

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: What Do You Want it to Become?



Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

Senior Officials Meeting on a Transnational Qualifications Framework

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back in Singapore at another event dedicated to the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, the VUSSC. We begin by expressing our warm thanks to the Government of Singapore. When we say 'our thanks', we are referring to the thirty countries participating in the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth as well as to the Commonwealth of Learning. Singapore has been a stalwart supporter of this project from its early days and has generously shared the cost of hosting previous planning meetings and a course development meeting on teacher education.

Your meeting on a Transnational Qualifications Framework is just one in a succession of meetings that have been held here at the National Institute of Education. We thank the Director of NIE and his staff for the warm welcome and able assistance that they always give us. They provide an excellent working environment.

I am clearly too late to welcome you to this meeting, so let me express our gratitude to you all for coming and say a special word of thanks to our UNESCO representative, Ms Akemi Yonemura. Like most intergovernmental organisations UNESCO is now trying to give more assistance to small states. We have agreed that COL and UNESCO will coordinate their efforts in support of education and training in these countries. As a concrete example of this approach I shall also be joined by a UNESCO colleague in the Seychelles next week for discussions with Minister Bernard Shamlaye about the development of

higher education there at the same time as we hold a VUSSC course development workshop on Fisheries.

In thanking you for coming we note that in the short history of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth this meeting is rather special. So far we have held three planning meetings, two here in Singapore and one in Jamaica, and four course development meetings, that we sometimes call 'boot camps' because one of their functions is to provide basic training in IT skills for online collaboration.

The first workshop, for developing materials in Tourism, Hospitality and Entrepreneurship was held in Mauritius in 2006. Last year we held three more of them: here in Singapore for Professional Development of Educators; in Trinidad & Tobago for Life Skills; and in Samoa for Disaster Management. Next week, Seychelles will host a boot camp on Fisheries and there will be another on Construction in the Bahamas later this year. we express our warm thanks to all the countries that have hosted these events.

The VUSSC: preliminary activities and outputs

You will gather from this that the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is gathering momentum. Content and course development has taken place in a number of the subject areas that were identified as priorities by your Ministers of Education when we canvassed them in 2005. Furthermore, we are getting better at organising the process. Each successive course development workshop makes 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.

You will also be aware from your contacts in your ministries that there have 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. We estimate that the hundred people who have attended the five boot camps have, between them, trained another 400 people at home. This is a significant contribution to the bridging of the digital divide, which was one of the aims of Ministers when they conceived the VUSSC.

Another spin-off, which we have found impressive and touching, 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. They seem to find it immensely enriching to meet people from a range of cultures and backgrounds who all have in common the experience of living in a small state, whether one surrounded by ocean or one surrounded by other, bigger countries.

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. This is the background to this meeting on a Transnational Qualifications Framework. Nothing like the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth has ever been done before. Only a few years ago the idea of having 30 small

states collaborating online to develop and share course material for their tertiary institutions would have been a fantasy. But today we have begun to do it.

So now is a good time to ask what you want the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth to become. That question is the title of our remarks to you today. We ask what do you want it to become, because the VUSSC is an initiative of your ministers of education and as senior officials you are mandated to represent your ministers in these discussions. Let us go back to basics.

The VUSSC: What is it for?

The proposal for the VUSSC that was presented to Ministers in 2003 (COL, 2003) contained the following statement:

'The vision that emerged for a virtual university serving small states was one of a consortium of institutions, enabled by appropriate ICT applications, working together in practical ways to plan programmes, develop the required content and ensure the delivery of those programmes and support services to learners.'

It also included the sentence:

'The virtual university will be as much concerned with adding value to conventional on-campus instruction as it is with serving learners at a distance.'

And it also noted that a virtual university could benefit small states by:

'Providing accreditation systems to develop quality standards and ensure that they are met'.

The overriding objective for the VUSSC that emerges from the original proposal to ministers is that it should help institutions in the small states to serve learners better.

How are we doing?

How has the VUSSC worked?

I first make the point that the manner in which the VUSSC has developed has been significantly different from that envisaged in the original proposal, which called for the expenditure of \$20 million over the first five years. In the event, although ministers approved the proposal, 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 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. Contrary to what the proposal

called for, we have not set up a special unit of COL, nor have we gone around creating special nodes or sites for the VUSSC, nor have we set up standing committees. We did not think these would have been useful expenditures.

Instead, we have organised the work around two guiding principles. First, in order to remain close to the thinking of ministers of education, whose initiative this is, we created the function of 'interlocutors', usually ministry officials who can speak for their countries in planning meetings. Most of you are interlocutors in this sense, even though you may not be the formally appointed Interlocutor for your country, and at this meeting you are giving us a steer on qualifications frameworks for the VUSSC.

