

Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)

OVERVIEW

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) has continued to progress and grow exponentially since its conceptualisation at the Commonwealth Education Ministers meeting in Halifax, Canada, in 2000. Given its mandate to develop capacity in the small states of the Commonwealth by engaging with ministries and institutions, it has attracted a lot of attention. Many international institutions and organisations are following the development of VUSSC closely with a view to becoming involved or just to follow its progress. This flagship initiative is building ICT skills of educators and capacity in developing Open Education Resources (OERs) for course development, teaching and learning. VUSSC is developing capacity through collaborative partnerships to produce learning materials and their adaptation into courses under the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF).

COL's VUSSC network is facilitating collaborative development and the sharing of OERs. In support of this important goal this has been made possible, in the main, with additional funding.

MAIN OBJECTIVE

The main objective of VUSSC is to develop a collaborative network of Commonwealth small states aimed at developing capacity, creating and sharing learning materials at the post-secondary level and establishing a transnational framework that would enable the transfer of credits and qualifications.

KEY PARTNERS OF VUSSC

The VUSSC has been partnering with a number of organisations and post-secondary institutions at all levels in its development. The number of these organisations and post-secondary institutions has increased to broaden the scope of VUSSC in its deliberations especially for financial support without which would have been an impossible task. These include;

- National Ministries of Education and Tertiary Institutions,
- The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC),
- National Qualifications Authorities (NQAs),
- National Quality Assurance Agencies (NQAs),
- The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation,
- The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and
- The Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

COUNTRIES



To date, 32 small states are now actively engaged in VUSSC related activities.

Pan-Commonwealth: 32 Commonwealth VUSSC countries

1. Antigua & Barbuda
2. Barbados
3. Belize
4. Botswana
5. Brunei Darussalam
6. Cyprus
7. Dominica
8. Fiji
9. Grenada
10. Guyana
11. Jamaica
12. Kiribati
13. Lesotho
14. Maldives
15. Malta
16. Mauritius
17. Namibia
18. Papua New Guinea
19. Samoa
20. Seychelles (The Republic of)
21. Sierra Leone
22. Solomon Island
23. St. Kitts & Nevis
24. St. Lucia
25. St. Vincent and the Grenadines
26. Swaziland
27. The Bahamas
28. The Gambia
29. Tonga
30. Trinidad & Tobago
31. Tuvalu
32. Vanuatu

REPORT

The VUSSC has been focusing on these three main activities:

1. Developing capacity in small states in areas of ICT, production of ODL materials and OERs.
2. Development of course materials.
3. Development of a Transnational Framework of Qualifications.

In its undertaking, COL has worked closely with Ministries of Education through its Interlocutors to facilitate the realisation of these activities and also by engaging with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of Qualifications Authorities and Quality Assurance Agencies.

2008 Interlocutors' Meeting

The 2008 interlocutors' meeting was held at the Birkbeck College, London University, UK in July. Again, this provided a platform for member states to discuss pertinent issues in relation to the VUSSC.

The meeting agreed that there should be a management committee for VUSSC. It was a unanimous decision that the VUSSC Management Committee (VUSSCMC) will cooperate with COL to oversee the activities of the VUSSC, working directly with the Education Specialist for VUSSC who will be an employee of COL from January 2009. The President of COL reports on VUSSC to the Ministers of Education at the triennial meeting and will carry out this task with the assistance of the VUSSC Management Committee.



