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**The Virtual University Becomes a Reality**

**Paul G. West**

*Commonwealth of Learning*

This article describes a network among the Commonwealth’s 28 smallest countries created to enhance the professional capacity of educators, developing new course materials, and enabling the transfer of courses and qualifications across borders. The focus is on topics such as entrepreneurship, tourism, professional development of educators, life skills, disaster management, and a range of technical and vocational subjects. The transfer of courses and qualifications among countries requires having in place an agreed framework of quality assurance and unit standards. Workshops, or “boot camps,” are run by a group of team leaders selected from the participating countries. After feeling “left behind,” these countries are now putting the Internet to use in connecting themselves with other small states, sometimes more than 10,000 km away.

“Create a network of educators that spans 28 of the world’s smallest countries and, in some cases, the world’s most remote countries,” could have been the way Ministers of Education made their request to the Commonwealth of Learning (“COL”) in 2000.

Ministries of Education in small and island states, led by Seychelles, The Gambia, Mauritius, Namibia, Samoa, and St. Lucia expressed their concern in 2000: With the rapid growth of the Internet and eLearning, our countries might be left behind. COL was asked to conduct a review of possibilities these countries could implement to help advance their education systems and increase their course offerings. Since 2003, when Commonwealth Ministers of Education approved COL’s recommendations, COL has worked to engender a

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network among these countries. Ministers asked that this virtual network be created to strengthen institutions and that it be called the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth ("VUSSC").

After extensive consultations and deliberations, the main areas of focus came down to enhancing the professional capacity of educators, developing new course materials, and enabling the transfer of courses and qualifications across borders. The subject areas focussed on topics such as entrepreneurship, tourism, professional development of educators, life skills, disaster management, and a range of technical and vocational subjects. To participate in the network, educators need to learn how to form working relationships with peers in other countries, which may be thousands of kilometres away. This may sound straightforward to some people in industrialised countries, but in countries where cultural interaction happens predominantly in a face-to-face environment and the Internet is a relatively new technology, online collaboration might seem more far-fetched.

The second task, that of facilitating the transfer of courses and qualifications among countries, requires having in place an agreed framework of quality assurance and unit standards. Since these have not been universally implemented in most parts of the world, it creates both an opportunity and a challenge for small states to take a leadership position.

### The Member Countries

Now participating in the Virtual University Network are twenty-eight Commonwealth counties—and in some events The Comoros, which is not a Commonwealth country:

1. Antigua & Barbuda 16. Samoa
2. Barbados 17. Seychelles
3. Belize 18. Sierra Leone
5. Cyprus 20. St. Lucia
7. Grenada 22. Swaziland
8. Guyana 23. The Bahamas
10. Lesotho 25. The Gambia
11. Maldives 26. Tonga
12. Malta 27. Trinidad & Tobago
15. Papua New Guinea

### International Training and Materials Development Workshops

"Thanks for a wonderful, well-crafted programme," said one participant; "skills and knowledge acquired will enable me to perform efficiently and effectively in my organization," said another. With comments like these as encouragement, the third VUSSC International Training and Materials Development Workshop, affectionately called a “boot camp,” was run in Trinidad & Tobago in the Caribbean and arrangements are underway for a fourth in Samoa in the Pacific. Being away from home for three weeks is a long time for most people, but this length of workshop helps to ensure that the maximum amount of time is made available for participants to practise their newly learned skills. Participants are immersed in training and practice exercises, while they build their technical skills for use in education. Skills learned range from how to create more engaging slide presentations to creating Web pages of learning materials using wiki technology, and how to work with graphics files.

It's often felt that training courses do not deliver results as people attend for a few days, listen to crammed-in lectures, and then leave, without having had time for the learning to assimilate properly. Online learning for people who do not usually work in cyberspace also did not seem a likely reality. The concept of a longer workshop, which combines elements of training, practise, and materials development was the chosen methodology. With people having to travel across eight time zones or more around the world to get to these workshops, it is also more cost effective to pack in as much practise time as possible while they are together.

The workshops, or “boot camps,” are run by a group of team leaders selected from the participating countries. A coordinator is selected from the host country, who can act both as a team leader and a go-between, between the team and the expertise to be found within the host country. COL and the host country’s Ministry of Education provide a supportive environment, while the team leaders and participants get on with sharing expertise and valuable life-lessons.

Hidden benefits of the workshops include the opportunity to learn about vastly differing countries and how needs and educational approaches differ from one country to another and one region to another. Personal bonds have been formed in the three workshops held to date, which will last a lifetime and help to reduce the isolation of educators in these countries—educators who can now comfortably work online in a truly international setting. In the words of Sir John Daniel, COL’s President and CEO, at the opening of the last workshop:

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 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
OERs and Copyright

Copyright is never far from the discussion as participants grapple with finding, customizing, and creating learning materials that may be freely shared, adapted, and published for others to use. Materials that are the easiest to share are those covered by the Creative Commons licenses with attribution and share-alike restrictions, but participants must understand the implications of this and other licenses. There are a few Creative Commons licenses that enable sharing of materials under various circumstances. Participants are made aware of what they are allowed to do with materials carrying each of the possible licenses they use from others and to what they are committing when they publish their materials online.

