

# *Bridging the Last Mile*

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*Commonwealth of Learning, Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, Third Course Development Boot Camp, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 4 June 2007*

## *Bridging the Last Mile: Opening Remarks*

*Sir John Daniel*

### **Welcome and Introduction**

It is a great pleasure to greet you and to welcome you to this course development workshop, affectionately known as a Boot Camp, for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

These are pictures from the very first boot camp, held in Mauritius last August. I can see after talking to you last evening that we need to come up with a better name than boot camps, a term which has associations with prisons for young offenders for some of you and does not resonate a group like yours composed mostly of women. Please invent a new nickname for this event whilst you are here.

This is the third of these events, the second was held in Singapore in March. However, it is the first one that I have been able to attend. I was present for part of the VUSSC planning meetings that took place in Singapore and Ocho Rios, Jamaica, but they were different - important but different. These boot camps are the guts of what the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is all about and I am delighted to be here with you. I express special thanks to your team leaders who came to Vancouver earlier to prepare for this session.

I really enjoyed meeting you all last evening and am tremendously impressed by the talent and diversity in the group - and that it is dominated by women.

You come from Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Botswana, Grenada, Jamaica, Lesotho, Maldives, Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland, Tuvalu and Trinidad and Tobago - our wonderful hosts. Those facilitating the session come from Canada, Malta and South Africa, so this is a wonderful pan-Commonwealth gathering.

I'm thrilled also to be back in Port of Spain. Trinidad and Tobago has been a wonderful friend of the Commonwealth of Learning. I thank their Excellencies Hazel Manning, Minister of Education, and Mustapha Abdul-Hamid, Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education for their support, which we at COL try to reciprocate by adding value to education, training and learning in Trinidad & Tobago.

This is our first course development boot camp in the Caribbean and it is particularly appropriate that it is being held in Trinidad and Tobago. That is because the subject area that we are opening up at this event is Life Skills, an area in which Trinidad & Tobago has developed a special reputation for strong programmes. Through this event and what follows we hope that all the small states of the Commonwealth will be able to benefit from the expertise that is here.

My task this morning is fourfold. I shall explain why the Commonwealth in general, and COL in particular, works closely with small states; I shall give you some background on the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth; I shall explain why what you are doing here is unique; and I shall suggest some priorities for you when you return home to your countries.

## **Small States are Special**

You all come from the small states that make up two-thirds of the 53 countries in membership of the Commonwealth. Small, in this context, refers either to population or to geographical size - or to both. Most of the small states of the Commonwealth are small islands with small populations located in the Caribbean, in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. But there are also landlocked states with small populations such as Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana - although Botswana is not small geographically. There are also coastal states with small populations such as The Gambia and Belize, which are geographically small, and Guyana and Namibia, which are rather large.

Despite their diversity small states face common challenges. Commonwealth small states, as well as constituting two-thirds of Commonwealth membership, account for three-quarters of all the world's small states. This means that the Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations, that is to say the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat, must lead the international community by the special attention that they give to these states in their work. That is why this boot camp is partly financed by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation.

What can we say about the general needs of small states? You all come from small states and know much more about the opportunities and the threats that they face than I do. Seen in a world perspective through the lens of the Millennium Development Goals small states do face special challenges.

The first is simply being small. A small territory means that natural resources are limited in quantity and variety. A small population makes it difficult for a country to have skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy. Then there is the tyranny of transport. Small landlocked states face difficulty and expense in getting their traded goods to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.

Lately we have become more sensitive to the special environmental challenges that affect small states. Recalling the hurricane in Grenada, the tsunami in the Maldives and the floods in Guyana reminds us that small states are both particularly prone to natural calamities and especially vulnerable to their effects.

Some of them, such as Tuvalu, are in the front line of climate change because rising sea levels threaten the very existence of the country. That is why training in disaster management will be the subject of a

future boot camp of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The big countries are suddenly all talking about climate change but the small states are already living it.

Small states have become increasingly conscious of their common needs and are asking international bodies to formulate programmes to address them. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is one such programme. How did the VUSSC, as I shall sometimes call it, come about?

## **Origins of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth**

The Commonwealth Ministers of Education meet every three years. The idea of the VUSSC emerged when they met in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2000. Two special features of that Millennium Year influenced their discussions.

