

Rural Policy Centre



A Canadian Experience: Building successful  
networks and utilising social media to  
encourage business opportunities

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Research Report



# A Canadian Experience: Building successful networks and utilising social media to encourage business opportunities<sup>1</sup>

Rural Policy Centre Research Report

Siân Ringrose

Rural Policy Centre,  
Land Economy and Environment Research Group,  
SRUC, Edinburgh, EH9 3JG  
Tel: 0131 535 4193  
[Sian.ringrose@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:Sian.ringrose@sruc.ac.uk)

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**Contents**

Introduction..... 3

Rural Development: A tale of two towns..... 3

Agricultural Diversification..... 5

Translating research into practice ..... 7

Networks..... 7

Research Snapshots..... 7

Engaging young people in land-based industries ..... 8

Conclusion..... 10

References: ..... 12

## **Introduction**

The Farmers Club Charitable Trust Fund generously funded a knowledge transfer and exchange trip to Canada in the summer of 2012. The purpose of this visit was to improve the understanding of: a) how to develop of successful networks between research and industry and; b) the role that social media communications play in fostering growth through collaboration and knowledge exchange between rural businesses – with particular respect to SMEs within agriculture. In addition to these key aims, the trip enabled the observation of methods used to encourage young people into the agricultural sector; identified and assessed lessons learned from Québec's rural development policies and illustrated how Canadians translate research into practice.

The motivation for the visit was in response to the announcement of the creation of new Rural and Farming Networks by the then UK Agriculture Minister, Jim Paice. Understanding how to utilise networks, such as these, so that they are effective and efficient in facilitating the exchange of knowledge between research and practice or policies, is essential in order to provide best practice guidance on maximising the economic, social and environmental potential of such networks. York University, Ontario has built up a strong reputation in network communications especially capitalising on the use of social media – such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Blogging etc. Consequently they provide a good platform from which to identify communication methods that could be applied to the UK. Additionally, with ever more technologically minded youth, it is vital that the agricultural sector keeps up with the fast pace of information transfer, in order to attract and keep young people.

This visit also included a two week summer school with the International Comparative Rural Policy School (ICRPS). ICRPS attracts academics, practitioners and policymakers from Europe and North America and enables the identification and sharing of good practice related to rural policy issues. The topics covered vary depending on the host institute and location. This means that ICRPS is unique each year and that it covers a variety of rural based topics that are specific to the specific region being visited. The 2012 summer school travelled from Montreal through to Québec City and ended up in the North West of Québec province in a rural town called Rimouski.

This report summarises my findings and discusses key issues and highlights possible avenues that could help address the aims of developing successful networks and encouraging interest and sustaining growth within the agricultural sector

### **Rural Development: A tale of two towns**

One of the topics covered during the ICRPS trip was the sustainable development of rural areas, and how this could be achieved in particularly remote regions. Some of the issues under discussion related to challenges that are relevant to rural UK where the infrastructure to maintain large commercial ventures is not adequate, centres of production are distant from the point of sale incurring higher supply chain costs, or small communities are dependent on the survival of one industry/business (Leadbeater, 2009, Mahroum *et al* 2007).

Two major points of interest during the ICRPS trip were the towns of Victoriaville and La Pocatière. These towns provided two different examples of how rural communities can recover from the loss of the main income support for the area or attract and keep large scale

industries. Additionally, La Pocatière has been recently used as a best practice model of rural innovation at an OECD conference in Siberia in October 2012 (Jean, 2012).

### **Victoriaville**

Victoriaville was once heavily dependent on the furniture manufacturing industry. When the industry crashed in the mid 1970s the community suffered badly as 60% of the residents worked in the furniture and textile industry (Victoriaville Municipal Government Mr Martin Lessard). As such, the residents were forced to find other means for sustaining the population of Victoriaville and those in the surrounding region.

The residents achieved this by developing the concept of becoming a truly sustainable town, supporting projects conducive to economic growth and social development while maintaining a strong environmental conscience. The community is now branded '*Victoriaville Habitation Durable: C'est rentable et responsable*' which forms the basis of all their activities. They have implemented a very successful waste management programme and are currently implementing a sustainable housing programme. In order to achieve this, all actors in the town worked together collaboratively. The commitment and determination of local community members, combined with the political support to inform the community helped to develop these projects with little or no financial assistance from the provincial or national governments.

