Opening up Spaces to Support Rural Business in Scotland

Conference Item

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Opening up Spaces to Support Rural Business in Scotland

The Open University has a commitment to releasing core curriculum openly, while we have always edited for “the open” tailoring has been minor. Rural Entrepreneurship in Scotland is a different model, based on material to develop your business idea from across our academic programme. However, the material has been revised significantly to place in a rural Scottish context: Setting up a business or social enterprise is a complex and personal undertaking. It is about more than knowing the right steps; it is about applying that knowledge in context.

One of the benefits of releasing curriculum in this way is the ability to evaluate how it works in the world and adapt it accordingly. For example, we are using the analytics to track topics of particular interest and looking at how we can enhance and improve those components. One of the benefits of low cost reversioning content for less populated curriculum areas is the ability to invest resources in supporting and understanding how resources are used in practice. Through these workshops with rural entrepreneurs we are able to assess how open education operates in practice for practice. We have learnt from working in the open, our analytics suggest the finance component is crucial, while our outreach work suggests we need to develop a new component on generating entrepreneurial ideas.

PASSING PLACE

Less Populated Areas

The OU has a commitment to releasing core curriculum content onto its OpenLearn platform, while we have always edited for “the open” this has tended not to change the content but rather the style with minimum of support of assessment or activities removed. We also create bespoke content for OpenLearn, with the OU in Scotland’s Guide to Contemporary Scotland being a case in point.

Rural Entrepreneurship in Scotland is a different model, based on material to develop your business idea from across our MSPA programme. The material was then revised significantly to place in a rural Scottish context.

We found creating content in this way allowed us to reach areas of the country and the curriculum that would not normally look at the content and engage with them. The resulting content has been able to support users to develop new business ideas.

Design and ReDesign

Setting up a business is complex, in the ‘real’ world. It is about more than knowing the right steps; it is about applying that knowledge in context. One of the big challenges is to turn the process of turning a rough idea into a robust plan.

Beyond Online and Open

One of the benefits of low cost reversioning content for less populated curriculum areas is the ability to invest resources in supporting and understanding how resources are used in practice. We have developed an outreach programme, based on a series of workshops where we look at how to generate and choose business ideas and how to understand your customers. So far, we have run these “tasters” in a range of businesses throughout Scotland within the national parks and rural areas as part of the Scottish Creatives Federation “Induction to Creativity” course.

As we run the workshops, we are learning about how these resources operate in and for practice. One of the key bits of feedback we have received concerns the “business ideas”. The online content focuses on putting an idea into practice, workshop participants felt it would be useful to have open online resources focusing on generating and evaluating business ideas. This is a challenge, and we found the “real” case study approach for structuring the convergent phase of enterprise development and idea exploration, idea generation, opportunity exploration and early framing of problems and opportunities requires a different approach. We are still wrestling how to do this in the open.

Conclusion

These insights only arise because the low cost reversion model has allowed us to go beyond releasing content online and letting it wander away into the wild. Developing in partnership has allowed us to bring new content into the academy as well as embedding these open resources in established networks. It means we can reach into the communities themselves and learn from them.