Commonwealth of Learning

**The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth:
What is it for? How is it doing? Where is it going?**

Sir John Daniel & Paul West
Commonwealth of Learning

What is it for?

The proposal for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) that was presented to Ministers in 2003 (COL, 2003) contained the following statement:

'The vision that emerged for a virtual university serving small states was one of a consortium of institutions, enabled by appropriate ICT applications, working together in practical ways to plan programmes, develop the required content and ensure the delivery of those programmes and support services to learners.'

It also included the sentence:

'The virtual university will be as much concerned with adding value to conventional on-campus instruction as it is with serving learners at a distance.'

And it also noted that a virtual university could benefit small states by:

'Providing accreditation systems to develop quality standards and ensure that they are met'.

The overriding objective for the VUSSC that emerges from the original proposal to ministers is that it should help institutions in the small states to serve learners better.

How is it doing?

The manner in which the VUSSC has developed has been significantly different from that envisaged in the original proposal, which called for the expenditure of $20 million over the first five years. In the event, although ministers approved the proposal, funds on this scale were simply not forthcoming.

In reality total expenditure to date has been about $2 million. That includes all out-of-pocket costs for travel, etc. and an estimate of the salary costs of those who have attended the various VUSSC events. It does not include salary and overhead costs for COL because supporting the VUUSC is part of our normal business.

We are all most grateful to the Hewlett Foundation, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation and the Government of Singapore for defraying many of the out-of-pocket costs.

The VUSSC is a shoestring operation, because there isn't much money. It is also a bootstrap operation because we've built it from the bottom up. Contrary to what the proposal called for, COL did not set up a special unit, nor have we created special nodes or sites for the VUSSC, nor have we set up standing committees. We did not think these would have been useful expenditures.

Instead, we have organised the work around two guiding principles. First, in order to remain close to the thinking of ministers of education, whose initiative this is, we

created the function of 'interlocutors', usually ministry officials who can speak for their countries in planning meetings.

Second, since the overall aim of the VUSSC is the development of learning materials and programmes that can be studied by real students in real institutions leading to real qualifications; we identified the role of 'implementer'. These are people, usually in tertiary institutions, who are involved in the teaching/learning process. Those who attend the boot camps are mostly implementers or educational professionals in the topic area of the workshop.

The identification of implementers has been very pragmatic. Ministers identified a number of subject areas in which they wanted the VUSCC to develop materials and Implementers refined the list. When we hold a workshop to develop content in one of those areas, such as in Disaster Management (Samoa, 2007), we ask all countries whether they are interested in taking part. Countries that decide to join in identify a specialist in the subject matter from their most appropriate institution. We have been extremely impressed by the expertise and quality of many of the people who have come.

You could say that in order to get materials created we have focused on subjects and individuals rather than institutions. Instead of a consortium of institutions the VUSSC has been a network of ministries of education identifying the individuals needed to get the work done. There is nothing wrong with that. It is interesting to look back over the VUSSC meetings held so far and to see who has attended. It was necessary to start with groups of people who could train and influence others and who could later on, go onto receiving and offering programmes in an online mode.

So far, aside from the meeting on a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF), we have held three planning meetings, two in Singapore and one in Jamaica, and five course development meetings, that we used to call 'boot camps' because one of their functions is to provide basic training in IT skills for online collaboration.

A first boot camp, for developing materials in Tourism, Hospitality and Entrepreneurship was held in Mauritius in 2006. Last year we held three more of them: in Singapore for Professional Development of Educators; in Trinidad & Tobago for Life Skills; and in Samoa for Disaster Management. In 2008 Seychelles hosted a boot camp on Fisheries and there will be another on Construction in the Bahamas. We express our warm thanks to all the countries that have hosted these events.

Figure 1 gives the overall picture. The three planning meetings and the TQF meeting have involved 132 people, nearly 60% of them from government ministries or agencies. 87 people have attended the course development boot camps and most of them, over 70% are from institutions. This balance, with more ministry officials and interlocutors at the planning meetings and more institutional implementers at the course development workshops is what we would have expected. We are surprised that the proportion from institutions at the boot camps was not even higher, but we realise that in small states some people wear two hats and can represent the ministry of education and in institution at the same time. If you put all the events together you have 48% of participation from institutions, 46% from government and 6% from other bodies.

Which countries have shown most interest in the VUSSC? Figure 2 lists the countries with the highest level of total participation in terms of person-meetings. For example, across all the events the VUSSC has held, 21 places were taken by Trinidad &

Tobago, though of course in some cases the same person attended more than one meeting. This table shows a nice spread around the Commonwealth regions and is good to see our smallest state, Tuvalu, right up there.

Who attended these events? Figure 3 ranks countries by the number of person-events involving ministry of education officials. There are similarities and differences with the previous table. For example, Namibia was number 3 in overall participation but since nearly all its participants were from institutions it doesn't figure in this table. The same goes for Botswana.

Next, which countries sent most people from institutions? Figure 4 ranks the top countries by their institutional attendance. Again there is a nice spread. A total of 46 institutions from the small states have been represented at one or other of the VUSSC events. Mauritius spread the experience most widely with five institutions involved, followed by Lesotho with four.

Figure 5 looks at individual institutions. Which are the institutions that have attended VUSSC events most assiduously? Again there is a nice spread with the University of Swaziland at the top but also key institutions in smaller countries like St. Vincent & the Grenadines and St. Kitts and Nevis also taking advantage of these opportunities.

