

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)



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Introduction: VUSSC

The idea for having a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) was conceived by the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth at their conference in Halifax, Canada in 2000.

It was the year of the internet revolution and the Education Ministers of the small states did not believe that their small countries had the critical mass to pursue the challenges brought forth by the emerging eWorld.

They decided to work together and create a mechanism through which their small states would collaborate in training staff in the use of ICTs and in developing eLearning materials for use in their existing tertiary institutions.

The VUSSC has made remarkable strides in the last five years with very modest inputs of external funds.

The VUSSC is working to strengthen tertiary level institutions in small states as a collaborative network of Ministries of Education. It focuses on the development of human resources, the creation and offering of new courses, and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. 32 small states are now participating in the VUSSC initiative.

Participating countries, comprising land-locked, coastal and island states, all face issues of isolation, brain drain, economical challenges and are susceptible to the various impacts of climate change.

The most significant events in the development of the VUSSC have been a series of ten course development workshops, each lasting three weeks and hosted by one of the participating states. The first one was held here in Mauritius in 2006.

VUSSC has developed courses and programmes in Sustainable Tourism, Disaster Management, and Environmental Science with elements of climate change and education for sustainable development, just to mention a few. These were identified by senior officials as priority areas for the small states.

The VUSSC has a web presence through a web portal where member states can access open educational resources, information about VUSSC and learn about its developments.

The web portal also includes a learning management system that the small states can use to offer a series of courses and programmes.

National institutions are now able to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC provided they are approved by local authorities responsible for accreditation, where applicable, regional ones.

The small states have also started to map their qualifications to the TQF and are doing some alignment exercises.

The following institutions are now offering VUSSC developed courses:

- University of the West Indies
- National University of Samoa
- Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning
- University of Lesotho
- University of Seychelles and the
- Seychelles Tourism Academy

It is estimated that a total of approximately 11,583 people - including the participants in workshops and the additional VUSSC courses - have been trained or reached as a result of VUSSC. If we were to add the figures for institutions offering VUSSC courses right now, this figure would be much higher.

Learning for Development

Sir John Daniel identified three key components of Learning for Development:

First, development is job number one for the 21st century. Development means helping people to greater freedom. That includes freedoms from, as in freedom from hunger; and freedoms to, as in freedom to express your opinions. In operational terms, for the Commonwealth of Learning, development means

achieving the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All, and the Commonwealth aspirations of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

Second, learning is the key to development. This is true not only for the goals that target education directly, but also for reducing poverty and hunger, improving health, promoting gender equity and nurturing a better environment.

Third, the learning challenge is so enormous that traditional approaches are not up to the task. We need new approaches for expanding learning that can be used at scale to deliver good quality at low cost.

We can agree that Learning is the key to development.

Sustainability is a call to act now to protect the future and avoid environmental, economic or social crises by encouraging development that is good for both people and the planet. Because education is fundamental to the success of sustainable development this necessitates the urgency to act now and to include ESD in the agenda for the small states beyond the 2015 agenda.

VUSSC and ESD

When Ministers of Education met in 2000 to discuss the idea for having a VUSSC, achieving sustainable development was already a matter of concern hence it was included as one of the long term objectives for the VUSSC.

Although the notion of “sustainability” was not imposed, it emerged as an essential value and perspective during the course of the discussion

While many nations around the world have embraced the need for education to achieve sustainability, only limited progress has been made on any level. This lack of progress stems from many sources. In some cases, a lack of vision or awareness has impeded progress. In others, it is a lack of policy or funding.

ESD as a Cross Cutting Theme and National Priority for Small States – a VUSSC’s Perspective

To cite an example, in 1993, the Canadian Province of Ontario mandated that local school boards create outcomes-based curriculum. The first phase was to create a new curriculum for students from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 9 (for 4 to 15 year olds). The provincial government gave broad guidelines; however, each community was to develop locally relevant curriculum to achieve provincial goals. The mandate was to consult with the community, build a new vision of an appropriate education for the twenty-first century, review the existing program, and then discard, reorient, or build anew.

One of the core components that was identified in the new curriculum is Responsible Citizenship.

The Province of Ontario believed that the students will value the diversity of the world's people, cultures, and ecosystems. They will understand and actively promote equity, justice, peace, the democratic process, and the protection of the environment in their own community, Canada, and the world.

Many small states have also incorporated ESD in their curriculum but not as a core component but as part of a specific subject or course, for example in Environmental Education, Sustainable Tourism and Environmental Science.

Sustainable Development (SD) has become the framework for a worldwide response to threats to environmental, societal, and economic systems, and a blueprint for innovative solutions to serious challenges from the global to the local level. A healthy, happy society depends on a healthy environment to provide food and resources, safe drinking water, and clean air for its citizens.

Some Questions for Consideration

Matthew has given us some insights of ESD and findings of his research. On the other hand I have tried to give you an update of VUSSC and establish its relationship to sustainable development. ICT and digital literacy have now become an essential part of the curriculum. Should Education for Sustainable Development also be treated this way, can it become a core component in the curriculum beyond the 2015 development goals?

Let me end here but I will leave you with four questions.

- Can we use VUSSC to integrate ESD in small states?
- How can ESD be reflected in small states beyond the 2015 development goals?
- Should the small states play a leading role for the introduction of ESD post 2015?
- Should ESD become a cross cutting theme and national priority for small states?

I hope the small states respond to the call of education for sustainable development with great vigour and determination. I believe the small states can make a difference.