

# *A Celebration of Sharing and a Milestone for Open Educational Resources: but What Really Matters is What Happens Now!*

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*Launch of Open Educational Resources for Open Schooling and Implementation of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and Transnational Qualifications Framework*

*The Seychelles  
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*Sir John Daniel  
Commonwealth of Learning*

Vice-President of the Republic of Seychelles, Mr Danny Faure; Vice-Chancellor of the University of Seychelles, Dr Rolph Payet; Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

What a splendid occasion this is! Many colleagues have already commented on the two achievements that we celebrate today, the creation of an impressive corpus of Open Educational Resources for Open Schooling and a milestone in the implementation of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and its accompanying Transnational Qualifications Framework, so I shall limit my comments to some key points.

This is my last engagement in Africa as President of COL. I am delighted that it is here in Seychelles to celebrate these two projects with which I have had a close personal association. I like to give a title to my remarks on such occasions, so I have called this address *A Celebration of Sharing and a Milestone for Open Educational Resources*. There is also a sub-title but I shall get to that later.

I shall make five points.

First, it is wonderfully appropriate that we are holding this celebration in Seychelles and that Vice-President Danny Faure has opened our event. It was twelve years ago, at the Conference of

Commonwealth Education Ministers in Halifax, Canada, in the millennium year, that the Ministers from the Small States decided that they would try to conquer the eWorld of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by collaborating and sharing. Danny Faure was a leading protagonist of the concept of what we now affectionately call the VUSSC and he organised a small meeting of Ministers here in Seychelles in March 2003 to develop a formal proposal that was endorsed by all the Commonwealth Education Ministers in Edinburgh later that year.

COL is very proud to have accompanied the VUSSC on every step of the journey since those early days and it is a nice coincidence that our current Education Specialist for the VUSSC is another Seychellois, John Lesperance.

The fundamental purpose of the VUSSC is to strengthen tertiary education in the small states by expanding both capacity and curriculum. A splendid symbol of this process, which must resonate with all the small states, is the creation of the University of Seychelles and it was a privilege to be here, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2010 for the official inauguration of your University by Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, Chancellor of the University of London. At the time the press labelled it ‘the world’s smallest university’. That made me feel quite at home because in the 1980s, when I was president of Laurentian University in Ontario, Canada, I had academic responsibility for what was then labelled the ‘world’s smallest university’ by the Guinness Book of Records. This was the Collège universitaire de Hearst, located up in the lowlands of Hudson’s Bay and enrolling 30 students. The University of Seychelles is large by comparison!

I also note the link between the University of Seychelles and the second project that we celebrate today, Open Educational Resources for Open Schooling. Some of the artisans of that programme have been associated with the teacher education programmes in the small states. Here in Seychelles I think of Alex Souffe, who has often joined me and the other members of the project steering committee for many teleconferences at ungodly hours.

It is also very apt that we are launching these Open Educational Resources for Open Schooling in Seychelles, which does not have an open school. That is not a paradox! All secondary schools are short of learning resources and we hope that the example of Seychelles, in adopting them to support teaching and learning in the classroom, will be widely copied.

All this is to say that Seychelles is the right place to be celebrating these projects and we are most grateful to the government, the university and the people of Seychelles for their warm hospitality.

Second, may I point out some of the commonalities between these two projects? An obvious one is that they both involve small states. I don’t know whether we planned it that way, but five of the six countries in the Open Schooling project are also part of the VUSSC. I am pleased that COL – and the Commonwealth more widely – have been able to express their special commitment to small states by facilitating these endeavours.

Another link between the projects is that they are based on the creation and sharing of Open Educational Resources, OER. It was two years after the idea of the VUSSC was hatched that the term Open Educational Resources was coined at a conference on Open Courseware at UNESCO, Paris, in 2002. I

will come back to Open Educational Resources in a minute but here I simply note that OER are a perfect fit for these two projects, because the third common element between them is sharing.

Sharing and collaboration were the fundamental principles that underpinned the vision of Danny Faure and the VUSSC pioneers. They decided to create collectively what each state did not have the critical mass to create individually. The same principles motivated the cooperative development of OER for Open Schooling.

Sharing and collaboration mean learning from each other and this is the fourth important link. We often highlight the learning materials that have been produced as the central feature of these projects. But equally important is the massive amount of learning, skills development and capacity building that has occurred alongside materials development in both projects.

As a result of the ten course development workshops – the boot camps – that the VUSSC has organised, hundreds of academic staff and officials in the small states have acquired advanced IT and eLearning skills, either directly at the workshops or by learning from colleagues returning from them. Similarly the hundred master teachers who have been trained through the Open Schooling programme are a now a great asset for their countries.

The last link I must mention is the great support that the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has given to both projects. I have enormously appreciated the encouragement that COL has had from the Hewlett Foundation during my tenure as president. It all began years ago when Hewlett asked Paul West to advise them on some of their projects with other institutions. After a while, impressed by Paul's wisdom, they suggested that COL itself might like to propose a project to the Hewlett Foundation. The rest, as they say, is history.

