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Opening up Spaces to Support Rural Business in Scotland

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The Opening Educational Practices in Scotland project facilitates best practice in Scottish open education. We aim to enhance Scotland's reputation and capacity for developing publicly available and licensed materials, supported by high quality pedagogy and learning technology.

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 programme. However, the material has been revised significantly to place it 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. The 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" this has tended not to change the content but rather the style with mentions of support of assessment or activities removed. We also create bespoke content for OpenLearn, with the OU in Scotland's Gaelic in Contemporary Scotland being a case in point.

Rural Entrepreneurship in Scotland is a different model, it is based on material about developing your business idea from across our MBA programme. The material was then revised significantly to place it in a rural Scottish context. We found creating content in this way allowed us to reach areas of the country and the curriculum that we would not normally look at. The cost and time savings associated with creating content 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. Outside the 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. Based on 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 lead 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 it works in the world and adapt it accordingly. For example, we collect data on its use, while we get about 1600 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 "meta data" within the course matches common 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 finance section, we realised the "worked examples" might not be accounting for the potential "fear factor" of finance. Through feedback gathered in our outreach work we recognised the need to re-emphasise finance is only one component of an enterprise.

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 for and through practice. We have developed an outreach programme, it is 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 locations throughout Scotland within the national parks and most recently as part of the Scottish Crofters Federation "Induction to Crofting" course.

As we run the exercises we are learning about how the resources operate in and for practice. One of the key bits of feedback we have received concerns the "business idea". The online content focuses on putting an idea into practice, workshop participants felt it would be useful to have open online resources focussing on generating and evaluating business ideas. This is as a challenge, while we found the "real" case study approach for structuring the convergent phase of enterprise development and idea exploitation, 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.

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You will find the course at:
<http://tinyurl.com/q75v759>

