

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: What can it Contribute?



Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

Course Development Workshop on Fisheries

Seychelles

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here in Seychelles for this course development workshop of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth devoted to developing an eLearning programme in Fisheries.

We begin by expressing our thanks to the Government of Seychelles for hosting this event. Seychelles is an especially appropriate venue for three reasons. First, amongst the small island states Seychelles has rights over an unusually large area of ocean. Maximising the benefits of this resource for the Seychellois in a sustainable way is an economic imperative. The Fishery is a key element of this marine resource.

Second, being in the Seychelles is a homecoming for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. When ministers of education conceived this initiative back in the year 2000 the then Minister of Education of Seychelles, Danny Faure, was a leading protagonist of the concept. Later, when a draft proposal had been developed, he hosted a meeting of a small group of ministers here in March 2003. They finalised the proposal and sent it to the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, which endorsed it later that year. Here we are back again, exactly five years later, and this seems like a good occasion to bring you up to date on how the ministers' concept of a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth has developed in that time.

The third reason the Seychelle is such an appropriate venue is that this workshop also coincides with the beginning of a study of the tertiary education sector here that will prepare the ground for a national forum

next month to explore options for development and advise on the form that the University of the Seychelles should take.

COL is proud to be working with UNESCO to assist the small states with the development of higher education and that collaboration will take concrete form here this week. It is a pleasure to say a special word of welcome to Ms Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić from UNESCO. Later this week she and I will be talking to Minister Bernard Shamlaye about how we can jointly support the developments in higher education here. We see the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, the VUUSC, as an important element in those developments.

Let me briefly give you some background on the accelerating development of the VUUSC.

The VUUSC: preliminary activities and outputs

So far we have held three planning meetings, two in Singapore and one in Jamaica, and four course development meetings, that we used to call 'boot camps' because one of their functions is to provide basic training in IT skills for online collaboration. Last week there was a very productive meeting in Singapore that laid the groundwork for a Transnational Qualifications Framework. This will facilitate the offering of VUUSC courses, such as the ones you will be developing in Fisheries, in small states around the Commonwealth.

So this is the fifth course development workshop. The first, for developing materials in Tourism, Hospitality and Entrepreneurship was held in Mauritius in 2006. Last year we held three more: in Singapore for Professional Development of Educators; in Trinidad & Tobago for Life Skills; and in Samoa for Disaster Management. In the coming weeks you will be working on Fisheries and another workshop on Construction will be held in the Bahamas later this year.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is gathering momentum. All these subject areas were identified as priorities by your Ministers of Education when we canvassed them in 2005 and now eLearning materials to teach them are coming on stream.

Moreover, we are getting better at organising the process. Each successive course development workshop has made greater progress than its predecessor in producing learning materials in electronic formats. The event on Disaster Management held in Samoa late last year was a model of how to operate such a workshop, thanks to the tremendous expertise and dedication of the team leaders in particular and the participants in general. We expect that you will do even better.

There have also been some important spin-offs from the workshops apart from the learning materials. One is that significant numbers of educators from your countries have acquired good skills in the most modern forms of collaborative online working through ICTs. COL urges all workshop participants to share this training when they get home and many have done so. Nearly a hundred people will have attended the five workshops and we estimate that they have trained another 400 people when they got home. This has thrown a well-placed bridge across of the digital divide - one of the aims of Ministers when they

conceived the VUSSC. Another spin-off is the cross-cultural friendships and understandings that have been generated. Educators from small states do not often get opportunities to visit small states on the other side of the world. You seem to find it immensely enriching to meet people from a range of cultures and backgrounds who all have in common with you the experience of living in a small state.

So the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is beginning to have some real impacts and is generating a sense of cohesion amongst the participating states.

As you do your work in the next two weeks you should ask yourselves what you want the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth to become. We say what do you want it to become, because the VUSSC is an expression of the will of the small states to take their development in hand. How can it best contribute?

The overriding objective for the VUSSC that emerges from the original proposal to ministers that was finalised here in Seychelles five years ago is that it should help institutions in the small states to serve learners better.

So how are we doing?

How has the VUSSC worked?