Re-developing the region and re-branding the town as a sustainable town was a potentially risky venture as sustainability was and still is often perceived incorrectly as a trade-off between economic growth and positive environmental impacts (UNEP 2011). Therefore, gaining community commitment was an essential requirement to support and make this unique/novel initiative successful. Educating the community has played a particularly important role in developing and sustaining Victoriaville. Businesses, local government and education sectors have all participated in showing the community what happens to their recycled waste. Furthermore the community benefit from the waste management programme through compost being re-distributed. Education and knowledge has often been acknowledged as a necessary part of developing economic activity (Hudson, 2011; Lundvall, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). To encourage education about sustainability and community engagement, an educational initiative was implemented called the CFER (*Centre de Formation en Entreprise et Récupération*). The CFER is a network of training centres and businesses that help re-introduce people into the workforce. It was set up at the same time as the implementation of the waste management system and has been pivotal to educating the population and demonstrating the benefits of becoming a sustainable town - a relatively novel initiative and unique to the region.

### **La Pocatière**

La Pocatière is renowned for the level of innovation and business development in the area given the small population size (~5,000 people). It has recently been used as a best practice model of rural innovation at the OECD conference in Siberia at the beginning of October 2012. The reason for this is that La Pocatière, despite being located approximately an hour and a half from Québec City and more than four hours from Montreal (i.e. the main business focal point in the province), has two major businesses based in the region. These businesses are Bombardier (the world's only manufacturer of both planes and trains) and

L'Agrobiopole which is a centre for business innovation and strategic business development in the industries of food, agro-forestry and agriculture.

Despite the challenging barriers faced by these businesses such as high competition and the predominant language being French, these businesses have continued to operate successfully within a very rural area with limited infrastructure. The reasons why this area has been successful at keeping and attracting businesses and innovators, is again reflected in the strong community drive and political will. The historical culture was commented on as playing an important role in creating this community drive for innovation and education. For the last 150 years the Catholic Church has played an important role in developing a culture of knowledge. The Church had a huge influence on the community, and it had the means, capacity and political power to influence and generate a consistent culture and vision for investment and innovation.

Additionally, given the small population size, La Pocatière region has a high number of educational institutes. Education is again revealed as a key factor in rural development and innovation. Both these towns, Victoriaville and La Pocatière, showed real enthusiasm and passion for developing their rural opportunities and ensuring a sustainable future for the people living there. With the endorsement and collaboration of the political figures within the local principalities, and the commitment of local communities, it was clear that everyone was working together with a common goal and focus.

### **Agricultural Diversification**

My concluding thoughts from the ICRPS tour end with the final destination – Rimouski. In Rimouski we spoke to two local rural businesses; an agro-forester and apiarist. It was here that we learnt about how Québec rural policy affected agriculturalists in practice.

Québec has an agricultural policy which protects prime agricultural land from urban development, similar to the UK's greenbelt land. It was primarily implemented to restrict Montreal's urban sprawl and prevent building on highly fertile land which is rare in the province due to the topography of the land and the very short summers. However, the rural businesses we spoke to commented that this policy was too restrictive in the rural areas and not strict enough in the urban areas. As a result, small rural businesses who want to diversify, cannot do so on their farms unless the products they wish to sell are cultivated or produced on their land. If the farmer has to import raw materials before processing, then they are required to operate this aspect of the business from the nearest settlement. For example the agro-forester wanted to develop a salmon smokery on his land but was not allowed to as he was using salmon caught elsewhere not directly from his farmland. These restrictions prevented him from diversifying his business as he was unable to run both his agro-forestry business as well as his smokery in two different locations without incurring additional capital and labour costs. The agricultural policies in place in Québec province thus appeared, from this short visit, to want to encourage diversification on one hand, but at the same time to restrict the ability of farmers to do so.

The apiarist also informed us that succession was very difficult as the taxes and policies in place made the costs associated with the younger generation taking over the family business, far too high. Succession is a problem many farmers face, in the UK and is often a fraught and highly stressful process. Unfortunately this is an issue that many countries seem

to face. with limited positive action taken to enable an easier transition from one generation to the next. This is an issue that needs to be a focus of the UK Government if new and young entrant farmers are to enter the industry. One possible strategy that has been discussed in numerous forums is the 'share farming' system that New Zealand has been using. This system not only allows a slow systematic increase in responsibility and financial commitment for young/new entrants but it is also an excellent way of transferring knowledge and experience down through the generations. This 'share farming' system could be an option that both Canada and the UK could benefit from.

