

# The Virtual University *for Small States of* The Commonwealth

*Invitation to participate*

NOVEMBER 2004



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

# Purpose & Summary

*The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) invites the Small States<sup>1</sup> of the Commonwealth, through their Ministers of Education, to indicate whether they wish to participate in the creation of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and, if so, what outcomes and results they seek to achieve for their country through this initiative.*

*This guide gives the background to the initiative, explains the purpose of the VUSSC, describes how it will be created, details the conditions of participation, and clarifies the role of COL.*

## Background

Commonwealth Education Ministers conceived the idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth at their meeting in Halifax, Canada, in 2000. The dotcom frenzy was then at its peak and Ministers from the Small States were worried that, unless they took collective action, the new world of eLearning would pass their countries by.

Following the Halifax meeting, COL chaired a technical advisory committee and helped draft a proposal for the VUSSC. A small group of Ministers, meeting in the Seychelles in March 2003, reviewed the proposal<sup>2</sup> and recommended it to the Edinburgh Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) in October 2003.

Following endorsement by the CCEM, COL reviewed developments in eLearning since 2000 and explored potential sources of financial support for the VUSSC<sup>3</sup>. It came to two conclusions.

First, in the years since 2000 eLearning has expanded in a gradual and evolutionary way rather than provoking the rapid revolution in education that some predicted. This means that the Small States have ample time to integrate eLearning in a systematic way with their existing use of media and technology in education and training.

---

1) THE SMALL STATES OF THE COMMONWEALTH ARE NORMALLY DEFINED AS: ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA, THE BAHAMAS, BARBADOS, BELIZE, BOTSWANA, BRUNEI DARUSSALAM, CYPRUS, DOMINICA, FIJI, THE GAMBIA, GRENADA, GUYANA, JAMAICA, KIRIBATI, LESOTHO, MALDIVES, MALTA, MAURITIUS, NAMIBIA, NAURU, PAPUA NEW GUINEA, SAMOA, SEYCHELLES, SOLOMON ISLANDS, ST. KITTS & NEVIS, ST. LUCIA, ST. VINCENT & THE GRENADINES, SWAZILAND, TONGA, TRINIDAD & TOBAGO, TUVALU AND VANUATU.

2) THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY FOR SMALL STATES OF THE COMMONWEALTH, COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING, 2003 ([WWW.COL.ORG/CONSULTANCIES/02VIRTUALU.HTM](http://WWW.COL.ORG/CONSULTANCIES/02VIRTUALU.HTM))

3) THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY FOR SMALL STATES OF THE COMMONWEALTH – UPDATE FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING, JULY 2004 ([WWW.COL.ORG/04VIRTUALU.HTM](http://WWW.COL.ORG/04VIRTUALU.HTM))

Second, since the turn of the Millennium the priorities of international development agencies have come to focus increasingly on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These agencies now favour programmes that address the MDGs directly in particular countries. They do not want to invest in new international structures such as the consortium originally proposed for the management of the VUSSC. The agencies do, however, show considerable interest in helping countries to use ICTs effectively in their development, notably for education and training.



COL therefore concluded that building the VUSSC from the bottom up, in an evolutionary manner, would be the more successful approach. COL's President explained the rationale for this strategy to a special session held after the Commonwealth Summit Meeting of Education Ministers from Small States on HIV/AIDS that was convened in the UK in September 2004. The Ministers encouraged COL to proceed along these lines but asked that it take special care to respect the core principle of the VUSSC, namely that it enable the Small States to work together to develop courses and delivery mechanisms suited to their specific needs.

## The VUSSC: Nature & Purpose

At the Edinburgh CCEM, Ministers endorsed the VUSSC in these terms:

The vision that is proposed for a virtual university serving Small States is that 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.

The VUSSC is designed to offer opportunities for expanded access to education, teacher training and upgrading, and which may also benefit other regions and states of the Commonwealth. COL should take leadership of this capacity-building initiative, and collaborate with existing resource institutions in member countries.

The proposal also noted that the virtual university is not a university in the conventional institutional sense and will be as much concerned with adding value to conventional on-campus instruction as with serving learners at a distance.