The small states are slowly taking ownership of VUSSC. This has been made apparent by the creation of a VUSSCMC in October 2008. The VUSSCMC will work with COL in the future management of this initiative. Members of the committee are:

Asia and the Pacific

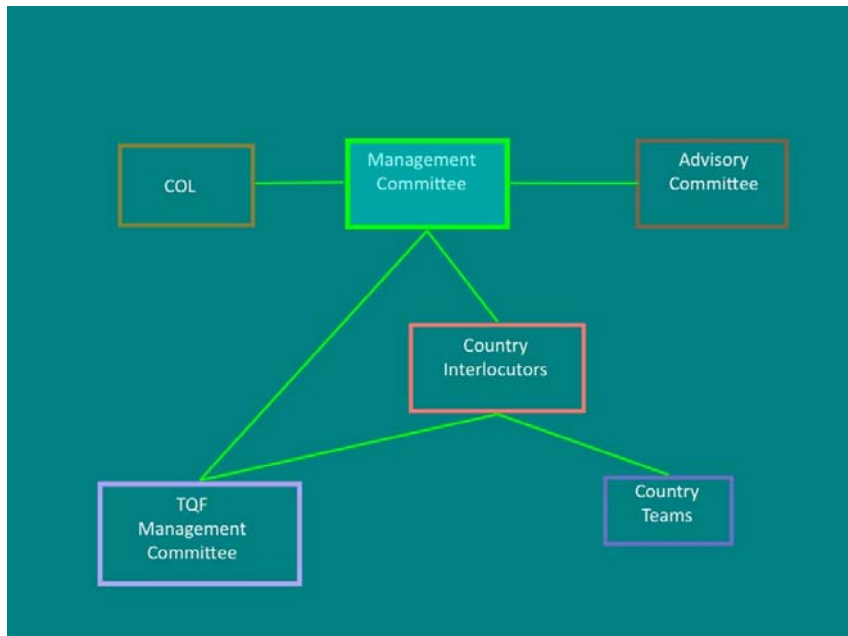
Emma Kruse Vaai, Samoa
Fawaz Shareef, Maldives

The Caribbean

Leon Higgs, the Bahamas
Karen Rosemin, Trinidad & Tobago

Africa and the Mediterranean

Ricaud Auckbur, Mauritius
Mamolete Mohapi, Lesotho



VUSSC Management Structure

The branding of VUSSC was also an important decision that was taken by Interlocutors at the London meeting in 2008. Several logo designs were circulated and Interlocutors approved one design in particular and suggested some changes to it. The final version of the VUSSC logo is shown below.



VUSSC logo



Appointment of the Education Specialist for VUSSC

As was supported by country interlocutors at the London meeting in 2008, and in its endeavour to strengthen VUSSC, COL recruited an Education Specialist for VUSSC in January 2009. John Lesperance from the Seychelles was recruited to fill the position and is now a full-time staff at COL. The Education Specialist for VUSSC will ensure the successful implementation of all VUSSC related activities while working in close collaboration with the VUSSCMC.

VUSSC Website

An internet portal has been created for VUSSC. The website is already providing access to an online programme offered by an accredited institution. The URL for the website is www.vussc.info and it is a gateway to information on VUSSC, particularly for member states but will also serve as a source of information to the rest of the world. The website will serve as a portal for the registration of VUSSC courses offered by participating institutions that are accredited by National Qualifications Authorities or other recognised national bodies.

Transnational Qualification Framework

A 32-country international online course development initiative like the VUSSC poses challenges of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition. Nothing like this has been done before. Courses developed under the aegis of the VUSSC are intended to be adapted and offered in many countries. But since the VUSSC is not an accrediting or awarding body, the institutions that offer the courses must accredit them locally.

In order to facilitate the certification of courses across the small states, the VUSSC has worked with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop a concept document for the establishment of a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions and help give credibility to courses offered by national institutions in the small states. A first consultation meeting with Qualifications Authorities and Quality Assurance Agencies of the small states was held in Singapore in February 2008.

Following the consultative meeting in Singapore and subsequent setting up of the Transnational Qualifications Framework Management Committee (TQFMC) that was approved at the bi-annual meeting of Interlocutors held in London in July 2008, the TQFMC held its first meeting in Singapore in October 2008.

The purpose of the meeting was to develop a consultative document for the implementation of the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) for the VUSSC. This document explains the concept in greater detail and suggested procedures and guidelines of the VUSSC TQF that would apply to any of the 32 members of the small states of the Commonwealth that wishes to use VUSSC.