In addition to the difficulties that the rural landowners faced, the support system in place to aid rural development and diversification could be made more effective. The Regional County Municipalities employ rural development agents who are supposed to act as the hub in a network of governmental and non-governmental organisations. Multiple organisations feed into the rural agents supplying them with information on funding opportunities, innovation possibilities and training requirements. In addition, the rural agents provide rural communities with access to technical support and project management advice. However, with so many organisations feeding into the rural agents and with only one agent for nine municipalities in the Rimouski-Neigette region (one agent for 53,000 people) it appears that this system is not functioning to its full potential.

One of the rural agents that we spoke to stated that they had many demands on their time which prevented them from supplying the information to those who needed it, at the time they needed it. He informed us of an initiative that he was involved in to establish a local village grocery store. This is something that is not very common in rural Québec as local food is generally considered to be more expensive. This is mainly due to the lack of local markets – all produce has to be transported to the markets based in Montreal and then transported back to the region for sale. Initially the local store was reasonably successful; however, it was unable to retain customers due to the relatively low loyalty of the local community, something that I found rather surprising from my knowledge and experience of the UK situation. Unfortunately the local store did not use the rural agent system to its full potential when demand reduced, and consequentially failed. He felt that given the restrictions on his time and being spread across such a large area he was unable to keep in touch with this group as well as he would have liked. The rural agent felt that that this venture could have been a success if all opportunities had been exploited

This example highlights how the use of rural agents is not as effective in Québec as it could be. The catchment area the agents are supposed to cover and the number of organisations influencing their focus and deliverables is not a sustainable system for the rural businesses and clients, nor the rural agents who are spread so thinly. This highlights some of the issues in developing a 'one-stop-shop' system for rural development and diversification. For a system such as this to work successfully there needs to be the capacity in which to deliver the services and support. If the capacity to see projects through from inception to a stable viable business is not there, then the investment and funding of these projects seems to be wasteful. Focusing on a smaller area, servicing that location and building up a common goal such as displayed in Victoriaville and La Pocatière could be a more effective way of using rural agents for successful rural development.

### **Translating research into practice**

Moving from Québec to Toronto, Ontario I visited York University and their Knowledge Mobilization Unit (KMb Unit). The purpose here was to see how York University translate research into practice, to learn more about the use of social media in building networks and reaching those less geographically accessible.

Whilst the KMb Unit is primarily focused on connecting urban businesses with researchers, given the size of the province and country some of the groups involved are fairly remote and/or isolated. This provided an opportunity to view a number of different initiatives and approaches used in engaging hard to reach groups. Some of these principles could be applicable to the UK agricultural industry given the level of isolation documented by some farmers and young farming families (Monk, 2000).

The main purpose of the KMb Unit is to facilitate and enhance a two-way connection between researchers and research users. It employs knowledge brokers to be the point of contact between different groups, to help facilitate meetings, shape the agenda and manage expectations.

### **Networks**

One of the first groups I visited was a project that was a web-based initiative, established in 2007 called The Homeless Hub. With increased usage of the internet as a method of connecting and communicating, the Homeless Hub was a good example of network communications can work effectively, especially across large distances. The Homeless Hub was developed in part from the recognition that different stakeholders (in government, academia and the social services sector) think about and utilise research in different ways. The main purpose of this website is to make information accessible to all stakeholders so that anyone can access and share the latest research, policy and best practice covering a whole range of issues surrounding homelessness; from drug/substance abuse, domestic violence to those adversely affected by the recent economic downturn. The Homeless Hub interacts with 61 community groups across Canada providing a database of information on homelessness management with journal outputs, blogs and research summaries or 'snapshots'. The operation of this network appears to be along similar lines to the idea behind the Rural and Farming Networks. However, the difference in this network is that it is non-region specific. It also does not restrict communication to be just between businesses and policymakers but it encourages dialogue across multiple disciplines. By encouraging dialogue between users a better understanding of issues, their complexities and variations in cause and effects across all groups, researchers, policymakers and practitioners alike, is developed.