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. The colleagues who attend the boot camps are mostly 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 in Disaster Management at the recent event in Samoa, we ask all countries whether they are interested in taking part. Countries that decide to join in then 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. We note that this TQF meeting has requested that a specialist in qualification frameworks is included in each workshop to ensure that materials are structured to fit well within the TQF framework.

You could say that in order to get materials created we have focused on subjects and individuals rather than institutions. Instead of a consortium of institutions the VUSSC has been a network of ministries of education identifying the individuals needed to get the work done. There is nothing wrong with that as we needed to gain traction and involvement in the initiative. It is interesting to look back over the VUSSC meetings held so far and to see who has attended from which institutions.

This table gives the overall picture. The three planning meetings and this TQF meeting have involved 132 people, nearly 60% of them from government ministries or agencies. 87 people have attended the course development workshops and most of them, over 70%, 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 from institutions at the course workshops was not even higher, but we realise that in small states some people wear two hats and can represent the ministry of education and in institution at the same time.

If you put all the events together you 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 up there.

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.

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. You know better than we do whether that aim is being achieved.

We must confess that when we started work on the TQF we had no idea just how timely the idea of a qualification framework was. When we wrote to Ministers last year asking for them to send us their national qualifications frameworks we expected only a trickle of replies. Instead we have not only had replies from most countries, but those replies have shown us that qualifications frameworks are a live issue for many countries.

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 us start with what the VUSSC is not and will not become. You have discussed at some length the name and function of the VUSSC, which is the title chosen for it by the Ministers in 2000. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth 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. Another 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 life moves on and we suggest that it is now time for the VUSSC to develop from being an informal network of ministries of education towards the more formal 'consortium of institutions' that the ministers envisioned in the quotation from the original proposal that I read out earlier. We shall, of course, continue to hold meetings of interlocutors - and there is an important one coming up in London in July - but we need to strengthen the involvement in VUSSC of the institutions that are actually developing and using the VUSSC eLearning materials.

It would not have been efficient to stress the notion of consortium and how it could function earlier because what counts is the intensity of an institution's involvement with the VUSSC. Consortia are most effective when their members have a real stake in the outcome of the consortium's work and have the human and infrastructural resources fully to participate. Only experience could show us which institutions are most engaged with the VUSSC.

The future we see during this year is that a portal or hub will be created for VUSSC that will provide access to 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. Clients 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, clients will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing the

qualification's registration in the Transnational Qualification Framework. You have proposed a management structure for this.

Curriculum Expansion

During the first phase of the creation of the VUSSC, we started by supporting those people who needed ICT skills in education; we did not want to contribute to increasing the digital divide. Once educators have the necessary skills to work online it becomes possible to learn how to offer online courses as well. We have trained some 100 people in ICT skills for educators, and these participants have created course materials which are being posted on COL's website. The participants have also trained colleagues back home resulting in an estimated 400 or more educators who now have improved ICT skills. We have arrived at a point where we can take a serious look at increasing skills in eLearning - both for the creation of online courses and the tutoring of online learners.

Another preoccupation is how we expand and multiply 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 to begin 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.

However, the three-week workshop model is not sustainable in the longer term because it is too expensive. We trust that there is now, or shortly will be a large enough cadre of skilled educators 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! The first order of business was to help to reduce the digital divide; we can now begin training in the offering of online programmes with those countries in which sufficient capacity building has taken place. Once eLearning programmes have been provided by these countries and 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. That is to say it accords with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF.

Accredited institutions in participating countries that already have online courses appropriate for international offering may have these included in the VUSSC website to be developed during 2008. Academic programmes included in the VUSSC website will have to have been approved by appropriate national quality assurance structures, and where appropriate, by regional qualification structures. This is in line with your recommendations.

Course Delivery

Finally, we would like to see institutions create a forum - which could be an online 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. In addition to our earlier quotation from the original VUSSC proposal about adding value to conventional on-campus instruction, variations in connectivity within states mean that distance learning will take place in a wide variety of ways. Pooling experience of what works and what doesn't will be most valuable.

Conclusion

Let us finish by inviting you to reflect on these questions with your colleagues when you return home. We believe that by following an informal bottom-up approach ministers have obtained excellent value for the small investment that has been made in the VUSSC since 2003. But we suggest that the time has now come to formalise arrangements somewhat more while continuing to develop the VUSSC in a pragmatic way. Your work this week has been of immense help in doing that.

Each country must now ask itself again what goals it intends to achieve through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and put in place the local institutional arrangements necessary to see that it reaches them. Through your work this week you have made it much easier to explain what is on offer from the VUSSC and for that we are most grateful. We thank you for your excellent contributions and wish you safe trips home.

Reference

COL (Commonwealth of Learning) (2003) *A Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth* (for presentation to the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, Edinburgh 33pp.