

Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth: Launch of the Transnational Qualifications Framework



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*Remarks by
Sir John Daniel
Commonwealth of Learning*

On behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning it is a pleasure to welcome you to this dinner to launch the Transnational Qualifications Framework that has been developed for the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth. Before I ask Franz Gertz, who has been closely involved with the development of the TQF, to present it to you, let me give a little background.

First, what is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)? The key point to make is that it is not a new award-giving university that could apply to join the ACU. The VUSSC, as we call it, was conceived by Ministers of Education at their triennial Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2000. They were concerned that most of the Commonwealth's many small states were too small to conquer the online eWorld on their own, but they might do it by working together.

After some planning, in which the Commonwealth of Learning was closely involved, Commonwealth Education Ministers approved what they called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth at their next conference in 2003. It was conceived as a collaborative network. COL was requested to help countries collaborate and strengthen the capacity of national education institutions.

COL supported the first meeting of policy makers, or Interlocutors, and then the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation stepped in to help support the next phase of development followed by Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC). During this phase, the ideas were discussed and translated into action plans Ministers generated a list of important topic areas for which learning materials should be developed.

Training and materials development workshop

The first 3-week training session was held in Mauritius in 2006 and was attended by educators from 14 countries. Lessons learned from this first workshop have helped to form the basis for an evolving training programme for educators from the small states in the pragmatic use of ICTs in education.

Each of the training workshops, sometimes called “boot camps”, has brought together a range of educators from a particular subject area selected from the list agreed by the Ministers. Eight of these workshops have been held to date, each hosted by one of the small states:

2006 - Mauritius: Tourism and Entrepreneurship

2007 - Singapore: Professional Development for Education

2007 - Trinidad: Life Skills

2007 - Samoa: Disaster Management

2008 - Seychelles: Fisheries

2008 - Bahamas: Construction

2009 - Samoa: Maritime

2010 - Maldives: Agriculture

The birth of the TQF concept

In March 2007, the Small States originally involved in the setting up of the VUSSC proposed the creation of a mechanism which would support the development, international recognition, comparability and easy understanding of qualifications. In order to achieve these aims across the small states, the VUSSC has worked with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to develop the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). As a starting point, the framework is aimed at helping to build systemic capacity in Commonwealth small states, but interest has since been expressed by non-Commonwealth countries as well.

Work by representatives of the qualifications authorities and their equivalents in most the small states resulted in the production of a draft concept document by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Most of the literature review was based on documents that were sent by the small states on their qualifications systems and, to my surprise, almost all small states participated in the review after I wrote to ministers requesting for information on their country.

In February 2008, senior officials representing qualifications authorities and quality assurance agencies from small states attended the first TQF consultation meeting in Singapore to discuss a proposed transnational qualifications framework for the VUSSC based on a draft concept document developed by SAQA.

The TQF procedures and guidelines discussion document

Based on the proposal, the TQF is a ten level framework. It is not meant to replace existing qualifications frameworks in the Small States. It is a translation instrument between the systems in different countries and regions that will provide a mechanism for the transfer of credits, qualifications and learners between countries. It will also provide a means by which qualifications frameworks can be compared and allowed for referencing of all qualifications to the TQF levels.

VUSSC has created an internet portal that provides online programmes offered by accredited institutions in VUSSC countries. These institutions, having already received accreditation from their national system, will be able to promote selected programmes to the international market through the VUSSC portal. Once eLearning programmes have been approved by the national and regional structures, they will be posted on the VUSSC website. Posting of programmes on the VUSSC website will signify that the programme is credible, i.e. that it aligns with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF.

Learners will register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the portal will carry the national accreditation of the country in which the providing institution is based. In addition to this, learners will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing the qualification's registration in the TQF.

Setting up of TQF working committee and subsequent management committee

The drafting of the TQF procedures and guidelines discussion document was done entirely by the TQF management committee.

Following the Singapore senior official meeting and subsequent setting up of the TQF management committee, the management committee met in Singapore in October to start drafting the TQF document. It took the TQF management committee almost one full year to complete the work.

TQF regional cluster meetings

Three consultation meetings were held in each of the three VUSSC regions (Asia - Pacific, Africa - Mediterranean and the Caribbean) to discuss the draft consultation document and also to get consensus on the proposed framework that was drafted by the TQF management committee. In its final lap the TQF the management committee met in Vancouver in August 2009, to finalise the TQF.

What's next

- Copies of the TQF will be sent to ministers for endorsement. A meeting will be convened for CEO of qualifications authorities and quality assurance agencies to discuss implementation issues, buying in and translation mechanisms required for comparison purposes and implementation and the signing of a generic MOU.
- Non Commonwealth countries have shown considerable interest in using the TQF for qualifications recognition.
- A qualifications portal will be developed and will to maintain a record of VUSSC offered qualifications.

Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the work of my COL colleagues Paul West and John Lesperance in bringing the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth to this point. I also commend the excellent manner in which the members of the VUSSC Management Committee and the TQF Committee are carrying out their work.

