Expanding Tertiary Education in Small States in an Economic Crisis: The Role of Collaboration

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Abstract

Small states face unique challenges in the era of globalisation. In higher education they have always been internationally oriented, because many of their citizens have traditionally gone for higher education overseas, often with state support. As progressively larger proportions of their young people seek higher education at a time when foreign exchange is in short supply because of deteriorations in terms of trade, this practice is unsustainable. Small states are now trying to provide more extensive higher education at home, which is a challenge when the population base is small. The first part of the paper explores the challenge of creating a university institution in a small state, looking particularly at those with populations of around 100,000.

Since small states make up two-thirds of the Commonwealth's 53-nation membership they are a priority in its programmes. In 2000 the Minister of Education of these 32 small states asked for the assistance of the Commonwealth of Learning in setting up a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). This is not a new tertiary institution but a collaborative network through which countries and institutions work together to develop skills-related courses in eLearning formats – for use both in classrooms and by distance learning – and to build capacity in ICT skills for online collaboration. The VUSSC is the focus of the second part of the paper.

Nine years on the VUSSC is developing well, with strong ownership by the states themselves. Although the member states belong to four regions (Africa, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Pacific) the VUSSC is global in nature. To facilitate international usage of the courses it has been successful in developing a

Transnational Qualifications Framework managed by the states. The presentation highlights the lessons for internationalisation, regionalisation and globalisation from the VUSSC initiative.

Introduction

I am delighted to be sharing this session with Mark Bray, Michaela Martin, Hubert Charles and Emma Kruse Vaai. Mark and Michaela organised an excellent policy forum on higher education in small states last week and have reported on it. I thank them, on behalf of my constituency of Commonwealth small states, for taking that most valuable initiative.

It is a thrill to be working with Hubert Charles again. Hubert was a wonderful colleague during my time here. The Director-General trusts only his best people to run UNESCO's offices in important Member States. Hubert represented UNESCO successively in South Africa, Mozambique and Nigeria, which puts him in a class of his own. I was overjoyed, when I visited Dominica late last year, to discover that Hubert had returned to his native land as president of the Dominica State College.

And it is always a special pleasure to work with Emma Kruse Vaai. Apart from her remarkable contribution to the development of the University of Samoa she has been one of the most active players in the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth that I shall be talking about. The three-week course development workshop on Disaster Management that she hosted in Samoa is the most talked about of all those workshops and we are delighted that she has agreed to host another on the Maritime Industry.

My remarks today will be in two parts. First, I would like to make some general remarks about the challenge of expanding higher education in the smaller small states. To judge by the discussions at the IIEP last week this is a hot topic right now. Given the huge cost of sending large numbers of students overseas to study developing higher education at home is a legitimate aspiration for these states. But realising that aspiration is not straightforward.

Second, I shall talk about an initiative of the Commonwealth Ministers of Education called, somewhat misleadingly, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Its main purpose is to help small states expand higher education, so it follows on naturally from the first part of the talk.

Creating Universities in Small States

My title is Expanding Tertiary Education in Small States in an Economic Crisis: The Role of Collaboration. Let me begin therefore with some principles about expanding tertiary education to university level in small states. I focus particularly on the smaller small states with populations of around 100,000. I shall then come on to the role of collaboration.

My only comment on the economic crisis is to quote again the old cliché that the Chinese ideogram for 'crisis' combines the ideograms for 'danger' and for 'opportunity'. Clearly there are dangers. Some of the small states risk being hit harder by the economic downturn than their bigger neighbours. But let me stress the opportunity, which is that the crisis can facilitate policy decisions and changes that would be

more difficult in normal times. This is important because small states have a particular inertia when it comes to change. That is because everyone knows everyone else and people who do not like a government decision can simply call the president of the country on his or her mobile phone. Institutional rearrangements are particularly difficult because there is a reluctance to offend important people.

I say this because I shall argue that expanding tertiary education will require rationalisation, harmonisation and conceptualisation. These are three big words that all imply disruption to the existing order of things. But a crisis does make it necessary and easier to force the kind of re-thinking that those words imply.