In fact the VUSSC has developed rather differently from what was envisaged in the original proposal, which called for the expenditure of \$20 million over the first five years. In the event funds on this scale were simply not forthcoming. Total expenditure to date has been closer to \$2 million, for which we are all most grateful to the Hewlett Foundation, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, the Government of Singapore and the participating governments.

You could call the VUSSC a shoestring operation, because there hasn't been much money. You could also call it a bootstrap operation because we've built it from the bottom up.

We have followed two guiding principles. First, in order to remain close to the thinking of ministers of education we created the function of 'interlocutors', usually ministry officials who can speak for their countries in planning meetings.

Second, since the overall aim of the VUSSC is the development of learning materials that can be studied by real students in real institutions leading to real qualifications; we identified the role of 'implementer'. These are people, usually in tertiary institutions, who are involved in the teaching/learning process. You are implementers.

The identification of implementers has been very pragmatic. Ministers identified a number of subject areas in which they wanted the VUSCC to develop materials. When we hold a workshop to develop content in one of those areas, such as Fisheries here in Seychelles, we ask all small states whether they are interested in taking part.

Countries that decide to participate identify a specialist in the subject matter from their most appropriate institution. We have been extremely impressed by the expertise and quality of many of the people who have come.

In order to get materials created we have focused on subjects and individuals rather than institutions. This approach has helped us get traction and secure involvement in the initiative. It is interesting to look back over the VUSSC meetings held so far to see who has attended from which countries and institutions.

This table gives the overall picture. The three planning meetings and the TQF meeting involved 132 people, nearly 60% of them from government ministries or agencies. 87 people have attended the course development workshops over 70% of them are from institutions.

This balance, with more ministry officials and interlocutors at the planning meetings and more institutional implementers at the course development workshops is what we would have expected. We are surprised that the proportion of people from institutions at the course workshops is not even higher, but we realise that in small states some people wear two hats and can represent the ministry of education and an institution at the same time. If we put all the events together we have 48% of participation from institutions, 46% from government and 6% from other bodies.

Which countries have shown most interest in the VUSSC? This table lists the countries with the highest level of total participation in terms of person-meetings. For example, across all the events the VUSSC has held, 21 places were taken by Trinidad & Tobago, though of course in some cases the same person attended more than one meeting. This table shows a nice spread around the Commonwealth regions and is good to see our smallest state, Tuvalu, right in there. Seychelles is well-placed, as befits a country that helped to create the concept.

Who attended these events? This table ranks countries by the number of person-events involving ministry of education officials. There are similarities and differences with the previous table. For example, Namibia was number 3 in overall participation but since nearly all its participants were from institutions it doesn't figure in this table. The same goes for Botswana. Seychelles is near to top because most of its participants have been from the Ministry.

Next, which countries sent most people from institutions? This table ranks the top countries by their institutional attendance. Again there is a nice spread. A total of 46 institutions from the small states have been represented at one or other of the VUSSC events. Mauritius spread the experience most widely with five institutions involved, followed by Lesotho with four.

Our final table looks at individual institutions. Which are the institutions that have attended VUSSC events most assiduously? Again there is a nice spread with the University of Swaziland at the top but also key institutions in smaller countries like St. Vincent & the Grenadines and St. Kitts and Nevis also taking advantage of these opportunities.

The surprise, if you compare this with the original proposal, is to find that the two regional universities have not participated much in the VUSSC. The University of the West Indies was only involved in three events and the University of the South Pacific has not taken part at all. Maybe the lesson for the future is

that the VUSSC has most to offer to the smaller small states that do not have a well-developed tertiary sector.

So what do we conclude from all this?

When the Ministers conceived the VUSSC they wanted to launch their countries into the e-world and to have them acquire the skills necessary to look larger countries in the eye as equals in their mastery of eLearning and online education.

The proof of that mastery is not only the ability to put electronic learning materials in a repository, but more importantly the know-how to get them out again and into the hands and minds of students, whether studying in classrooms or learning at a distance.

For that to happen it is not enough for the eLearning materials to be attractive and well-designed. They must fit seamlessly into the curricula and programmes that your tertiary institutions are offering so that students can receive credit and awards in the normal way.

Hence our decision to begin work on a Transnational Qualifications Framework that we hoped would facilitate the adoption and use of VUSSC programmes of study in all countries, thus supporting institutions in their wish to offer online qualifications internally. This should contribute usefully to the general development of education in the small states.

