

The 6th International Workshop of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth



Official Opening

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Thirty of the world's smallest countries have embraced distance education across borders as a way of reinforcing their tertiary institutions and increasing national autonomy by acting collectively. They are doing this through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), which aims to bridge the digital divide through a combination of shared learning materials development and training in ICTs.

The concept of the VUSSC emerged when the Commonwealth Ministers of Education met in the millennium year, 2000. It was the year of the dotcom frenzy when the Internet began to revolutionise communication between people and create new ways of doing business. Online communication 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 realised 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 the new ICT developments for the benefit of their peoples. They believed that by working together their small states could create more than the sum of their individual efforts.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth was the mechanism that the ministers invented for this collaboration. Despite its name, the VUSSC is a collaborative network, not a new tertiary institution. It is owned by the countries and their existing tertiary institutions as a collective mechanism for producing, adapting and deploying courses and learning materials that would be difficult for any one country to develop alone. It is also working to increase the credibility and transferability of programmes offered by recognised institutions in the small states.

At the same time the VUSSC provides a special opportunity for people to develop expertise in online collaboration, eLearning and ICTs generally.

The initial effort of VUSSC was in the use of ICTs is to orientate professionals, academics and managers to interact with comfort in a networked, or "web2" world. Even if the first VUSSC programmes have to be delivered by the traditional means of face-to-face and distance methods to some students, they are being developed in formats that can be shared electronically between participating countries.

These thirty small states are a blend of islands, landlocked and coastal countries spanning the world. They have chosen to focus on creating postsecondary skills-related courses, in eLearning formats, in areas such as tourism, entrepreneurship, professional development for teachers, disaster management and a range of technical and vocational subjects.

These non-proprietary, electronically-held course materials, which can readily be adapted to the specific context of each country, are used in the offering of credit-bearing qualifications in the countries' post-secondary institutions, strengthening their educational capacity and outreach. The materials may be used both for distance learning and in the classroom. The VUSSC is thus a way of networking the existing institutions so as to expand access, deepen their curricula, improve the quality of their offerings and enable them to operate confidently in the eWorld.

To increase the cadre of ICT-skilled people and launch the development of eLearning materials in each new subject area, COL convenes a three-week workshop in one of the small states. The participating states that are interested in participating in the subject area send experts to the workshop. At the workshop they get training in methods of distance education design and development, collaborative development strategies and tools, and a range of different technologies that are used in eLearning development. Participants acquire these skills while working on real courses.

In order to facilitate the international use of programmes offered by institutions in the small states, the VUSSC has worked with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). The TQF aims to promote "translation" of programmes between countries and regions, and give greater credibility to the eLearning courses developed within the framework of the VUSSC which are offered internationally.

During 2008 an Internet portal or hub is being 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 in the international market, through the VUSSC portal. 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 it accords with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the VUSSC TQF.

Learners will be able to register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the portal 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 accreditation of the qualification in the country of origin and 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, advertently or inadvertently, have acquired reputations as safe havens for degree mills.

The participants for the 6th VUSSC Workshop have arrived in the Bahamas and will now embark what we expect will be a memorable three weeks - of learning about many cultures and education systems from across the world - of teaching colleagues from other parts of the world and learning from colleagues from far afield. We expect the skills and professional networks built up here in the Exumas Islands of the Bahamas to make a significant difference in the lives of participants and their colleagues back at home. From previous workshops, reports have been coming in on how participants have been impacting on the education systems in their home countries and we are sure you will be no different.

We wish you an enjoyable and productive workshop.

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