

Opening Ceremony of the Officials Meeting on the Transnational Qualifications Framework, VUSSC



*Part 1
Opening Ceremony*

*Virtual University for the Small and Island States of the
Commonwealth*

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Introduction

There is a widespread expectation that online courses will transform the worldwide provision of education, both by making opportunities for learning more widely available within countries and also by expanding the availability of cross-border education.

If online courses are to have a transformative impact, then institutions must avoid the difficulties that have led to the failure of many e-learning initiatives (see e.g. Keegan et al., 2007). For international online courses to play a significant role in the expansion of education they must be set within a global framework of quality assurance and qualifications recognition that inspires confidence.

One initiative for online courses already spans the globe: the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This collaborative venture between 30 countries illustrates the benefits gained and the challenges faced when many countries collaborate to develop courses online and offer them internationally through existing institutions with local accreditation.

Many governments are struggling to respond to increased demand, knowing that their Age Participation Rates in higher education are well below what is needed for sustained national development. APRs are

now between 40-50% in OECD countries but remain below 5% in some developing countries. We believe VUSSC can help governments of small states to strengthen their national institutions to increase APR rates.

The Virtual University for Small and Island States of the Commonwealth

The concept of the VUSSC emerged when Commonwealth Ministers of Education met in Canada in 2000. That millennium year was noteworthy in two ways. First, a strong focus on international development led to the articulation of the Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar Goals of Education for All. Second, the rich world experienced the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began to revolutionise communication between people and to create new ways of doing business. Online communication also seemed to have potential for transforming education.

The ministers of education from the small states wanted to take advantage of online communication in developing their education systems but realized that their individual countries did not have the critical mass of expertise, equipment or bandwidth to engage resolutely with online learning. However, they hoped that by working together they could nurture an indigenous capacity for online learning and so harness these new ICT developments for the benefit of their peoples. They believed that the small states, working together as a collectivity, could achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts.

The ministers conceived a mechanism for such collaboration, called it the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and asked the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to help them conduct a needs analysis and prepare a formal proposal. The proposal was approved at the ministers' next triennial meeting in 2003.

Despite its name, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a collaborative network, not a new tertiary institution. It began as a network of ministries of education seeking to use online learning in the development of education and training. In 2004 COL canvassed ministers to determine the priority topics for course development in the small states. They flagged the areas of Teacher Education, ICTs, Information Systems, Tourism and Hospitality, Nursing and Health Care, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Life Skills, Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship, Public Administration, Agriculture and Fisheries (COL, 2008a).

The VUSSC is a product of the countries and their existing tertiary institutions. It is a collective mechanism for producing, adapting and deploying courses and learning materials, on subjects such as those I mentioned, that would be difficult for any one country to develop alone. At the same time it provides a special opportunity for their people to develop expertise in online collaboration, eLearning and ICTs generally. Although the ICT infrastructure in many small states is still rudimentary, especially outside the main population centres, the ministers conceive the VUSSC as a route into the online world. The initial drive in the use of ICTs is to orientate professionals, academics and managers to interact with comfort in a networked, or "web2" world. Even if its first courses have to be delivered by traditional

means of face-to-face and distance methods to some students, they will be developed in formats that can be shared electronically between participating countries.

Course development

In theory, specialists in the participating countries could have begun developing eLearning courses by collaborating internationally in a common electronic space. In practice it was considered imperative to start by bringing the participants together physically in order to provide training in online working and to create a common sense of purpose around the VUSSC initiative. The model that has developed is a three-week training and course development workshop at which subject specialists from a subset of the participating states strengthen their IT skills and being to develop course material collaboratively online. The online technologies provide the means for these professionals to continue interacting and developing learning materials in future years.

Four of these workshops, which are sometimes called 'boot camps' because of the basic training in online working that they provide, had been held by the end of 2007. These events have become progressively more efficient in four ways. First the training in IT skills has become more tightly focused on the participants' real needs; second, better methods for capturing the course material in a useful form have evolved; third, an increasing amount of usable course material is generated during each workshop; and fourth, collaborative course development continues more smoothly after people have returned to their countries.

Each time a workshop is held country interlocutors (Ministry of Education representatives) are asked to nominate participants for the training. Participants who are already knowledgeable in the particular topic area are expected to be in a position to work in the online groups.

The course materials are created using COL's Instructional Design Template (COL, 2006), using a private online team workspace called BaseCamp. Information about the workshop is published on the Internet on COL's WikiEducator (COL, 2008c). These materials, which are available on COL's website, are open educational resources, freely available for use and adaptation by people and institutions anywhere in the world. Institutions in the small states will adapt them for their own use and may offer them as distance learning or to enrich face-to-face instruction. As the corpus of learning materials grows, the VUSSC will gradually transmute from a network of ministries of education into a consortium of the tertiary institutions using the materials in the participating countries. COL will continue in a supporting role as long as necessary.

In creating the VUSSC, education ministers wanted their countries to acquire the skills to operate confidently in the eWorld so that they could produce eLearning courses appropriate to their needs. Their goal was not the autonomy of developing every course from scratch, but rather to acquire the skills required to be able to assess the world's rapidly growing body of open educational resources in order to adapt and use them appropriately. One important criterion of appropriateness is whether a particular course fits the existing pattern of qualifications in each country.

A Transnational Qualifications Framework

We are here in Singapore to take the VUSSC a significant step forward. Ministers want to know that course materials can be shared between countries; that when citizens participate in courses offered from other countries, that these qualifications will be worth the paper they are printed on, and when they move between countries, that their qualifications will be recognised.

Our task here is to debate and agree on what can be done, how we can compare qualifications across borders and help ensure that people are treated with respect when they move in an increasingly mobile world. COL will report the findings and decisions reached this week to Ministers of Education in 2009.

Thank you

The Commonwealth of Learning would like to extend its gratitude to the Government of Singapore for its support this this important meeting. Your support is very important to the process of creating the Transnational Qualifications Framework. To all the governments who have sent senior officials, we are most thankful as it is only with your expert participation, that we will be able to report back to ministers with a satisfactory result.

References

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