### **Research Snapshots**

The research summaries or 'snapshots' provided on The Homeless Hub website are conversions of academic papers into easy to understand, plain English articles. These simple snapshots are to enable policy makers and the general public to comprehend easily what the research outputs are trying to illustrate. The Homeless Hub was not the only group I visited who used research summaries. Part of the everyday work of the KMb Unit is to produce a whole range of Research Snapshots using a simple template of headings that they designed specifically for communicating research to a wide range of stakeholders. This



communication of simple clear messages is incredibly useful for policymakers to be able to understand a variety of different situations, their potential impacts and the knock-on consequences of implementing various policy strategies. Additionally this information helps the general public understand some of the complexities surrounding the issues under debate. In addition to the KMb Unit, there are many other organisations in Ontario and Canada that use this research snapshot template: Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA); Knowledge Translation and Transfer (KTT) programme; the University of Guelph, SPARK programme; the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH); and CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre. These are just a small number of organisations I met with that use the snapshot templates for communicating research findings to their stakeholders and clients. All of them commented on the benefits of disseminating their research and work to a wider audience, with increased connections, improved networks, communication and an increase in integrated, multi-disciplinary work.

Research Snapshots are two page summaries outlining what the research was about, what was found and the key points that stakeholders need to know. The Snapshots only use previously published papers. The researchers' permission to publish their work as a snapshot summary is then sort, they are not asked to write the snapshot themselves. When probed about the authors' willingness to have their work interpreted and presented by someone else, the KMb Unit commented that most were happy for the unit to summarise their work and publish it. As long as they were given the opportunity to proof read the article before publishing. Authors felt they were benefiting from getting their work circulated to a wider audience, not just academics; and whilst they may like to have more control/authorship over the snapshots; they admit that they have neither the time nor the funds to produce such easily accessible material. Additionally, to be able to write in clear, plain English is something most academics find difficult to do as they have been trained to write primarily for academic audiences not for public media (Bauer & Jensen 2011, McCall 1982, Trench & Miller 2012).

### **Engaging young people in land-based industries**

A particular aspect that made a big impression during my visit was the employment of students. As previously noted, many of the organisations I visited in Ontario produce high quality, plain English Research Snapshots. What was impressive was the training given to students from a wide range of backgrounds to help produce these Research Snapshots that were a clearly distilled interpretation of the published academic articles. Not only were these students given the skills and training to produce a variety of output articles but they were also expected to take on a large amount of responsibility for organising and producing the Research Snapshots.

Both at York University and the University of Guelph, students were encouraged to take a lead role in knowledge transfer (or knowledge mobilization as the Canadians call it). Students were given internships or term-time placements where they could work for the KMb Unit or for SPARK (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge) producing a variety of public media which communicates research findings. The trust and responsibility given to students for the production of knowledge transfer material was excellent. It was also very inspiring and somewhat refreshing to see the belief and trust that the students would deliver high quality knowledge transfer material.

The KMb Unit and others at York University regularly employ two or three students, particularly during summer vacation period, to produce Research Snapshots and engage with academics in a variety of fields to transfer their clear language communication skills to others. At the University of Guelph the SPARK programme takes student employment one step further. The SPARK programme is now just over 20 years old and has grown from employing two students to having ten participants per year. SPARK does not limit its clear language communication to just two-page Research Snapshots. It also uses a variety of media tools encouraging video and audio reports as well as posting material in the University's Research magazine, the [@Guelph](#) newspaper and commodity newsletters, as well as numerous industry publications.

Participants have to go through a rigorous application process before being interviewed for one of the ten posts available. Participants can be from first year undergraduates, to final year PhD post graduate and from any discipline. Successful SPARK participants work with a senior SPARK writer who assigns stories and edits copy much as in the world of journalism. The student then has to research the subject area and arrange an interview with the researcher to ascertain the 5W's and H of the research project – the who, what, when, where, why and how.

After the participant has written their article or produced their interview, the researcher approves the draft to ensure they are an accurate interpretation of their work. This programme gives young enthusiastic students excellent experience not only of the working world but also offers the opportunity for personal growth and development. I was particularly impressed with the encouragement of students from non-science backgrounds to take on subjects and stories relating to bio-chemistry, agriculture and rural policy.

This programme appeared to be an excellent system for encouraging young students to explore a whole variety of subjects and issues surrounding them not just their chosen subject for study. I felt this programme was a fantastic way to:

- a) Help students increase their knowledge of a variety of subject areas and improve their analytic and writing abilities.
- b) Expose them to the dynamic interactions between research, policy and economics and;
- c) Increase their awareness of possible job opportunities.

