Opening up Spaces to Support Rural Business in Scotland

Conference or Workshop 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. It is based on material to develop your business idea from across our academic programmes. However, the material has been revised significantly to place it in a real Scottish context. Setting up a business or running a 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. These module materials are designed around “real” case studies developed with key stakeholders within rural Scotland. 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 of 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” but had not significantly to place it in a real Scottish context. We need creating context in this way allows us to reach areas of the country and the curriculum that we could not normally touch. The cost and time savings associated with creating context in this way meant we moved beyond content to the process of how they might be used in the open and were able to invest in outreach programmes to support users to support users.

Design and ReDesign

Setting up a business is complex, may be unfamiliar and is deeply personal. It is about more than knowing the right steps. It is about applying that knowledge to your context. On the last classroom in the open this presents a significant design challenge. We designed the materials around a set of “real” case studies developed with key stakeholders across rural Scotland. Through our engagement with these key stakeholders, we developed a diverse series of rich descriptions of enterprise as a live experience, from farm diversification to mountain guide, from bespoke joinery to a community taking over its local Post Office and shop. These start-ups then led the reader through the process of turning a rough idea into a robust plan.

One of the benefits of releasing curriculum in this way is the ability to evaluate how to works in the world and adapt it accordingly. For example, we collect data on its use, while we get about 1500 learners per year mostly from Scotland but with significant numbers in Africa and Asia. We might have expected a higher “hit rate.” A review of how well the “real life” within the course reacts content and linked searches on rural business or enterprise suggests changes to the meta data would increase visibility of the resource. We can also see where people are landing and visiting most frequently; with high numbers jumping straight to finance, suggesting it is a key concern for those starting a business. When we reviewed the licence sections we realised the “walked examples” might not be accounting for the potential “read factor” of failure. Through feedback gathered in our outreach work, we recognised the need to re-emphasise finance is only one component of an enterprise.

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.

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