

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Its journey, evolution and future



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Honourable Ministers, the purpose of my presentation is to give you an idea of how VUSSC moved from concept to implementation and the contribution this initiative is making to building national capacities and strengthening human resource development in your countries.

At the turn of the century Ministers of education of small states 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, and lacked the capacity to benefit from the developments in technology.

The idea for VUSSC was proposed by Ministers of Education at the 14CCEM. COL was instrumental in the development of the VUSSC proposal and this was accepted by Ministers at the 15CCEM in Edinburgh. COL 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 active contributors, by developing a cadre of people with the skills and expertise to implement virtual education systems
- Strengthen existing tertiary institutions
- Be responsive and be able to change quickly to take into account emerging needs
- Permit the delivery of courses in a variety of formats according to available technologies.

The new organisation would be a network rather than a new university competing with existing providers. VUSSC started its activities by strengthening the capacity of institutions and educators in open and distance learning using appropriate technologies while at the same time developing free content.

Today VUSSC has grown into a robust network dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. It has been a powerful forum for connecting the Commonwealth and promoting Commonwealth collaboration.

This collaborative network represents two thirds of the Commonwealth membership and is supported by a Management Committee consisting of six representatives from all regions of the Commonwealth.

What has the VUSSC achieved so far? Thousands of professionals have been trained in ICT skills. Courses have been developed collaboratively and are being offered by several institutions. All content

developed under VUSSC are Open Educational Resources or OER which can be adopted adapted or reused freely by anyone anywhere in the world. VUSSC has its own web presence and a Learning Management System (LMS) for participating institutions to use.

First, let us look at capacity. To date more than 28 institutions from 20 countries have participated in VUSSC training activities.

Second, twenty three institutions in 14 countries have started to offer VUSSC courses and programmes.

Institutions are offering these through a variety of means mainly through conventional, online or blended modes. Sharing content developed collaboratively enhances quality and reduces costs.

VUSSC has held several capacity building workshops in the use of technology enabled learning. Participants of the workshops learned to develop online courses in a very practical way. VUSSC has developed fourteen programmes which were identified by the small states themselves. They cover areas such as tourism, sustainable agriculture, environment, education. These are now being shared freely as open educational resources or OER. They can be repurposed and recombined to suit specific contexts.

The National University of Samoa has also been offering the VUSSC developed Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture and the first group of graduates are all in full-time employment. Another batch of students graduated after completing the Bachelor in Business and Entrepreneurship at BOCODOL, Botswana.

Recently COL commissioned a study to compare the benefits of VUSSC distance learning students with their campus-based counterparts in the Bachelor of Business and Entrepreneurship programme in Botswana. It is significant that the students surveyed were first-generation university students. This shows that VUSSC is opening up access for tertiary education to those who had so far been outside its purview.

The tuition fees of the VUSSC students was 69% less than that of the campus students studying the same programme. Interestingly 77% of VUSSC students were already employed and saved on opportunity costs by combining work and study, resulting in nearly \$600 more monthly income than face to face students.

In addition to increasing access to a new constituency of students, and reducing costs significantly, the VUSSC students had only one third the carbon footprint of campus learners without any compromise on learning outcomes.

The UKOU Research Hub conducted a survey to assess the use of OER by formal learners in India, the small states of the Commonwealth and the Open Learn UK. Students in developing countries, especially small states showed high levels of satisfaction with OER in terms of increased interest, better collaboration with peers and improved grades.

By 2007, most of the Commonwealth small states had joined the VUSSC initiative. The participating states are scattered all over the world. In order to facilitate the use of jointly developed courses in all states the VUSSC developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions and to give credibility to the eLearning courses developed.

A referencing tool has been developed to help institutions align their courses to the TQF.

Six courses and programmes have already been registered on the TQF by four countries. This will facilitate the movement of courses and programmes between

States and promote the quality and credibility of VUSSC offerings.

VUSSC is also working in partnership with the Commonwealth Youth Affairs Division and University of the West Indies to make the Diploma and Degree in Youth Work available to a wider audience and to share these as OER. More institutions will now have access to the Commonwealth Youth Programme through VUSSC. Sixteen universities around the Commonwealth have joined the consortium which was formally launched by President Museveni of Uganda last year.

Let me share three significant developments since the previous CCEM held in the Bahamas. Nursing education can be expensive and for this reason the number of trained personnel available can be seriously compromised. VUSSC worked with the University of Swaziland to develop an OER policy, build capacity and the courses for the Bachelor of Nursing programme are being developed. Once complete, they can be adopted/adapted by other institutions.

At the previous CCEM held in The Bahamas, ministers had suggested that VUSSC develop a course on the emerging concept of the blue economy. Working with the Blue Economy Institute at the University of Seychelles, COL supported the development of this free six-week online course which was offered last year. It attracted 247 learners from 24 countries. In partnership with the IITK, COL has developed MOOKit, a MOOC platform that your institutions can access to offer such courses.

Another notable development has been the transitioning of Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) to Botswana Open University. It is offering 7 VUSSC programmes, the largest number that any institution is offering so far, in which more than 1000 students have enrolled.

These, honourable ministers are some examples of what VUSSC can offer. What does the future promise?

From the outset ministers were clear that VUSSC should facilitate access to quality tertiary education and this has been achieved to some extent but much more needs to be done if VUSSC is to have greater impact. We need more institutions to offer VUSSC developed courses and programmes. The expansion of mobile learning is happening much faster than most of us anticipated and it is having great impact on the young generation and VUSSC can harness this technology to increase access. We need to see more qualifications registered on the TQF to promote quality education to benefit the learners.

Moving forward we would like to hear from you about your needs and priorities.

What more needs to be done?

How can we enhance our engagement?

How can VUSSC support your agenda of promoting 'learning for sustainable development'?

Thank you for your kind attention