

Changing Mindsets for Inclusive Open Education – The VUSSC Leadership Initiative

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Abstract

As small states of the Commonwealth navigate the complexities of equitable access to Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) stands as a transformative model supporting inclusive education. Established through the leadership of Commonwealth Ministers of Education and facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), VUSSC is reshaping educational collaboration, policy frameworks, and capacity-building in Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Changing mindsets is crucial to ensuring that small states transition from being consumers of external educational models to becoming architects of their own open learning systems. The VUSSC Management Committee plays a vital role in leading this shift by guiding policy integration, promoting transnational qualifications, and fostering a culture of knowledge-sharing. Through a leadership-driven approach, VUSSC has enhanced digital learning infrastructures, expanded opportunities for micro-credentialing, and strengthened institutional collaboration. However, for inclusive open education to become truly sustainable, small states must embrace policy reforms, workforce-aligned skills training, and collaborative content development, all of which require leadership commitment and strategic innovation.

Following a qualitative, multi-source approach, to address each research objective, this study situates VUSSC as a leadership initiative, designed to influence systemic change in small states' educational policies and practices. The study further explores how shifting mindsets toward collaborative, digitally enabled, and policy-driven approaches ensures that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) models remain inclusive and relevant. The key finding is that VUSSC and the leadership management team are not just focused on building capacity; collaboratively the focus is on empowering small states to lead their future for inclusive open education so that the needs of the small states are addressed.

1. Background and Introduction

In this century, Inclusive Open Education (IOE) takes priority within educational structures across the globe. Deliberate emphasis through the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is no exception, with reference to its Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) initiative, supported by its Management Committee from across the world regions, serving as a transformative model in this regard. VUSSC, which came into existence through the leadership of Commonwealth Ministers of Education and facilitated by the COL in 2008, is reshaping educational collaboration, policy frameworks, and capacity-building in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). (VUSSC, n.d.).

The VUSSC initiative, in consultation with its Management Committee, absorbed and owned this responsibility in leading this shift by guiding policy integration, promoting transnational qualifications, and fostering a culture of knowledge-sharing. Through this collaborative leadership-driven approach, VUSSC has enhanced digital learning infrastructures, built capacity, expanded opportunities for micro-credentialing, and strengthened institutional collaboration across borders for educational impact. This impact-driven approach, undergirded by collaboration and networking among post-secondary educational institutions and ministries of the SIDS, showcases the power of inclusive open education. The intricacies of striving for inclusive open education opportunities, with no one left behind, is a critical starting point for leadership, action, and the changing of mindsets.

2. VUSSC Management Committee: Roles and Responsibilities

The VUSSC Management Committee was formally proposed and endorsed during the Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum (PCF5) held in London in 2008. This committee was established to collaborate closely with COL, operating through an appointed Education Specialist who is a COL staff member responsible for facilitating and advancing the implementation of VUSSC initiatives.

The Management Committee is tasked with providing oversight into the activities of participating VUSSC member countries across key regions: Asia and the Pacific, the Caribbean and the Americas, Africa, and the Mediterranean. In doing so, it seeks to fulfill the following set of strategic objectives designed to enhance the coordination, quality, and impact of VUSSC's programmes across the Commonwealth's small island states:

- Guide the strategic direction and implementation of VUSSC initiatives in collaboration with the COL
- Shape policy on the use of ICTs in education, particularly for expanding access through open and distance learning (ODL), and in building capacity to support this effort
- Oversee the development of free educational content
- Recommend a sustainable business plan and budget, and identify funding opportunities
- Promote VUSSC's mission among stakeholders in small states
- Inform Education Ministers and regional partners of progress, and advocate for continued political and institutional support
- Monitor programme implementation, evaluate project outcomes, and ensure quality through the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)
- Review TQF outputs to support the recognition and transferability of learning
- Foster professional relationships among participating countries to encourage a strong culture of collaboration and shared growth

3. Significance

VUSSC and the Management Committee operate under a shared vision, goal and perspective. There is a rootedness in these beliefs, that changing how people think plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive open education. It builds a culture where people accept each other, come up with new ideas, and work together. This approach has an impact on fairness and access by pushing teachers/academics and other key stakeholders to appreciate differences and give all beneficiaries the same chances. It helps break down biases and system-wide obstacles that get in the way of inclusive methods.