Seeing what could be accomplished with the additional resources and the capacity to respond to policy relevant issues was very impressive. Additionally, the experiences and skill sets that these students develop over the years would, no doubt, be a huge asset to them when entering the highly competitive job market

As a young researcher myself I feel very strongly about improving the guidance given to young students whether they are in academia, higher education, or at school leaver level. The concerns regarding adequate career advice and current levels of high youth unemployment was recently raised by Education Committee Chair Graham Stuart MP<sup>2</sup> (23<sup>rd</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Careers services deteriorating, MPs warn, by Sean Coughlan, BBC News education correspondent <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-21144825>

January 2013) (Office of National Statistics 2012). Not only was the issue of adequate information, advice and guidance discussed but issues of choice and opportunities were also raised. Examples such as the SPARK Programme and KMb Unit summer recruitment plans offer us in the UK lessons that we can learn from and utilise for the benefit for our own future young workers.

From my own personal experience after graduating with a BSc Honours and a Masters degree I felt I had little knowledge of the job opportunities available to me when trying to enter the work place. I think schemes such as the SPARK Programme provide a fantastic service not only providing young people with important work skills and experiences but also offering the opportunity to broaden their horizons and expose them to a wide range of job opportunities and careers that they may not previously have known about. Agriculture is an industry where there is a huge diversity of jobs available to young students and those interested in entering the industry. Despite this, the knowledge and awareness of young people or the general public to agricultural jobs can be limited or biased by the view that there is little money in agriculture or at least there are better opportunities outside agriculture (Fennel, 1981:35; Gasson *et al* 1988; Errington & Gasson 1996). If the agricultural sector is to encourage and attract young people to revitalise and grow, then we have to make the effort to demonstrate clearly what opportunities there are outside farming specifically, and across the whole of the rural sector. This in turn will encourage rural development, diversity and resilience.

## **Conclusion**

This four week study tour has given me a wide range of opportunities and experiences generating ideas and identifying areas from which we in the UK can learn from. Experiencing these issues in other countries helps us to reflect on similar issues in the UK. Discussion with foreign counterparts is always helpful for getting a fresh perspective.

There are two main lessons which I feel the UK could learn from Canada's approach to knowledge transfer and exchange and encouragement of youth involvement.

1. The integrated, inter-disciplinary approach to working and disseminating information
2. The value and responsibility placed on students to produce high quality communication material.

The researchers, policymakers and industry representatives I met were all focused on improving the current situation. They did this through open discussions with each other and a willingness to share information and knowledge. It is true that the individuals I met were all converts to the idea of knowledge transfer and exchange, however, it was interesting to see how they managed others not so engaged with the concept of free discussion and information sharing. In a world where knowledge is at the fingertips of most western societies we need to embrace free communication and make sure that the information that is available is accurate and expertly validated. To do this, researchers, policymakers and industry bodies all need to believe in the concept of knowledge transfer and exchange and take a proactive lead in the dissemination of information rather than being reactive to changing environments.

The responsibility given to students of all ages is also a very empowering system. In an industry which has had bad publicity over work load, lifestyle and financial rewards, it is vital that the agricultural sector utilises as many opportunities to change the perception of young people and focus on the positives that the industry can offer young farmers. Exposing agricultural students to the variety of job opportunities in the industry and engaging them in a way that makes them feel valued and empowered to research new methods or novel approaches I believe is an excellent way of revitalising the industry. There are of course opportunities already in place, such as Nuffield Scholarships; however, it is about encouraging those young people interested in these schemes and developing the right mentality for driving the agricultural sector forward in an unsettled/difficult climate.

An additional benefit of this trip has been in generating increased awareness of SRUC and the Rural Policy Centre and the development of international links. Links to Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs are particularly useful given the knowledge exchange and research commercialisation programmes they are currently running. Learning new ways in which our agricultural research can aid and benefit a wide range of industries is particularly important at this time given the economic downturn and increases in input costs. This experience has given me the opportunity to reflect on SRUC's current knowledge transfer and exchange activities and the role which other agricultural institutions need to be playing to promote and encourage a successful future for the sector. In increasingly difficult times we need to be maximising all the information and knowledge we have. We need to be sharing our experiences so that problems can be overcome more efficiently and growth within the sector can be supported.

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