# Building the VUSSC

COL will work in close co-operation and consultation with participating countries, institutions and agencies to establish the VUSSC in five phases.

## *Phase 1: Identify participants and objectives*

This invitation to participate launches the first phase of implementation. Its purpose is to determine the scope and scale of the VUSSC by canvassing the Ministers of Education of all the Small States to discover which states wish to participate and what each seeks to achieve by so doing. The Ministers that respond positively will each identify a contact person with authority to represent them in discussions with COL and will outline the key objectives of their country's participation.

These objectives will include the learning opportunities that they wish to see the VUSSC make available, the technologies and media that they want it to develop, and any other cultural, economic or social objectives for which the VUSSC could be a vehicle.

COL will clarify these aims in a dialogue with each Minister's designated contact person; a dialogue that will also identify which of the country's institutions will be the national lead for the initiative. At the same time, COL will make an inventory of related initiatives in the regions and in larger Commonwealth states that could support the VUSSC. It will also explore, in general and regional terms, possibilities of support from the various international development agencies.

This phase will run from November 2004 until February 2005.

## *Phase 2: Identify common aims and resources*

In phase 2, COL will complete its review of the statements of national aspirations for the VUSSC received in phase 1. It will list the objectives that are most widely shared, both regionally and globally, and juxtapose these with the resources and other initiatives that might be harnessed to support them. This phase will continue the dialogue with the contact persons in order to identify any national needs that might be satisfied more fully by building on existing initiatives through the VUSSC. A manageable number of initial areas of content development and/or technology deployment will then be identified.

COL will then facilitate the creation of task groups of countries for each selected area and work with them to clarify the tasks, identify the resources available, and propose appropriate organisational arrangements for managing and monitoring the projects in a results-based framework.

COL's Board of Governors will receive a progress report at its June 2005 meeting.

This phase will run from March 2005 to June 2005.

### *Phase 3: Develop content and systems*

Phase 3 will see a number of groups of states working together on a series of projects that meet widely shared objectives. COL will continue its supportive role in this phase, notably by identifying useful resources (e.g., content, equipment, software, funds, etc.) that could support each project, advising on organisational arrangements and identifying training needs directly related to the implementation to the VUSSC. At this point it will convene an advisory panel of representatives from each project. The panel's purpose will be to create synergy between the VUSSC projects and existing programmes so that, at least at the national and regional levels, the emerging VUSSC constitutes a coherent set of activities.

**This phase will be of variable length for each project, but will take place from June 2005 into 2006.**

### *Phase 4: Implement elements of the VUSSC with learners*

In phase 4, local institutions will offer the courses and programmes using the delivery systems developed in phase 3. Learners are likely to comprise not only the student body of the institution, but also some of the staff working in the institutions. Through this process, institutions are likely to have extended their range of course offerings, their use of learning technologies or their geographical reach.

When approving the VUSSC, the CCEM stressed that it should build on existing institutions. Its purpose is to add value to conventional on-campus instruction while serving learners at a distance. Enhancing the skills of institutional staff will be critical to the success of the VUSSC.

A progress report will be made to the CCEM in 2006.

**This phase will begin in 2006 and be ongoing thereafter.**

### *Phase 5: Evaluation of the results of VUSSC*

Phase 5 will be a formative evaluation of the VUSSC as a whole and of its various projects. Monitoring reports on the various projects will be reviewed at regional meetings. A global meeting will subsequently assess the overall impact of the VUSSC.

The evaluation results will help to determine whether the VUSSC should develop further and, if so, in what directions. The evaluation will also consider whether there is a need to formalise the organisation of the VUSSC as the consortium originally envisaged and whether COL should continue to be involved. An important aspect of the evaluation will be to compare and contrast the different projects with a view to achieving greater impact and relevance in any future work.

**This phase will take place in 2007.**

# Conditions of participation

## *Which countries can participate?*

The VUSSC was initiated by the Ministers of Education of the Small States and they are its principal stakeholders. Its aim is to increase the Small States' capacity to create the expanded learning opportunities for their people necessary for cultural, economic and social development. With this proviso, the larger states of the Commonwealth, or Small States that are not members of the Commonwealth, would be welcome to associate with the project.