Additionally, enhancing student learning outcomes is another significant advantage. When teachers/academics gain confidence and competence to create supportive and flexible learning spaces, students get more involved and naturally do better. A way of thinking that focuses on including everyone, drives new ways to teach and learn. It also promotes the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs), to provide high-quality education to all.

Building a feeling of community and collaboration is also essential to achieving common objectives in education. When educators, students, and other involved parties feel connected, it leads to more collaboration and networking. This makes it easier for small states to share what works best and pool their resources.

Therefore, for VUSSC and its management leadership, it is crucial to back sustainable growth. Education that includes everyone gets all students ready to take part in society. This helps long-term social and economic progress in their communities. By zeroing in on these approaches, the VUSSC Leadership Initiative can give SIDS the power to shape their future in open education that leaves no one out.

4. Problem Statement/Orientation

Inclusive Open Education is steadily gaining momentum in various parts of the world. Though VUSSC stands as a transformative model supporting inclusive education, a lot is required to ensure a shift of mindset among SIDS, from consumers to architects of their own open learning ecosystems.

If IOE is to become truly sustainable, SIDS must embrace policy reforms, workforce-aligned skills training, and collaborative content development, all of which require leadership commitment and strategic innovation. Considering these aspects, this study investigated how mindsets can be changed/shaped among SIDS to own and

drive IOE initiatives based on a leadership approach model proposed by the VUSSC Management Committee in tandem with COL's VUSSC Adviser.

5. Objectives

The study's objectives were to:

1. Reframe leadership for IOE by helping to drive mindset shifts in governance, institutional partnerships, and lifelong learning models.
2. Support capacity-building in small states by helping to align projects with policy reform and digital transformation in education.
3. Mobilise knowledge to help change mindsets by supporting the VUSSC Voices initiative to help share insights of best practices, case studies, and policy recommendations for open learning.

6. Literature Review

Inclusive Open Education (IOE) is grounded in the principle that everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, location, gender, disability, or other barriers, should have fair and equal access to quality education (UNESCO, 2020). Open Educational Resources (OERs) have become a fundamental force in making education accessible to everyone. Hence, for open education to truly welcome everyone, we need a fundamental shift in mindset. However, numerous studies point out that the potential of OERs remains underutilised in many developing contexts, particularly in SIDS, due to deeply embedded traditional mindsets and systemic barriers (Lane, 2009; Mulder, 2016).

There needs to be a significant shift in mindsets from passive consumption to active participation in OER. According to Hodgkinson-Williams and Arinto (2017), transformative engagement with OERs requires a fundamental change in the values, beliefs, and practices of educators, policymakers, and institutions. These mindset shifts include moving from viewing education less as a static, traditional system and more as a flexible, learner-centered, and collaborative experience that we build together.

Strong, effective leadership is a key factor in promoting truly inclusive open education. Fullan (2014) emphasises that effective educational leadership must embrace complexity and promote innovation, particularly in uncertain and evolving environments. For small island developing states, which often have constrained limited resources, strong and insightful leadership is even more crucial for gathering support, building collaborative partnerships, and driving necessary reforms in education.

Research by Blessinger and Bliss (2016) highlights the importance of distributed and collaborative leadership in advancing Open Educational Platforms (OEPs). In their view, leadership is not limited to formal roles but includes those who facilitate policy integration, encourage professional development, and support change management. In this light, VUSSC and the VUSSC Management Committee's approach to shared leadership and regional collaboration presents a viable framework for advancing inclusive education in SIDS.

Policy integration is foundational for sustained change in open education. Vince et al. (2024) argue that integrated policy frameworks enable more coherent and sustainable governance, particularly when institutions face interdependent challenges such as digital transformation, curriculum reform, and quality assurance. For SIDS, it is crucial to connect education policies directly with their national development goals and digital strategies. This alignment is essential to ensure that open education is more inclusive and impactful.