The TQFMC comprises of the following members:

Asia and the Pacific

Richard Wah, Fiji

Abdul Waheed, Maldives



The Caribbean

Michael Bradshaw, Trinidad & Tobago

Yvonne Marshall, Jamaica

Africa and the Mediterranean

Frans Gertze, Namibia

Kaylash Allgoo, Mauritius

The TQFMC reports directly to the VUSSC Management Committee. To support VUSSC being a cohesive initiative, the TQFMC recommended that its chair become a member of the Management Committee of the VUSSC Initiative.

One of the recommendations made by the TQFMC at the meeting was that each region should meet and discuss the consultation document before it is finalised. As a result, two cluster meetings were held. The Africa and Mediterranean region meeting was held in South Africa at the South African Qualifications Authority in Pretoria in March 2009 and the Caribbean region meeting was held in Saint Lucia, Castries in May 2009. Each meeting resulted in the production of a series of recommendations that was presented in a report. Once the three cluster meetings have been held the TQFMC will convene a meeting to discuss recommendations made and finalise the implementation document which will then be circulated to Ministers of Education.

International Training and Materials Development Workshops

Two training and materials development workshops were held in 2008. The first one was held in the Seychelles in March and the second in the Bahamas in October which focused on the development of learning content in Fisheries and Construction respectively. The two courses are being finalised using the COL instructional design template. Materials developed during the workshops were designed to be approximately one semester course in duration and was pitched at the post-secondary level. The courses have been copyrighted under a Creative Commons license that permits anyone to use the materials free of charge.

The VUSSC has enabled over 130 professional educators from 26 countries to meet and learn new skills that are now impacting on the education systems in their home countries, and have formed international networks of people in their areas of expertise. As a result, workshop participants have each trained colleagues in the use of a range of technologies, adding to the multiplier effect of VUSSC.

Offering of eLearning Course

Two eLearning courses, Managing and Facilitating Online Instruction, in partnership with the University of the West Indies (Open Campus) were offered to VUSSC member states. The first course was offered in November 2008 and because of its popularity it was offered again in March 2009. Further capacity building courses are planned for offering.

Monitoring and Evaluation Update Report

The first report was published in June 2008, followed by an update in September 2008. The Monitoring & Evaluation Update is intended as an accompanying document to the VUSSC Interim Evaluation Report published in June 2008. This report provides an updated summary of VUSSC activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts, organized by country. It also includes some background information on context for each country: population size, languages, and Internet usage. Also, illustrative quotes from interviews conducted at the July 2008 VUSSC Interlocutors meeting are presented, indicating the range of outcomes



and impacts achieved and potential strategies for the future of VUSSC. Finally, the report concludes with an additional set of recommendations. Further updates will be followed in due course.

Performance Indicators

1. VUSSC has grown to a full complement of 32 small states participating in this initiative.
2. Six VUSSC International Training and Materials Development Workshops for staff in partner institutions to raise the ICT skills of participating educators have been held.
3. A total of 115 individuals have been trained in course material development and in return have trained other colleagues.
4. A minimum estimated of 600 people were trained by returning workshop participants.
5. One Transnational Qualifications Framework concept document was developed.
6. The University of the West Indies offered two online courses to VUSSC countries.
7. To date, 278 senior educators have participated in policy meetings and development of occupational skills courses using the ODL format.
8. A training workshop was held in the Seychelles in 2008, where 15 IT managers received training on how to manage servers using Linux, an open source operating system.
9. The Transnational Qualifications Framework Management Committee was established and has already held a number of meetings in the preparation of the TQF implementation document.
10. The VUSSC Management Committee has been established and will be meeting for the first time early in the second half of 2009.
11. Two courses were fully completed using COL's instructional design template one in Disaster Management and the other in Training Educators to Develop and Design ODL Materials.