The VUSSC: Next Steps

To conclude these remarks we return to our theme: what do your countries want the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth to become? What are the next steps to take?

Status and Structure

Let me start with what the VUSSC is not and will not become. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is the title chosen by ministers in 2000. However, it is not a university in any normally accepted sense of the term. It is not a body that teaches programmes to students and awards degrees.

Nor will the VUSSC become a university in that sense. One reason is that the authority to grant degree-awarding powers rests with national governments, not with intergovernmental bodies like COL or UNESCO. A second is that ministers have made it clear that they want the VUSSC to reinforce the impact of your existing tertiary institutions, not to compete with them.

If that is what the VUSSC is not, what is it now? It is essentially an informal network of ministries of education supported by the part-time efforts of a number of people at the Commonwealth of Learning. We believe that approach has served us rather well to date and has produced very creditable outputs given the very small investment of money.

But we suggest that it is now time for the VUSSC to go beyond being an informal network of ministries of education and become a forum for real collaboration between institutions. We need to strengthen the involvement in VUSSC of the institutions that are actually developing and using the VUSSC eLearning materials. We hope that once you leave here you will constitute an effective consortium of institutions in the small states that will continue to advance teaching and learning about fisheries.

Later this year a web portal will be created for VUSSC that will provide access to online programmes offered by accredited institutions in VUSSC countries. Thanks to the good work in Singapore last week students will be able to 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, they will be able to see from the Transnational Qualification Framework how the qualification fits into their own country's framework.

Curriculum Expansion

During this first phase of the creation of the VUSSC, we are giving strong support to those people who needed more ICT skills in education. Once educators have the necessary skills to work online they can learn how to offer online learning as well. Several hundred educators have already improved their ICT skills through the VUSSC. We are now at a point where we can take increase skills in eLearning - for both the creation of online courses and the tutoring of online learners.

Another concern is how we expand and diversify the eLearning materials that the VUSSC can make available to countries and institutions. The model that we have used to date, that of the three-week face-to-face course development workshop, has served us well and has begun to narrow the digital divide between participating countries. People have acquired the ICT skills required for work in the virtual world and learning materials have been produced in the process; and an inspiring sense of community has developed amongst educators from small states.

The three-week workshop model that you will experience is fine, but it is too expensive to be sustainable in the longer term. However, there is now, or soon will be, a large enough cadre of skilled educators in the small states who can work in the online world.

The offering of online programmes in new subject areas does not mean developing all the material from scratch, Ministers were clear when they launched the VUSSC that, although they wanted to create an indigenous capacity to navigate in the e-world, their goal was not e-isolationism! Once people can operate confidently in the e-world they can draw on eLearning material from elsewhere, especial that available as open educational resources.

As time goes on we shall see the VUSSC website include courses that originated in a workshop like this one; courses developed collaboratively online by institutions working together; and courses derived from the growing body of freely available content. Posting programmes on the VUSSC website will signify that the programme are credible: that is to say they have been vetted by national and regional structures and that they relate to the TQF processes that began to be created last week.

Accredited institutions in participating countries that already have online courses that are ready for international offering can put these on the VUSSC website as it develops later this year.

Finally, we hope that your group will provide a forum for pooling experience of the delivery of VUSSC course materials. So far we are in the early stages of using these materials but clearly they will be used in very diverse ways. Sometimes they will enrich conventional on-campus instruction; sometimes they will be used for distance learning. Moreover variations in connectivity between and within states mean that distance learning itself will occur in a variety of ways. Pooling experience of what works and what doesn't will be most valuable.

Conclusion

Let us sum up. We believe that following an informal bottom-up approach in building the VUSSC has yielded excellent value for the small investment that has been made in it since 2003. But the time has now come to formalise arrangements somewhat more, especially the groupings of institutions offering similar programmes. Please bear that in mind as you do your work this week. You will determine what the VUSSC becomes and how it can expand and improve learning in your countries.

Each country must now ask itself again the question that was asked in here in the Seychelles five years ago. What goals does it intend to achieve through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and how can it put in place the local institutional arrangements necessary to see that it reaches them. Please carry that message back.

We thank you for coming to Seychelles and wish you a most productive and enjoyable workshop.