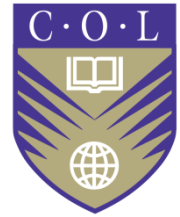


Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth



Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), Interlocutors Meeting

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Transcript

Colleagues & Friends

Welcome to this session on the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. The purpose of my presentation is to give you a brief overview of VUSSC. Some of you may be new to this consortium so I hope, you will be able to get an idea of how VUSSC moved from concept to implementation and the contribution this initiative is making to building national capacities.

The turn of the century witnessed the dot.com boom. Ministers of education were concerned about the rise of online universities and how this could negatively impact on small states, which stood at a disadvantage compared to larger countries. The ministers from the small states were determined that their countries should engage with the online world and increase access to programmes of study in their countries but doubted that they had the critical mass, of either expertise or equipment, to engage with virtual learning on their own. The ministers were concerned that their countries were on the wrong side of the digital divide, had inadequate access to tertiary education which resulted in brain drain, lacked the capacity to benefit from the developments in technology and would have difficulty in meeting the MDG and EFA goals. But if they worked together they could develop a collective capacity for harnessing new ICT developments for increasing access to quality tertiary education in their countries.

The idea for VUSSC came from your ministers of education, when they met for their triennial conference in 2000. The Ministers' directive to develop the proposal for a Virtual University for Small States "using existing structures and capacity" challenged the Technical Advisory Committee that was set up in 2002 to think in terms of how a virtual university might "add value" to the current status of higher education in the small states. The group met in Seychelles in 2003 and agreed on a proposal for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) that was presented to Ministers at 15CCEM later that year in Edinburgh and the Commonwealth of Learning was assigned the responsibility of implementing this initiative.

It was agreed that this Virtual University would be unique: It would

- Enable small states to be contributors, as well as consumers, by developing a cadre of people with the skills to implement virtual education systems
- Strengthen existing tertiary institutions making them more responsive to emerging needs
- Permit the delivery of courses in a variety of formats according to available technologies.

By the time COL began working with the small states in 2004 to implement the plan for the VUSSC, the context for its creation had changed in several respects.

By 2004 it was clear that online learning was not going to render all previous educational methods obsolete. But although some of the early applications of eLearning had been disappointing, it was also clear that it had great potential and was beginning to seep gradually into all forms and levels of education.

The plan as approved by the Ministers of Education implied the establishment and funding of a new Commonwealth body with its own organisational structure and headquarters. After some investigation COL quickly realised that donors were not interested in funding a new intergovernmental agency or central office for a university consortium, although they did express interest in the education and training outcomes that the VUSSC might yield, especially if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

COL decided, therefore, to build the VUSSC from the bottom up rather than from the top down. The new organisation would be a network rather than a new university competing with existing providers. Today VUSSC has grown into a network of 31 small states dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. VUSSC is therefore a network of for and by the small states.

This collaborative network is supported by a Management Committee consisting of six representatives from all regions of the Commonwealth,

What has the VUSSC achieved so far?

VUSSC has held several capacity building workshops in various small states. Participants of the workshops learned to develop online courses in a very practical way. VUSSC has developed fifteen courses which were identified by the small states themselves. These are now being shared freely as open educational resources or OER. Institutions have started to offer these courses. VUSSC has its own web presence and a Learning Management System (LMS) for participating institutions to use.

More than 21,000 people have been trained through VUSSC activities since 2006. VUSSC developed courses such as a certificate in Sustainable Tourism or a Bachelors in Business and Entrepreneurship have reached over 600 learners and the numbers continue to grow.

Nine institutions in 8 small states are offering VUSSC courses so far and I would encourage more of your institutions to start offering VUSSC courses either as stand-alone courses or as part of an existing qualification.

These are some of the courses that have been completed, are available as OER and can be adopted and adapted as required by your institutions.

The participating states are scattered over all regions of the Commonwealth. In order to facilitate the use of jointly developed courses in all states, VUSSC developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions, give credibility to the eLearning courses and promote the mobility of students.

As you can see, the number of institutions that have participated in VUSSC activities is quite impressive.

The National University of Samoa has been offering the Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture developed by VUSSC. The first group of students graduated this year and the most rewarding aspect is that all graduates are in full-time employment

From a different region of the Commonwealth, the Caribbean, Ms. Marcia Musgrove, a school teacher in The Bahamas, writes to say and I quote “Being a participant and team leader at a VUSSC workshop ...not only helped me to grow in personal ways, but has also spawned a series of opportunities to aid my professional development. I think of it as “The VUSSC Snowball Effect” ... in the tropics’, unquote.

Through VUSSC COL is collaborating with the Economic Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat in the delivery of an online course on International Architecture for Environment & Sustainable Development. The course is currently being offered through a partnership with the Indian Ocean Commission. VUSSC is also working in partnership with the Commonwealth Youth Programme, Commonwealth Secretariat and The Commonwealth Youth Programme, Caribbean Centre (CYPCC), to map the Youth Work Competency Standards to the TQF.

As we go forward, VUSSC will continue to strengthen tertiary education institutions in the small states. The advances in cloud computing and eLearning will give small states the opportunity to collaborate in real-time across any distance. COL will continue to provide institutional support to offer online courses. Developments in mobile networks will increase speed and further reduce the costs of bandwidth. The Transnational Qualifications Framework has the potential to promote cross border education and give the small states access to world class online education. And finally, VUSSC will continue to promote Commonwealth cooperation leading to bilateral and multilateral linkages between Member States .

Thank you for your kind attention.