I shall root this first part of my remarks in the example of the Seychelles, because the Commonwealth of Learning did some work there in advising the government about the setting up of a University of Seychelles, a process that is now under way. I must stress that I am not speaking for the Government of Seychelles, nor does it necessarily agree with COL's analysis. However, I shall try to highlight some general principles that seem important.

First, I suspect that this statement made by the Ministry of Education three years ago, expressed the views of many other small states, and has probably been reinforced by the economic downturn: 'tertiary education in Seychelles is a major drain on its economy as many Seychellois are sent abroad, at considerable expense, for higher education and training since Seychelles does not have a university'. Second, however, the demographics of creating a university are challenging. Seychelles has a population of less than 100,000. In round figures a country with a similar population and demographic profile might expect some 2,000 people to leave secondary school each year of which around 800 would seek to continue to university study. If we add in some 200 adult students we have 1,000 entering students per year. Multiply by four, representing the four-year length of the programmes, and we reach the figure of 4,000. The least that can be said is that this is a narrow base on which to build a university with a reasonable range of programmes.

So the first change of concept necessary is to see the expansion in a framework of lifelong learning. Assuming a population of 50,000 between the ages of 15 and 44, and assuming 25% of them take part in some form of tertiary-level lifelong learning each year, gives a figure of 12,500, which starts to look more promising. Clearly it would take time to achieve such figures, but it would be possible if lifelong learning were the policy foundation of the institution from the start.

This is one example of the general need to aggregate supply and demand around the new or expanded institution. Aggregating demand for different types of education and training increases the scope of programming required but also increases numbers and opportunities for synergy. The same goes for levels. Putting upper secondary studies under the umbrella of the tertiary institution on the model of community colleges, sixth-form colleges, or what Quebec calls CEGEPs, also helps to ramp up numbers and ensure more efficient deployment of staff.

The same goes for bringing all tertiary institutions together under one administrative umbrella and operating in all the modes of teaching and learning necessary to reach the maximum numbers possible. It is also helpful to aggregate relations with the outside world, rationalising the deployment of scarce academic staff, seeing overseas partnerships in a holistic manner and negotiating some good deals, and

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joining forces with other states to negotiate fees arrangements for those students that do need to go overseas. I am sure that Emma will have more to say about that.

There are also opportunities to share training and courseware development with other small states.

Finally, I suggest that any initiative to expand tertiary education in small states needs to use technology to the maximum. It is very easy to write policy papers that are full of modern rhetoric but to create a reality that is deeply traditional and will not stand up to economic forces.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth
Let me now move to the second part of these remarks and give you a brief sketch of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. I shall start by setting the context and then we shall answer the standard questions about what we call the VUSSC
Context.

I first recall that 32 of the 53 Member States of the Commonwealth are identified as small states. They mostly have populations of fewer than 1.5 million people and include island states in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Pacific and the Indian oceans, as well as landlocked states like Lesotho and coastal states like The Gambia and Belize.

These 32 Commonwealth small states account for about three-quarters of all the world's small states, so the Commonwealth takes a lead role internationally in promoting their interests.

The fragile economies of many small states are very sensitive to changes in the terms of trade for their exports, which are mainly agricultural. Transport costs are high for both the landlocked and island nations. Finally, they are particularly sensitive to a range of natural disasters: hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and the general rise in sea-level.

Why the VUSSC?

So why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth? It is an initiative of the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth. When they held their triennial conference in Canada in 2000 they faced two challenges.

First, the UN's Millennium Declaration and the Dakar World Forum on Education for All had put the spotlight on the imperative of expanding access to education at all levels. Second, however, the rich world was carried away by the dotcom frenzy as the Internet began to introduce radical changes to business and communication. Prophets and vendors claimed that henceforward all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen.

The ministers from the small states believed that by working together as a network of small states they could create a collective capacity for online learning and harness the eWorld for the benefit of their peoples. They called this network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

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and asked COL to help them.
What is the VUSSC?

So what is this Virtual University and what is it for? It has been said that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, Roman, nor an empire. Similarly the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is neither fully virtual, nor a university in the sense of being a degree-awarding body. It is a collaborative network of the small states of the Commonwealth.