Third, let me offer some congratulations.

I first pay tribute to Paul West. As well as securing COL's first Hewlett grant, Paul facilitated the development of the VUSSC in a most astute manner, always insisting on the principle that this was the Small States' project, not COL's project. COL role is to advise and support the participating states and institutions, a tradition that John Lesperance has continued admirably. Much the same applies to the OER for Open Schooling project. It gives me great pride to acknowledge the impressive energy and drive that Frances Ferreira and my former Athabasca University colleague Dominique Abrioux have brought to managing this ambitious and challenging endeavour.

I congratulate and commend you all for the determination and skill that you have brought to these two projects. Thanks to your commitment to fulfil your promises and to deliver products of quality, the Hewlett Foundation now has a high opinion of COL just as COL has steadily increased its commitment to OER. We have become the first international intergovernmental organisation to adopt a corporate policy to publish documents and materials as OER wherever possible.

Which brings me to my fourth point. The Hewlett Foundation has responded to the quality of your work by offering COL an unsolicited grant to work with UNESCO to get governments to develop policies in support of OER. This proposal grew out of a belief that most governments have not yet properly

appreciated the tremendous potential of OER for helping them achieve the goals of Education for All: wider access, higher quality and lower cost.

This new project is keeping me busier than ever during my final months at COL. It has three elements. First, we are conducting a survey of all the world's governments to determine the level of OER activity country by country and find out how many governments have policies on OER.

Second, to reinforce the survey, we are holding policy forums in all UNESCO regions. The aim is to profile local work on OER – but above all to develop a Declaration for governments about OER and the open licensing of educational materials. We held the regional policy forum for Africa in Pretoria just last week. Several of those here represented their countries at that event: Joshua Mallet from Ghana; Daniel Tau from Botswana and Alex Souffe from Seychelles.

That links to the third element, which is the World OER Congress that will be held at UNESCO HQ in Paris in June. Governments will be presented with the draft Declaration prepared by the regional policy forums and we hope that they will make a robust commitment to supporting the development and use of OER in their countries.

That brings me to my final point, the sub-title of these remarks that I warned you about.

I said that this day is *a Celebration of Sharing and a Milestone for Open Educational Resources*. My sub-title is: *but what really matters is what happens now*.

We have reached a stage when highly relevant OER of quality have been developed by the VUSSC and in the Open Schooling project. But what really counts is whether and how these OER are used. That is why the timing of today's event is appropriate. American universities use the term 'commencement' for the degree awarding ceremonies that come at end of students' programmes.

By analogy, today is the commencement of the real impact and influence of the work that you have done in both projects. The challenge now for the VUSSC is to ensure that the tertiary institutions in the small states – and indeed tertiary institutions well beyond the Small States of the Commonwealth – use the VUSSC courses and programmes to expand and improve their offerings.

In the case of open schools, I am amazed at how their number has expanded and the acceptance of the concept of open schooling has grown since we launched COMOSA, the Commonwealth Open Schooling Association. I remember going to the World Bank with Mohan Menon in 2007 to promote the concept of open schooling. We felt rather lonely. Since then we have made great strides and COMOSA members are ready-made users of the OER that you have produced.

However, our ambitions are wider than that. We want to see these OER being adopted and re-purposed for the conventional schooling system, which is why our project with UNESCO for increasing government buy-in to OER is important and why it is good to be doing this launch in Seychelles.

In the case of the VUSSC I believe we are at the point of take-off for the use of VUSSC materials in the tertiary institutions of the small states. Securing that adoption must be our immediate focus, even if we

know that these OER are already being picked up by institutions and individuals around the world for wider use.

It is now just over ten years since I joined UNESCO as Assistant Director-General for Education and began the work in international development that brought me on to COL. I have learned many things over that decade but the overriding lesson is that development takes time. It is also more than ten years since Danny Faure and his fellow ministers conceived the idea of the VUSSC; yet only now is that vision becoming reality in the tertiary institutions involved. People less determined than you might have abandoned the concept long ago, for countries and donors too often give up on development initiatives too early.

So my message today is to urge you to persevere with the concept of Open Educational Resources so that they can truly transform teaching and learning in schools and colleges across the world. I congratulate you on what you have achieved already.

Danny Faure and his fellow ministers launched the VUSSC because they did not want the small states always to be dependent on the big states. Yet as a result of their vision the small states have now shown the bigger states how to take advantage of a crucial 21<sup>st</sup> century innovation: Open Educational Resources. No other OER initiatives have the breadth of international collaboration of the two that we celebrate today.

Therefore, it now gives me immense pleasure to launch these Open Educational Resources for Open Schooling and to mark this milestone in the Implementation of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and the Transnational Qualifications Framework that underpins the global use of its courses and programmes. Congratulations to you all. Thank you.