The surprise, if you compare this with the original proposal, is to find that the two regional universities have not participated much in the VUSSC. The University of the West Indies was only involved in three events and the University of the South Pacific has not taken part at all. Maybe the lesson for the future is that the VUSSC has most to offer to the smaller small states that do not have a well-developed tertiary sector.

Where is it going?

So where is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth going? What are the next steps to take?

Status and Structure

Let us start with what the VUSSC is not and will not become. Despite its name, chosen by the Ministers in 2000, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is not a university in any normally accepted sense of the term. It is not a body that teaches programmes to students and awards degrees. Nor will the VUSSC become a university in that sense. One reason is that the authority to grant degree-awarding powers rests with national governments, not with intergovernmental bodies like COL or UNESCO. Another is that ministers have made it clear that they want the VUSSC to reinforce the impact of your existing tertiary institutions, not to compete with them.

If that is what the VUSSC is not, what is it now? It is essentially an informal network of ministries of education and public tertiary institutions supported by the part-time efforts of a number of people at the Commonwealth of Learning. We believe that approach has served us rather well to date and has produced creditable outputs given the small investment of money.

But life moves on. Is it now time for the VUSSC to develop from being an informal network towards the more formal 'consortium of institutions' that the ministers envisioned in the quotation from the original proposal that we read out earlier? Meetings of ministry interlocutors – such as the one in London in July 2008 – are important, but we suggest we need to strengthen the involvement in VUSSC of the institutions that are actually developing and using the VUSSC eLearning materials.

It would probably not have been efficient to stress the notion of consortium earlier because what counts is the intensity of an institution's involvement with the VUSSC. Consortia are most effective when their members have a real stake in the outcome of the consortium's work. Only experience could show us which institutions are most engaged with the VUSSC. Whilst we do not have as much information as we would like about the usage of VUSSC material in real classrooms or distance learning courses, we can look at the record of involvement with course development.

Figure 5 indicates the institutions that have engaged most with the VUSSC. What we don't know, and what we must find out, is how much effect this engagement has had on teaching and learning in the institution.

At the meeting of national qualifications authorities in Singapore in February 2008, a management committee was selected to oversee the establishment of a VUSSC/TQF website that will list accredited online programmes. Starting with online programmes that already exit, we believe that other VUSSC countries will soon begin to offer online programmes as well. To be listed on the VUSSC/TQF website, a programme will have to be offered by a nationally accredited institution in a VUSSC country, and the programme will need to have been accredited by the national accrediting agency, and if appropriate, the regional accrediting agency. We believe this will help to add credibility to institutions operating in small states, helping to ensure that their qualifications are recognised in other small states.

The TQF and the VUSSC/TQF website have special importance for establishing the credibility of VUSSC programmes because some of the states participating in the VUSSC have the reputation, rightly or wrongly, of being safe havens for the operators of degree mills and bogus colleges and figure on the informal 'black lists' of authorities in certain countries.

Curriculum Expansion

Another preoccupation is how to expand and multiply the eLearning materials that the VUSSC can make available to countries and institutions. The model that we have used to date, that of the three-week face-to-face course development workshop, has served us well. Material has been produced; hundreds of people have acquired the IT skills required for work in the virtual world; and an inspiring sense of community has developed amongst educators from small states.

However, the three-week workshop model is not sustainable in the longer term because it is too expensive. There must come a point in the next few years when those countries that are committed to developing education and training in the e-world have built up the critical mass of skilled people to initiate the development of new subject areas without going through the boot-camp process.

Nor does the development of new subject areas mean developing all the material from scratch, Ministers were clear when they launched the VUSSC that, although they wanted to create an indigenous capacity to navigate in the e-world, their goal was not e-isolationism!

In the short time that we have been building up the VUSSC an effervescence of activity around the world has created an expanding volume of open educational resources in digital formats that are freely available for use. One of the skills that people have acquired at the boot camps is the ability to track down these resources by using search tools available in the Internet.

One purpose of creating the VUSSC website is to share experiences of using these open educational resources. Although we cannot continue holding course-development workshops at the rate of two or three a year, a key element of the ministers' vision was that the small states should continue to work together on the development, delivery and accreditation of courses. This can now continue because a significant number of people in small states have now had their ICT skills boosted and can begin to further develop their skills online.

More and more of this collaboration will be done by online collaboration rather than face-to-face workshops and COL is committed to facilitating this. Already COL is investing substantial effort in sustaining the online communication between countries that is required to complete the courses for which material began to be developed at the various boot camps.

Course Delivery

Finally, the VUSSC/TQF websote will provide a forum for pooling experience of the delivery of VUSSC course materials. So far we are in the early stages of using these materials but clearly they will be used in very diverse ways. In addition to our earlier quotation from the original VUSSC proposal about adding value to conventional on-campus instruction, variations in connectivity within states mean that distance learning will take place in a wide variety of ways. Pooling experience of what works and what doesn't will be most valuable.

Conclusion

We invite you to reflect on these questions. We believe that by following an informal bottom-up approach ministers have obtained excellent value for the small investment that has been made in the VUSSC since 2003. However, that the time has now come to formalise arrangements through the implementation of the VUSSC/TQF website while continuing to develop the VUSSC in a pragmatic way. Above all, it is time for each country to ask itself again what goals it intends to achieve through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and to put in place the local institutional arrangements necessary to see that it reaches them.

Reference

COL (Commonwealth of Learning) (2003) *A Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth* (for presentation to the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, Edinburgh 33pp.