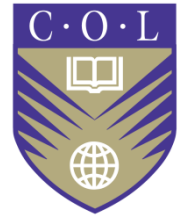


The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Making Dreams Come True



Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), Seventh International Training and Course Development Workshop, Apia, Samoa, 23 November 2009

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Welcome and Introduction

Good morning and Talofa ladies and gentlemen, thank you for making time to be with us this morning at the opening of this very important workshop.

I bring you greetings from the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning, Sir John Daniel who would love to have been here today, except that he is travelling at this point in time, the Vice President, Professor Asha Kanwar who is now the programme Director for VUSSC and Paul West, the Director for Knowledge Management and ICT who was with you when Samoa hosted the fourth workshop on Disaster Management.

Let me begin by expressing our thanks to the Government of Samoa for hosting yet another VUSSC workshop.

For those of you who are participating in this workshop you will be joining a group of professional educators who have received hands-on training in using ICTs to collaborate and develop course materials. By using appropriate technologies we have been able to reduce the distances that exist between educators of the small states, making you closer to VUSSC colleagues, even though you may be separated by vast distances.

Previous Training and Course Development Workshops

This is the seventh VUSSC workshop or "boot camp" as it is often known; previous ones have been held in Mauritius, Singapore, Trinidad & Tobago, Samoa, Seychelles and the Bahamas. You come from 16 countries and represent three VUSSC regions - Asia Pacific, Africa Mediterranean and the Caribbean - to

participate in this International Training and Materials Development Workshop in Transport and Logistics with a focus on Stevedoring in Samoa.

Your team leaders visited Vancouver four weeks ago for an intensive five days of preparation and will now help you get started over the next couple of days. While you are here and when you return home in three weeks time, I invite you to make contact with colleagues who have participated in previous workshops. It is very important that VUSSC workshop participants in each of your countries continue to collaborate and train more people. The face-to-face workshops will eventually come to an end sometime in the future and each of your respective Ministries of Education expect you and your institutions to play a more proactive role and thus build the expertise that is needed to continue with this process without so much external involvement.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

The idea for VUSSC originated at the Commonwealth Ministers of Education Conference in Halifax, Canada in 2000. Ministers of education from several small states expressed a concern: with the rapid growth of the Internet and eLearning, would their countries be left behind? COL was asked to conduct a review exploring how these countries could advance their education systems. COL's recommendations were approved by the Education Ministers three years later, and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth was born.

VUSSC is designed to address the unique challenges of small states. Access to educational materials is a significant obstacle to using education in the development of nations, particularly in small states. Defined by their small populations and relative isolation more than their geographic size, small states are often characterised by limited natural resources and a small, unskilled population. Small landlocked states face challenges in transporting goods; island states are confronted by the high cost of sea and air links. Small states are often more vulnerable to natural calamities and are less able to recover than countries with more resources and people.

The VUSSC is not a traditional bricks-and-mortar institution, it is a consortium of ministries of education and institutions of learning enabled by information and communications technology (ICT) applications, working together to plan programmes, develop the required content and ensure delivery of these programmes and support services to learners.

As an Area of Priority

For many years the Commonwealth Secretariat (ComSec) has been committed to improving the conditions of trade for small states and this workshop could not have happened at a more appropriate time. In a recent letter to ComSec, Sir John Daniel informed the Secretary General about this workshop which is taking place here in Apia.

The issue of port efficiency in the small states has always been questioned by international organisations such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and has a considerable influence and conditions of trade and capacity for economic development. This has resulted in considerable increase in port operating costs which has also influenced the import export sector of the economics of the small states. To date,

most of the small states of the Commonwealth are not offering any kind of formal training in the management of port activities.

I thus encourage you to promote this course and to use the materials to train others when you return home. I will also offer COL support to the National University of Samoa if it wants to offer this course to the rest of the small states. We can work together to convert the materials produced into a Learning Management System that can then be used for the delivery by a distance mode.

VUSSC Management Committee

A Management Committee is now directing VUSSC's activities. It is chaired by Dr Emma Kruse Vaai from the University of Samoa and is being supported by COL's Education Specialist for VUSSC. This signifies yet another accomplishment for the virtual university as the Small States start to take over the management of VUSSC.

A Transnational Qualifications Framework

While course materials were being developed it was soon realised that the issue of quality, credibility and recognition of courses had to be addressed. By March 2007, a good number of Commonwealth Small States had joined the VUSSC initiative. The VUSSC in partnership with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) worked to develop a concept paper for establishing a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). In February 2008, senior officials from 20 Small States met in Singapore to discuss the proposed TQF for the VUSSC based on a draft concept paper developed by SAQA.

In October 2008, a TQF Management Committee, which is a subcommittee of the VUSSC Management Committee, was set up to work on an implementation document for the TQF which has just been completed. I am happy to report that the TQF has just been completed and is now going through a process of editing.

Learners will register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the website 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. This question of credibility is particularly important for small states, some of which have inadvertently acquired reputations as havens for degree mills.

In Conclusion

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) has come a long way and thus has evolved into a model whereby countries collaborate and strengthen the capacity of their national educational institutions through a process of training in the use of ICTs and collaborative development of course materials. You will all experience this over the next three weeks.

I would like to thank the Ministry of Education of Samoa for their support for this workshop and for all VUSSC member countries that have sent participants. We are especially grateful to the National University of Samoa for contributing so much time and effort to making this workshop a reality.

Your selection to come here did not happen out of thin air, you are here because you have been handpicked by your country and this is because of your position and competence. You have accepted to be here because you believe in VUSSC and your preparedness to share your wisdom with your colleagues of the small states and we appreciate this very much.

While here you will also learn from each other and we ask you to ensure, when you get back home, that you communicate its importance to your colleagues and pass on the experience you gain here in Samoa.

We wish you success with this task.

Thank you.