Moreover, Mishra (2021) emphasises that without enabling policies at national and institutional levels such as recognition of open credentials, investment in OER repositories, and quality assurance mechanisms, open education initiatives remain fragmented and unsustainable. VUSSC's Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) represents a policy innovation that can address these challenges by promoting comparability, mobility, and mutual recognition of learning across borders.

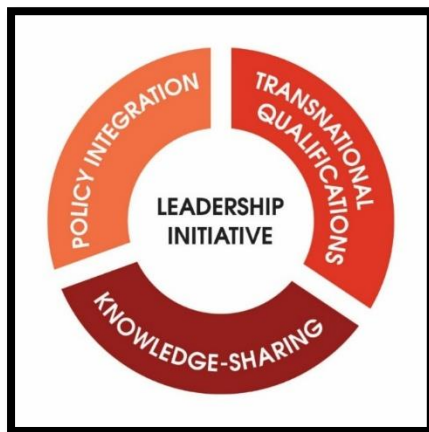
Developing the necessary skills and abilities is both a prerequisite and a product of IOE. As noted by Glennie, Harley, Butcher, and van Wyk (2012), educators and institutions must be equipped with the technical, pedagogical, and collaborative skills needed to design, adapt, and deliver open content. Furthermore, building this capacity also fosters confidence and promotes a shift in attitude towards openness and sharing (Lane, 2009). VUSSC's commitment to professional development and creation of online courses helps address these needs. However, research warns that building capacity must be continuous, localised, and supported by communities of practice (Conole & Brown, 2018). This reinforces why platforms like *VUSSC Voices*, which facilitate peer learning and experience sharing among member states, are so valuable.

Many studies have investigated why it's hard to adopt open education, especially in places with limited resources. These include resistance to change, fear of quality dilution, lack of digital infrastructure, and intellectual property concerns (de Hart, Chetty & Archer, 2015; Czerniewicz et al., 2017). These obstacles are not merely technical; they are deeply cultural and institutionalised.

To get past these obstacles, Cronin (2017) suggests fostering a culture of trust, experimentation, and community ownership within educational systems. This is where organisations like VUSSC, through its management committee, play a vital leadership role. VUSSC can model open practices, promote transparency, and encourage small states to customise and localise open content to fit their unique national needs and educational purposes.

7. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



An appropriate conceptual framework for a study of this nature requires a combination of interrelated parts, inclusive of policy integration, to support the promotion of transnational qualifications, to foster a culture of knowledge-sharing, and bolstered by innovative leadership at its core, as supported by Vince et al. (2024). For policy integration, the Open, Distance and eLearning (ODEL) field, with a focus on small states, calls for multidimensionality across or within sectors to ensure buy-in as a measure of minimising challenges (Vince, Fudge, Fullbrook, & Haward, 2024). By implication, transnational qualifications refer to cross-border recognition of qualifications, and within the context of this study small states can truly benefit from such recognition, thereby avoiding duplication of efforts and swiftly moving towards owning and leading inclusive education. When knowledge is shared, it opens opportunities for growth and innovation. Small states can ultimately only gain from

practicing a culture of knowledge sharing for growth and development, thereby avoiding redundant efforts. Holistically, the vision of harmonising these multidimensional parts for changing mindsets to foster inclusive open education within SIDS is supported by leadership that values innovation and transformation for collective educational advancement.

8. Research Design and Methodology

This position paper adopted a qualitative, multi-source approach to address its core objectives. The first objective was explored through a descriptive design (Adam et al, 2019) with elements of constructivism to explore the subjective experiences and perspectives of educational leaders (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To address the objective of supporting capacity-building in small states through the alignment of educational projects with policy reform and digital transformation, this paper adopted a strategic, evidence-informed methodology. Drawing upon secondary sources including VUSSC initiatives, Commonwealth of Learning publications, and global education reports, the approach integrated documented case illustrations to demonstrate practical alignment with national policy frameworks. A leadership-oriented conceptual framework underpins the analysis, emphasising the interconnection between policy reform, transnational qualifications, and knowledge-sharing. Furthermore, expert reflections from the VUSSC Management Committee members, inclusive of the VUSSC Adviser, and webinar discussions substantiated the methodology, offering nuanced insights into leadership dynamics and evolving educational mindsets.