Its first aim is to expand tertiary education in these countries – both face-to-face offerings and distance learning. Most of the small states do not have their own universities but nearly all of them have small tertiary colleges. Some states, such as Seychelles and St. Lucia, are developing these into national universities; others, such as St. Vincent and the Grenadines, have merged them to create a multi-purpose national institution with greater critical mass.

The second aim is to enable the small states to be players in the world of online learning. Bridging the digital divide is a key objective.
When did the VUSSC develop?

The idea of the VUSSC was hatched at 14CCEM, the Education Ministers conference in 2000, and COL then helped a smaller group of Ministers develop a formal proposal. This was approved at 15CCEM in Edinburgh in 2003 and COL was asked to continue facilitating the project.

Since then the VUSSC has developed steadily and has created a snowball effect – even though few of the small states ever experience snow. All 32 small states are now involved.

The most visible milestones in its progress, which have done much to generate a sense of excitement and momentum around the VUSSC, have been the six course development workshops, or boot camps. There were two other significant developments last year.

First, working with the South African Qualifications Authority VUUSC members have developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to facilitate movement of courses and programmes between states. Establishing the credibility of VUSSC offerings is particularly important since a number of the small states, whether deservedly or not, have a reputation for being safe havens for the operations of degree mills and bogus institutions.

Second, last November the University of the West Indies offered the first fully online course under the VUSSC banner, with students enrolling from many countries in the network.

The next major milestone was the launch this year of a VUSSC portal giving details of the courses that accredited institutions in the small states are offering internationally.

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Where Does the Money Come From?

Where does the money for VUSSC developments come from?
The proposal for VUUSC that the Ministers approved in 2003 called for the expenditure of some $20 million over the first five years. However, no donors stepped forward to fund the infrastructure costs of the VUSSC so rather than being developed as a donor project from the top down it has been built from the bottom up as a bootstrap operation. This may be no bad thing.

However, funds for some operating costs have been forthcoming. Given the importance of small states to the Commonwealth the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation has given a multi-year grant. Because of the VUSSC's commitment to developing courseware as open educational resources the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has supported some of the course development workshops, as has the Government of Singapore. Finally, COL has integrated support of the VUSSC into its programme and the states themselves have invested significantly in the salary costs of their nationals who have attended VUSSC events.

How is the VUSSC Managed?

My next question is: how is the VUSSC managed? VUUSC is not a COL project but an initiative of the small states themselves. In 2008 the states took over the management of the VUSSC through the creation of a formal Management Committee for the initiative overall and another group to oversee the implementation of the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

COL continues its behind-the-scenes support. South African Paul West has done a brilliant job developing the strategy that has brought us to this point and John Lesperance, from Seychelles is now dedicated full-time to the VUSSC.

What About the Boot Camps?

Most people who have heard of the VUSSC will have heard about the course development workshops, familiarly known as boot camps because of the basic training they provide in IT skills. There have been six boot camps to date:

2006 – Mauritius: Tourism and Entrepreneurship
2007 – Singapore: Professional Development for Education
2007 – Trinidad & Tobago: Life Skills
2007 – Samoa: Disaster Management
2008 – Seychelles: Fisheries
2008 – Bahamas: Building and Construction

Further workshops on the Maritime Industry and Agriculture and Agro-Business will be held later this year in Samoa and Maldives respectively. These events bring together subject experts from up to 20 states for a period of three weeks. They are given the training necessary to develop eLearning materials through

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online collaboration and begin the development of eLearning materials in the subject area. This course development work continues, through online collaboration, once the participants go home.

An important duty for the participants is to share the skills they learned with at least five colleagues when they get home and train them in the work of online collaboration and eLearning development. One hundred and thirty people have attended the six boot camps so there are now 500 academics and officials in the small states with advanced IT and eLearning skills.

The VUSSC materials are prepared in the form of Open Educational Resources (OERs). This means that they can be taken, adapted and used by any academic or institution around the world, not just those in the small states.

Conclusion

I hope that this short account of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth has given you an idea of the successful implementation of the vision of the Ministers of Education of the Small States for their countries to become equal players in the eWorld. The initiative has now achieved lift off and we believe that it will contribute substantially to the development of tertiary education in the small states of the Commonwealth in the years to come.

We are pleased that this is part of COL's wider collaboration with UNESCO in assisting the small states.