## *Who will speak for the country?*

In helping the Small States to develop the VUSSC, COL will deal with Ministers of Education and/or their designated contact persons. However, since many potentially important areas of activity lie in fields like Agriculture, Health and Social Welfare, COL invites Ministers of Education to consult widely among their Cabinet colleagues to identify areas that could benefit from collective work through the VUSSC. Institutions that aspire to participate in the VUSSC should contact their Ministers of Education. COL hopes that Ministers of Education will encourage a wide range of bodies (public and private educational institutions, other ministries, NGOs, technology providers, etc.) to participate under their guidance.

## *What does 'Virtual University' mean?*

Ministers do not see the VUSSC as a university in the conventional sense. The learning opportunities developed by the VUSSC will likely be at the post-secondary level in the sense that they are addressed to adults, even though some of those adults may not have completed secondary school. An important selection criterion will be the contribution of these learning opportunities to national development.

The terms virtual learning and eLearning have evolved recently to refer in a general manner to the use of media and technology to enhance learning. The VUSSC will not restrict itself to computer-mediated learning.

## *Who pays?*

The main reason for building the VUSSC from the bottom up in this evolutionary manner from existing provision is to enable VUSSC projects to draw on funding from various national and international sources. COL is not a funding body but it will work with the Small States to secure sustainable funding for priority projects. Ministers of Education should satisfy themselves that projects selected have the potential to be financially sustainable. In addition, Ministers will recall their decision at the Edinburgh CCEM that the Commonwealth Secretariat should work closely with COL to identify funding sources. The Commonwealth Secretary-General has expressed his desire to follow up on that decision.

# The status and role of COL



The Commonwealth of Learning is one of the three Commonwealth intergovernmental bodies. Its headquarters are in Vancouver, Canada and its associated Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia is in New Delhi, India. COL's mandate is to help the Commonwealth's developing Member States to develop policies and applications for learning technologies, particularly the techniques of open and distance learning, in order to expand the scope, scale and impact of their education and training systems.

COL already has close working relationships with all the Small States of the Commonwealth and will build on those relationships in implementing the VUSSC.

COL's key role is to maintain the momentum of the VUSSC by ensuring fluid and frequent communication between the Small States as the project advances. Its special task is to identify emerging common aspirations and to create the networks that will facilitate their attainment.

COL has world-class expertise in all areas of educational technology, including radio, television, print, multi-media, the Internet and eLearning. It is not COL's role to impose particular technological solutions. However, it has a proven track record in helping states to make cost-effective choices.

In developing the VUSSC, COL will be particularly concerned to ensure that any Learning Management Systems chosen for eLearning are sustainable and interoperable. In the spirit of the VUSSC, which is to build indigenous capacity, COL will help Small States contribute to and construct Learning Object Repositories for eLearning – instead of merely drawing on them for materials produced elsewhere.

The VUSSC brings together many aspects of COL's work. For this reason COL's President, Sir John Daniel, has convened a team that includes all COL's Education Specialists to help the Small States with the implementation of the VUSSC. This will ensure maximal synergy between the VUSSC and COL's other work and will also enable COL to respond effectively to any requests for technical assistance that the VUSSC may generate.

# Next steps

This document has been sent to all Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth with a request to the Ministers of the Small States to indicate whether they intend to participate in the VUSSC. Institutions, agencies, organisations and individuals with an interest in the VUSSC should contact their Minister of Education. The deadline for responses is Monday, 28 February 2005. Responses should be in the form of a letter from the Minister of Education to the President of COL that addresses the requirements laid out in phase 1 above.

Address:

Sir John Daniel  
President and CEO  
Commonwealth of Learning  
1055 West Hastings Street, Suite 1200  
Vancouver, BC V6E 2E9, Canada

Fax: 1 604 775 8210

Tel: 1 604 775 8200

E-mail: [VUSSC@col.org](mailto:VUSSC@col.org)