First, there was a strong focus on development in 2000. Meeting at the United Nations, Heads of Government approved a Millennium Declaration with eight Millennium Development Goals. Earlier that year the World Forum on Education for All convened in Dakar.

Second, and in sharp contrast to this concern for the world's poorer people, in 2000 the rich world was carried away by the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and creating new ways of doing business. Online communication seemed to have potential for transforming education as well. Enthusiasts told us that older educational methods would soon be history and that all true learning would take place in front of a computer screen.

These two developments rattled the Education Ministers when they met in Halifax at the end of 2000. On the one hand the Dakar and Millennium Goals increased their determination to increase access to education at all levels. On the other hand, new information and communication technology was both a threat and an opportunity.

The Ministers from the Small States shared a common anxiety that their countries did not have the critical mass, either of expertise or of equipment, to engage with online learning in a self-sufficient manner. But they did not want to be dependent yet again, as so often in the past, on the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states.

They believed that by working together they might be able to nurture an autonomous capacity for online learning that would enable them to harness these new ICT developments for the benefit of their peoples. They called this collaborative mechanism the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and asked COL work up a formal proposal.

COL did so and a plan for the VUSSC was approved when the Ministers met again three years later in Edinburgh. This plan was on my desk when I joined COL in 2004. I reviewed it, talked to people and reached two conclusions.

First, the atmosphere of panic generated by the dotcom frenzy in 2000 had subsided. As often happens when new phenomena appear, we overestimate the short-term impact but underestimate the long-term consequences.

By 2004 online learning had not dumped previous educational methods in the trashcan of history. However, it was seeping gradually into education and training at all levels.

Second, the plan for the VUSSC seemed to call for the creation and funding of a new institution with its own headquarters, organisation and infrastructure. I found that donors were not interested in funding any new international body, although they were keen to facilitate initiatives in education and training that might result from the VUSSC, especially if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

So we flipped the VUSSC over and started building it from the bottom up rather than from the top down. I wrote to the Minister of Education of each Small State asking three questions: are you still a player; what do you want to achieve for your country through the VUSSC; and who is your contact person?

Over 20 small states still wanted to participate. Today that figure has climbed to 28, which is 90% of the small states. The statements of priorities included the subjects countries are now working on, including Life Skills.

So let me emphasise strongly that the VUSSC is an initiative of your Ministers of Education to promote the development of education and training your countries. This is your project and you are here to make it happen. We at COL are here to facilitate the process but the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is you and your institutions. It is not COL.

## **Open Educational Resources, Wikis, and all that**

So how will the VUSSC work? What are you going to do here? Why do I say that it is unique?

Despite its name the VUSSC is not a new institution. It is a collaborative network with multiple points of activity. We are not creating a new institution but trying to reinforce the institutions your countries already have. All the Ministers want the VUSSC to strengthen their existing post-secondary institutions.

So the VUSSC is a mechanism to help small states work together to produce, adapt and use courses and learning materials that would be difficult for any one country to produce alone. That is the product goal. But the Ministers also had a process goal.

Knowing that the media and ICT environment is still underdeveloped in many small states, especially outside the main towns, I suggested to Ministers that the VUSSC would be a multi-media operation, using whatever medium was appropriate for the purpose, whether print, audio, video, DVD and so on. The Ministers replied that they understood my concern, but also that they saw the VUSSC as a special opportunity to develop expertise in online learning, eLearning and ICTs generally.

So that is one of our key aims. During the course of this 3-week period we shall give each of you real experience in eLearning. Moreover, we shall take you to the leading edge of current practice as you

develop open educational resources on a Wiki. Nowhere in the world are so many countries collaborating through ICTs in this very modern way.

Thanks partly to the VUSSC, the trend to open educational resources is gaining momentum. Open educational resources, which refer to open course content, open source software and tools, are your vehicle for collaboration. They and WikiEducator are the vehicles that will translate the vision of your Ministers in 2000 into reality.

You will hear much more about OERs at this meeting but let me make the point that even if, for reasons of connectivity and equipment availability, courses are made available to the learners by some institutions in traditional formats such as print, preparing them as OERs by online collaboration between individuals and institutions greatly speeds the processes of development and adaptation.