For the last objective, a descriptive and action research design was used to evaluate how the VUSSC Voices initiative can effectively share insights and best practices to change mindsets about open learning (Commonwealth of Learning, n.d.). Practitioner insights were drawn from ongoing dialogues within the VUSSC, including feedback from educators, policymakers, technical experts and participants of the webinars. These discussions enriched the analysis with lived experiences and regional perspectives.

9. Discussion of Findings

9.1 Shifts in Mindset and Leadership through VUSSC Outcomes

The outcomes achieved through the VUSSC-supported initiatives represent not only technical progress but also a significant transformation in the mindset and leadership approaches of small states. These projects underscored a transition from traditional educational models to more responsive, inclusive, and future-ready systems, driven by visionary and collaborative leadership.

9.2 From Traditional Delivery to Strategic Digital Transformation

Workshops conducted in Grenada, Dominica, Guyana, and Jamaica illustrate a leadership shift towards embracing digital education not as a temporary solution but as a strategic direction. Leaders have moved from simply maintaining access to proactively enhancing quality through internal quality assurance frameworks, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policies, and faculty empowerment. This signals a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of technology in education.

9.3 From Rigid Programmes to Flexible, Learner-Centred Pathways

The micro-credential initiatives, particularly the one held in Jamaica for the meeting of regional Commonwealth SIDs, as well as in-service teacher training across the Caribbean exemplify a mindset shift from one-size-fits-all education to modular, flexible, and needs-based learning. This approach acknowledges the diversity of learner needs and the importance of continuous professional development, underlining a leadership model that is agile, learner-focused, and equity-driven.

9.4 From Compliance to Capacity and Confidence

Across the initiatives, particularly in the AI workshops in Namibia and the sustainable Agriculture Farmer Field School programme in Dominica, leadership has pivoted from enforcing standards to building the capacity and confidence of educators and learners. This demonstrates a belief in long-term empowerment over short-term compliance, cultivating ecosystems that can adapt and thrive independently.

9.5 From Local Impact to Global Consciousness

Projects like the Climate Literacy MOOC in Jamaica and the ODFL expansion in Tonga show leaders are embedding global challenges such as climate change into local educational strategies. This reflects a mindset attuned to sustainability, resilience, and international collaboration, positioning education as a driver of both local development and global citizenship.

9.6 An Analysis of the VUSSC Voices Webinars

As part of the VUSSC initiative, webinars were launched from September 2024, to provide a forum that should serve as a space and opportunity for institutional and government representatives from VUSSC countries, whether they have partnered with VUSSC or are interested in doing so, to learn about ongoing and completed projects in other VUSSC countries from those who implemented them. The webinars also provided a platform to raise questions, concerns, and ideas about common issues, and leverage collective strengths to explore solutions to shared challenges. Specifically, the objectives of the webinars were to expand and strengthen alliances among VUSSC stakeholders, share experiences, explore responses to common problems, and identify best practices. Additionally, the forum offered guidance and inspired others to partner with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) through VUSSC, to promote knowledge sharing, and encourage collaboration across countries.

For 2024/2025, six bi-monthly webinars were planned, launched and implemented by the end of June 2025. Table 1 below provides detailed information on the completed webinars, each focusing on different themes relevant to ODL and sustainable development.