BUDGET (CAD)

COL Core Funding: 2008-2009: \$150,000

Additional funding (CFTC): 2008-2009: \$450,000



Achievement against Output/Outcome: The Evidence so far

OUTPUTS

- Six VUSSC International Training and Materials Development Workshops were held. These workshops raised the ICT skills of participating educators while they prepare course materials using Web 2.0 technologies.
 - August 2006: *Tourism and Entrepreneurship*, Mauritius
 - March 2007: *Professional Development of Educators*, Singapore
 - June 2007: *Life Skills for Youth*, Trinidad & Tobago
 - November 2007: *Disaster Management*, Samoa
 - March 2008: *The Fishing Industry*, The Seychelles
 - October 2008: *Construction*, The Bahamas

Completed materials available for download at <http://www.col.org/vussc> include

- *Introduction to Disaster Management*; and
- *Training Educators to Design and Develop ODL Materials*.

Available soon:

- *Introduction to Developing and Managing Small-Scale Fisheries*;
- *Starting Your Own Business: A Self-Study Guide for Small Business Entrepreneurs*;
- *Life Skills Development*;
- *Tourism - Tour Guiding*; and
- *Safety Practices in the Building Construction Industry*.

Planned VUSSC-related events for 2009-2010 are:

1. The VUSSC Management Committee will meet for the first time;
2. The last TQF cluster meeting will be held for the Asia Pacific region;
3. The TQF Management Committee will meet to finalise all details pertaining to the consultation document and subsequent online collaboration;
4. Seventh and eighth VUSSC International Training and Materials Development Workshops will be held in The Maldives and Samoa, in 2009. The topics will focus on Agriculture and Agro Industry and Maritime respectively; and
5. Workshop(s) to train IT managers of educational institutions to better manage and sustain IT infrastructure.

OUTCOMES

- Small states are now searching for and using free course materials in the production of ODL content for sharing through online repositories.
- Small states are now aware about the benefits of ODL and ICTs Educators are empowered.
- Transnational Qualifications Framework Management Committee is using the developed concept document to chart the way forward for the Transnational Qualification Framework.



- Educators are engaging students in the learning process as a result of the managing and facilitating online instruction courses.
- Students have been empowered through additional open and distance course offerings.
- IT Managers are using the Linux operating system to maintain e-learning/ICT infrastructure in a more cost effective way in educational institutions.
- Governments are more committed to using ODL in their country through VUSSC.
- The Transnational Qualifications Framework is being considered by national qualifications agencies for transferability and synergy.
- Content developed for various courses is being used and or adapted by institutions to suit local contexts.
- Educational practitioners are more skilled to produce and adapt curriculum materials.

ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT (JULY 1, 2006 – DECEMBER 31, 2007)

According to senior officials, VUSSC-trained educators have been impacting on how ICTs are used in education systems, developing new courses and integrating course materials developed during the VUSSC training into in-country courses.

The initiative was expected to assist countries in finding ways to exchange courses and qualifications. The creation of a TQF exceeds expectations and appears to go beyond what other multilateral projects such as the SADC-SAQA initiative have achieved. Barbados and The Bahamas are preparing to use the TQF as a basis for their own national qualifications frameworks and participating VUSSC countries have indicated their desire to collaborate and strengthen all national qualifications systems.

One workshop participant from The Bahamas was awarded “teacher of the year” and others have gone on to advance their studies because of the exposure they have had as a result of the VUSSC workshops and their additional motivation for learning.

Mauritius, The Seychelles, Antigua and Barbuda, Samoa and Trinidad and Tobago have used materials developed for training in Life Skills, Disaster Management and Training Educators to Design and Develop ODL Materials.

The early implementation of VUSSC encouraged The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to provide COL with a grant of USD 750,000, about half of which was to fund the initial stages of the VUSSC. Early successes encouraged the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation to provide VUSSC with funding of GBP1 million over a period of four years.