So you will be working together here to build up OERs on Life Skills and you will continue this work and involve others when you get home. Before long there will be a body of OERs on Life Skills that institutions can adapt and deliver within their programmes. This is a unique approach and the world is watching you.

## **Priorities for when you get home**

In the fourth and final part of my remarks I want to suggest some priorities for when you get home.

These are simply that you focus hard on both our process and our product goals. This boot camp is not an end in itself; it is the start of a new era.

The first imperative is that when you get home you continue to work on the VUSSC and train and involve other colleagues. This is your project and I have made it clear to Ministers that the success of the VUSSC in any particular country, or in any subject area, will depend on the skills, energy and teamwork of those involved. We have repeatedly reminded Ministers that time for working on the VUSSC must be written into the job descriptions of those involved.

As far as process goes, one of the important by-products of the VUSSC is a bridge across the digital divide in each participating country. Therefore it is your duty, when you get home, to share the skills you have acquired here and teach them to others so that ministries and institutions in your country have a steadily expanding pool of people who are comfortable with working online, know how to construct an open educational resource, and can manipulate material on WikiEducator.

As far as product goes, there are two imperatives. The first is to complete a set of usable OERs in the subject matter you are working on, namely life skills. Past experience shows that you will make considerable progress on this whilst you are here. However, much will remain to be done and it is vital not to lose momentum when you get home. That's why you yourselves must continue to contribute material and train others to do so too.

The second and ultimate imperative, on which the success of the VUSSC will be judged, and on which the programme stands or falls, is to translate the OERs into courses appropriate for your country that can be taken by real students through real institutions for real qualifications. Everything we are doing here is

simply a preparation for that. I call this the challenge of the last mile. Will all your great work on open educational resources make it over the last mile - or last kilometre if you prefer - to the learners?

Answering this question positively requires various things to happen. Each country needs to identify an institution or institutions to deliver the courses. People from that institution - which may be you - need to decide how much the material in the OER need to be versioned for your country and how it will be delivered to learners. The course needs to be approved as part of the institution's programme.

## **A Transnational Qualifications Framework**

This gets us into the challenging areas of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition. It also gets us into what is called cross-border education. Once again, nothing quite like this has been done before, with a core course being prepared for offering in more than twenty countries.

However, much work over many years has prepared the ground for this kind of thing, and we have made available to you an excellent document summarising UNESCO's Global and Regional Frameworks for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education.

From VUSSC's perspective UNESCO has created the top level treaties that are politically needed and UNESCO is about to start a major research project on the subject, which COL will stay close to. But COL is also working in a shorter-term perspective to create a master qualifications framework for the VUSSC. For that we are working with the South African Qualifications Authority, which has an impressive track record in this area, whilst keeping colleagues at UNESCO informed. You will hear more about this from Paul.

I mention this simply to stress the point that we must get all our ducks lined up, as we say in Canada, so that your good work finds its way smoothly into recognised courses that students in your countries can take.

You are all senior people who appreciate the importance of this goal, so I ask you to ensure, when you get back home, that you communicate its importance to your colleagues. The VUSSC will fail if it is seen simply as a vehicle for the collaborative preparation of courses and materials. It must be seen as a network that unites and strengthens the institutions in your countries by enabling them to operate on a larger canvas. That has implications for the way that they work together regionally.

My final point also sets what you are doing in a wider context. You are preparing learning materials and courses in online mode. This is what the Ministers wanted to see when they had the original vision of the VUSSC. They wanted their countries to acquire the skills and knowledge to operate confidently in the eWorld.

But they did not intend that you would have to invent every wheel yourself and design all the courses from scratch. With the skills you will acquire here you will be able to review and assess the rapidly growing body of OERs that is out there and see if some of them could be relevant to your country's needs.

Not all that material will be as freely available as the material you are putting on WikiEducator, but much of it can be used without cost by public institutions. We'll explain the ins and outs of copyright and

Creative Commons to you later in the session. This is another area where COL has acquired considerable expertise under Paul West's leadership.

That's more than enough from me. It has been a pleasure to talk to you. You have the possibility, through this new network called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth of transforming education and training in your countries and putting small states in the forefront of educational developments in the 21st century. I wish you well.