Table 1. VUSSC Webinars from September 2024 - May 2025

| | Webinar Series (2024 – 2025) | Number of Registrants | Number of Attendees | Number of Country Engagements |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Series Theme: Strengthening Alliances for Quality ODL Tertiary Education Presentation Titles: The COL/CPCE Connection: Building Faculty Capacity to Design and Teach Online and Distance Learning Courses. | 265 | 93 | 29 |
| 2 | Series Theme: The Blue Economy Presentation Titles: The Blue Economy Course: Impact and Lessons for SIDS. AND Looking to SIDS – Enabling Legal Environments for Finance and Impact. | 297 | 93 | 40 |
| 3 | Series Theme: Disability Inclusion in ODL: Diversity and Ability Presentation Title: The Debt we Owe to Difference. | 284 | 97 | 47 |
| 4 | Series Theme: Advancing Caribbean Teachers (ACT) in Mathematics Presentation Title: Strengthening Mathematics Education: Lessons from the Eastern Caribbean. | 199 | 76 | 38 |
| 5 | Series Theme: Leading from Anywhere: Youth, Leadership & Learning in the ODL Era Presentation Title: Toward a Participatory Approach to Youth Work Curriculum Development. | 193 | 86 | 49 |
| 6 | Series Theme: Farming Smarter, Feeding Stronger Presentation Title: Sustainable Agriculture Farmer Field School: The Dominican Farmers’ Lived Experiences | 168 | 56 | 45 |

The webinars reflect a deliberate move toward distributed, participatory, adaptive, and instructional leadership models that are essential for the evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) ecosystems in SIDS.

9.6.1. From Information Sharing to Leadership Development

Each webinar in the series functioned as a leadership development intervention elevating the discourse from transactional knowledge-sharing to strategic capacity-building. For example, the first webinar on faculty capacity in ODL teaching signaled a shift from episodic training to systemic faculty empowerment, embedding continuous learning and digital pedagogy as institutional priorities. This is reflective of transformative leadership, which Fullan (2014) describes as the development of people as the core lever for systemic change.

The large number of country engagements per session demonstrates not only geographical spread but also a collective willingness among national systems to realign their practices around new pedagogical and leadership imperatives. This momentum reflects a critical mindset shift from localised problem-solving to global responsiveness and peer learning.

9.6.2. Embedding Leadership in Sustainability and Economic Resilience

The second webinar on the Blue Economy positioned education as a strategic enabler of national sustainability goals. Participants were not merely passive recipients of content but active interlocutors in rethinking the interface between curriculum and national development. This implies a transformation in how leaders conceptualise education — as a lever for economic policy, environmental justice, and resilience building.

Such integration demonstrates a shift from reactive to proactive leadership, where institutions begin anticipating future economic shifts and align academic programmes accordingly. This marks a substantial

change in mindset from compliance-based curriculum management to mission-driven, context-responsive educational planning.

9.6.3. Shifting from Equity Awareness to Inclusive Systems Design

Webinar 3, focused on disability inclusion, and embodied a paradigm shift in the cultural mindset of educational institutions. Moving beyond rhetorical inclusion, the session brought to the forefront principles of universal design, accessibility, and digital equity. Leaders were called not only to acknowledge diversity but to operationalise it structurally within policy and practice a transformation from equity as a moral goal to equity as a technical, policy-driven, and measurable imperative.

9.6.4. Transforming Pedagogical Leadership through Regional Collaboration

The fourth webinar on STEM, zoomed in on mathematics education, illuminated the importance of contextualised pedagogical leadership. By spotlighting regional challenges and solutions, it positioned teachers not as isolated practitioners but as part of a collaborative regional professional community. This approach models a shift in leadership thinking: from individual excellence to collective impact, and from content transmission to adaptive, student-centred learning design.

This evolution is consistent with Conole and Brown's (2018) emphasis on knowledge-sharing networks and Wenger's (1998) communities of practice both of which were actively embodied in this session.

9.6.5. Redefining Leadership through Youth and Participatory Curriculum Design

Perhaps the most significant shift in leadership culture emerged from Webinar 5, which focused on youth agency and participatory curriculum development. By engaging young people not only as learners but as co-creators of knowledge and policy, the session challenged traditional hierarchies in education. It represents a move towards distributed and horizontal leadership, embracing co-design and co-ownership as norms rather than exceptions.