The wiki used by the VUSSC teams uses the copyright license: Creative Commons—With Attribution—Share Alike, which enables anyone to use the materials for anything, including for purposes of profit. Other possible options include the ability to restrict the materials for use for non-profit purposes (so-called “non-commercial”), and to restrict any users from making any changes to the material (“no-derivatives”). Both of these restrictions should be fully understood and used where necessary. COL’s copyright guidelines may provide some help in this regard, but legal advice should be sought.

The online wiki environment supports the evolution of a piece of learning material by the contributions of an online team. Within the teams, one person may start creating the first page, but very soon other team members become confident enough to create pages themselves. All team members edit each other’s work, and teams peer review each other’s work online. Documents and learning materials are always in a state of flux in a wiki, as anyone can change a Web page at any time. This online model includes the ability to have teams of people spread around the world. Distance has little impact on educators’ ability to participate online once they have the skills to collaborate via the Internet. This has been demonstrated by the millions of learners around the world who are dependent on learning at a distance to free themselves from the physical location and time limitations of classrooms.

Learning Materials for a Real-World Setting

Learning materials in small states are frequently needed in printed form so that they can be used both at a distance, and to support classroom-based instruction. It is therefore important to ensure that materials shared and developed on Web pages can either be printed from the Website or easily converted into a word processor format for finishing touches. Programmes of study are mostly at the post-secondary level, focussed on the so-called “bottom of the pyramid,” where the large majority of the population are who earn their living in the informal and semi-formal economies. By increasing the skills of people at this economic level, they are helped to improve their business practices and contribute to national economies.

To move the learning materials from the online workshop environment of the wiki to a format that can be immediately used and further customized, the contents of the more developed subject areas are now being converted to an Instructional Design Template created by COL. This template helps to standardize the content to look more uniform and provide a pedagogically based framework. Content that has been converted to the template is a snapshot of the total contents, which remains stable, while the versions in the wiki continue to evolve. Later, further snapshots may be taken and so new, stable versions will be published.

Transnational Qualifications Framework

COL is collaborating with the South African Qualifications Authority (“SAQA”) to provide facilitation and expertise in the development of a master list of national qualifications frameworks from both member and other countries. The initial starting point for this framework is expected to be ready for examination and discussion in early 2008. At this point, government officials will be invited to meet and agree on a way forward in the creation of a system to which member countries can ascribe.

The framework will help countries in the development of new courses and the evaluation of qualifications of people seeking local recognition. This will represent a “level playing field” for all who choose to use it.

Co-contributors, Not Consumers

Educators in small and island states are becoming contributors rather than simply consumers of other peoples’ learning materials. Ministers of Education wanted their countries to become fully-fledged partners in the world of education and ICTs, and this is happening as their selected educators are gaining skills in the immersion environment of the boot camp. Each boot camp draws a group from around the Commonwealth, usually representing about 15 to 20 countries. Having
never previously met, strong bonds are quickly formed and as the group members return home after three weeks, they have formed a “New Diaspora from scratch,” a term coined by Professor Senteni, who assisted the Ministry of Education of Mauritius to host the first boot camp.

Countries that have only gained access to the Internet during the last five to 10 years now have increased motivation to improve the quality and availability of bandwidth—the data connection that binds the country with the rest of the world. It is bandwidth that will enable educators to continue collaborating with colleagues from around the world and develop new courses to strengthen the institutions in their own countries.

The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth is leading the way in cooperative materials development using online technologies. After feeling “left behind,” these countries are now putting the Internet to use in connecting themselves with other small states, sometimes more than 10,000 km away. Their need to be recognized in a highly competitive world is bringing out a determination to set their own pace and standards, including a qualifications framework that will span the largest number of countries around the world.

Notes

i http://www.col.org/vussc
ii http://www.col.org/copyright
iii http://creativecommons.org
iv http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/
vi http://www.wikieducator.org/vussc
vii http://www.12manage.com/methods_praphalad_bottom_of_the_pyramid.html
viii http://www.col.org/colWeb/site/pid/3145
ix http://www.saqa.org.za/

Features on Web Site

Visitors to the Web Site maintained for this magazine will find the following features:

See all of these features at: BooksToRead.com/etp

• Sample Articles. At least two recently published articles from this magazine are always available at the site.
• Contributing Editors. The complete list of our regular contributors is available at the site.
• Author Guidelines. Prospective authors of articles for the magazine are encouraged to read these guidelines.

Open Educational Resources: A Bridge to Education in the Developing World

Mike Pereira
Development Gateway Foundation

Leveraging ICT to equalize access to education is critical in a world with over four billion poor people who have little access to formal education. Mainstreaming OER as a public good throughout the developing world could make an enormous contribution. The Development Gateway Foundation has established an online OER portal—http://topics.developmentgateway.org/openeduction—that provides descriptions and links to a wide range of OER content. Powerful open source collaborative platforms enabling collective authorship of content that is continuously updated and refined by users offer a new and unprecedented opportunity to advance OER content creation, localization, and dissemination. Collaborative tools hold great potential for delivering impact through improved utilization of OER; however, Website clearinghouse functionality that aggregates and disseminates external links to OER online and via e-mail should not be set aside. Content localization is of particular importance, and local partners have the expertise to build local OER capacity and facilitate OER content audits and inventories. Working together has created an opportunity to greatly expand the OER core content library by facilitating collaborative, user generated content. The Development Gateway Foundation believes the work undertaken together can lead to the wide availability of OER throughout the developing world.

Introduction

According to the 2007 World Development Report, there are 1.3 billion young people now living in the developing world. A record demographic of youth 12–