

Virtual University, Flexible Learning: How Far Have We Come?



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2nd Boot Camp for Educators from Member States of the Commonwealth, held at the National Institute of Education, Singapore 12 March 2007

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and

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Introduction:

At the first meeting of Interlocutors of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth, Sir John Daniel spoke of how the Small States represented two thirds of the membership of the Commonwealth. I can tell you today that 28 Commonwealth countries are now active participants in the Virtual University initiative. That is more than half the Commonwealth's membership. 22 of those countries are represented at this boot camp that starts here today.

It is significant that we are returning to the city-state of Singapore for this boot camp. More countries are represented at this boot camp than were even represented at the first meeting of interlocutors where we launched this important initiative of Ministers that we call the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

The small states of the Commonwealth are a blend of land-locked, coastal and island states that span all regions of the world in splendid diversity. Some countries are surrounded by sea, others are surrounded by neighboring countries. Some countries rise to nearly 4 km above sea level, while others have no ground higher than a metre or two above sea level.

While there are some significant differences between the member countries, they all experience similar natural and economic threats and have populations of under 4.5 million; mostly much less than 4.5 million, making them tiny players in a world where most countries are much bigger and wealthier.

Small States are remote, so travel can be excessively expensive for citizens wanting to participate in collaborative projects with other countries. However, all VUSSC countries now have Internet access and connectivity for their educators and learners improves by the day. It is this Internet access and the so-called "web2" environment that makes it possible for small states, no matter how remote, to be a full part of any initiative, anywhere.

The boot camp that starts today will provide participants with an opportunity to become immersed in the online technologies that bridge distances. This is immersion training in the technologies that support education.

Topic Focus Areas

While the boot camp participants will learn all about the technologies that can help them break some of the tyranny of distance, they will also focus on subject areas determined by their Interlocutors, that is to say by their governments, which have thought carefully about the priority topics for the VUSSC.

The first boot camp that was held in Mauritius last year started the process of creating learning resources for entrepreneurship and tourism. You will focus on the professional development of educators in your countries. The work you start here will continue for months and years into the future as you work online.

At the last boot camp, Professor Senteni of the University of Mauritius described the process as creating 'Diasporas from scratch'. He said that people had come from many countries, become a group and gone back to their many countries. A new Diaspora will be born in Singapore over the next three weeks. You will form bonds that will live on for years after you have left this beautiful and dynamic city. One of the useful by-products of the VUSSC is to create a human network of educator-colleagues across the small states.

Relevancy of Topics

You may ask about the relevancy of the topic areas of the Virtual University for your particular country. Subject areas were decided by governments and communicated by your interlocutors and are for all countries. Places in boot camps are offered to all countries each time one is hosted. These places are offered on a first-come-first-served basis. For this boot camp, 22 countries out of the 28 members have elected to participate, indicating that they attach importance to the professional development of their teachers and educational staff.

The next two boot camps will focus on life skills and disaster management respectively. It is important that VUSSC maintains a focus on the reality of the Small States of the Commonwealth. For this reason, we are particularly pleased to be preparing to work in the area of disaster management because of the

urgency for member countries to prepare for more frequent storm weather patterns, rising seas and desertification.

Small states are well experienced with the potentially destructive power of nature and are amongst the most at risk of the severe consequences of the now unavoidable climate change. VUSSC will strive to cooperate with member countries to prepare and adapt for climate change.

In Conclusion

VUSSC has come a long way from 2000 when Ministers of Education asked COL to investigate the establishment of a Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth. They called it a Virtual University but VUSSC was designed to support existing institutions in the member countries, not to compete with them. It was designed to help with the transfer of qualifications, and not create a new institution. VUSSC was asked to build capacity in existing institutions and strengthen the work of Ministries of Education.

COL was asked to help to make this a reality and so you are here as a part of an international network of Ministries of Education, that are collaborating to build better economies. And it is doing this by using leading edge technologies that work in Small and Island States.

I assure you that COL is sparing no effort to help you make the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth a powerful and valuable reality. But remember that this is your project. The success of the VUSSC will depend on your continued dedication, the skills that you develop, and the ongoing support of your governments. Please communicate that message strongly when you get home.

I thank the Government of Singapore for hosting us; I thank you for being here to participate in this important work on behalf of your countries, and I wish you a most enjoyable and productive session over the next three weeks.

Presented by Paul West on 12 March 2007.