This mindset shift from youth as beneficiaries to youth as strategic partners in change is transformational. It redefines leadership from a role to a shared process of sense-making, innovation, and collective ownership.

9.6.6. Leading Lifelong Learning, Inclusivity, and Food Security

Webinar 6 explored a VUSSC project, designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of small-scale farmers through participation in the Farmer Field School (FFS) to boost food security in Dominica. The presentation was enriched by firsthand narratives from participants, shared through YouTube video clips. Their testimonials provided valuable insights into how the course influenced agricultural practices. Participants highlighted the integration of AI, theory, and hands-on skills-based learning alongside other farmers as a key strength of the programme. Particularly compelling was the reflection of a visually impaired farmer who spoke candidly about his learning journey and the challenges he faced. His story highlighted the programme's inclusivity and impact on diverse learners, thereby enhancing the dynamism and relatability of the project.

This mindset shift of farmers learning via AI, theory, and practice to bolster food security in a small state is both novel and instructional. It supports leadership by doing and serving for the collective resilience of small states as a model for food security.

These shifts are evidence that the VUSSC webinar series is not simply a professional development tool, but a strategic intervention in transforming the culture of leadership in higher education across small states. As Vince et al. (2024) assert, sustainable transformation requires leadership that is deeply embedded in practice, people, and purpose. The VUSSC series exemplifies this, offering a replicable model for how mindset change can be systematically cultivated through reflective dialogue, strategic partnerships, and context-specific learning.

10. Call to Action

The aforementioned projects demonstrate a strong commitment among VUSSC stakeholders to transform higher education in response to the demands of today's dynamic educational landscape with a strategic intent of mindset change. A key priority is building the human capital needed to address global challenges. Given the unique scale of SIDS, the VUSSC community plays a pivotal role in developing appropriate policy instruments and advocating for the adoption of necessary frameworks to advance the digital transformation of higher education. This includes

the establishment of shared repositories for ODL and OER, with a focus on short courses tailored to the needs of small island states.

Micro-credentials serve as a powerful tool for skilling, upskilling, and reskilling not only for traditional university graduates but also within the context of lifelong learning. Leveraging the collective influence of VUSSC, to promote the recognition of degrees, qualifications, digital badges, and micro-degrees will be instrumental in navigating this rapidly evolving educational environment.

More pertinently, VUSSC, supported by the leadership of the VUSSC Management Committee, has laid a robust foundation for fostering inclusive open education by driving mindset shifts, enhancing capacity, and promoting collaboration. However, sustained progress requires ongoing commitment to policy reform, investment in digital infrastructure, and the cultivation of a culture of innovation and adaptability. By empowering small states to take ownership of their educational ecosystems, VUSSC not only addresses immediate educational needs but also contributes to long-term social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The collective efforts of the VUSSC community, through leadership efforts, webinars, capacity-building projects, and policy advocacy, signal a promising trajectory towards a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient educational future for SIDS.

11. Recommendations

To build on the successes of recent leadership and capacity-building projects in small states, several recommendations are proposed for future initiatives. These include:

- Expanding digital infrastructure and enhancing teacher training as they are crucial for supporting e-learning and digital transformation.
- Strengthening quality assurance frameworks to ensure educational programmes meet high standards, while promoting inclusive education to improve enrolment and success rates for marginalised learners.
- Fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing among institutions, policymakers, and industry partners through regular workshops and conferences.
- Developing micro-credential programmes as an avenue towards securing educational currency and providing flexible, industry-relevant learning pathways.
- Integrating emerging technologies like AI and Virtual Reality (VR) into learning and teaching for enhancing the learning experience.
- Supporting sustainable practices in education, such as the Sustainable Agriculture Farmer Field Approach project, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure initiatives achieve their intended outcomes.

The VUSSC Management Committee is cognisant that by implementing these recommendations small states can continue to align educational initiatives with policy reforms and digital transformation goals to ultimately improve educational standards and outcomes for all learners, hence its mandate to continuously challenge mindsets.

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