

A light gray map of Europe is centered in the upper half of the image. A small blue circle is placed on the map over the location of Iceland. The title text is overlaid on the map.

The Open University: Executive education and continuous learning at Reykjavik University

Reykjavik, Iceland





General Information

Title	Open University										
Pitch	Executive education and continuous learning at Reykjavik University										
Organisations	Reykjavik University										
Country	Iceland										
Author	Dr. Samo Pavlin (University of Ljubljana)										
Nature of interaction	<table><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration in R&D</td><td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lifelong learning</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Commercialisation of R&D results</td><td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joint curriculum design and delivery</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of staff</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of students</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Academic entrepreneurship</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Student entrepreneurship</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Governance</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Shared resources</td></tr></table>	<input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration in R&D	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lifelong learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Commercialisation of R&D results	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joint curriculum design and delivery	<input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of staff	<input type="checkbox"/> Mobility of students	<input type="checkbox"/> Academic entrepreneurship	<input type="checkbox"/> Student entrepreneurship	<input type="checkbox"/> Governance	<input type="checkbox"/> Shared resources
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Supporting mechanism	<table><tr><td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Strategic</td></tr><tr><td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Structural</td></tr><tr><td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Policy</td></tr></table>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Strategic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Structural	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational	<input type="checkbox"/> Policy						
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Summary	<p>The Open University is a non-academic department of Reykjavik University that provides programmes and courses for executives, specialists and managers from industry who would like to improve their work performance and strengthen their skills. The courses and programmes, especially in the fields of technology, business and law, are practically oriented, based on case studies and entail close relations with industry. The Open University also provides courses and programmes which are customised to the needs of a particular company, their duration varies from three-hour courses to two-semester programmes and the teaching staff come from both academia and business. The number of participants in the lifelong learning programmes is comparable or even exceed number of regular participants enrolled in bachelors and masters programmes.</p>										



Introduction & Overview

1. BACKGROUND

Reykjavik University (RU) was founded in 1998 by the Iceland Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Icelandic Industries, and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers. The aim is to provide graduates with knowledge which can be directly applied in the labour market; to be a university for industry and innovations. The Open University of lifelong learning is a non-academic department of RU founded in 2006 that provides programmes and courses for executives, specialists and managers from industry. Its aim and strategy are closely connected with the university ones. It stresses cooperation with companies, industry and associations to meet the lifelong learning education needs of managers, executives and specialists in industry and society.

RU Open University provides education and training to managers and experts through courses in the fields of technology, business and law, which are areas in which the university is specialised. All courses and programmes are practically oriented, based on case studies and include close relations with industry. Instructors are teachers at RU, cooperating individuals from industry, and international experts¹.

2. OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

The strategy of the university has three pillars – **education, research and connection with industry** – which can contribute to economic growth.

However, the motivation for the cooperation in the open university programmes comes from companies that would like to increase its human capital as well as professionals that seek to expand particular knowledge areas.

As a reaction to this needs the RU Open University has established a large number of extensive courses in cooperation with companies and institutions with the aim of improving the performance and skills of employees (Annual Report of RU, 2014). This way, RU achieves closer connection with industry and provides continuous education.

One of the objectives underpinned by RU Open University their strong belief that UBC is “key for the economic environment and competitiveness of nations”², therefore also the training and education they offer is designed based on current industry needs.

3. STAKEHOLDERS

The most important stakeholders of the Open University are:

Companies and organisations – they are aware of the importance of professional development of their employees and they invest in their human capital. Open University sends them regularly updates with latest courses and events and an annual brochure.

Individual Professionals and managers – they are willing to improve their performance at work and strengthen their skills. The attendees are those who have already graduated and do not seek a post-graduate education but specific additional knowledge from their professional field.

Academics departments of RU – they work closely with Open University providing their skills and expertise as lecturers of the courses.





Implementation

4. INPUTS

RU Open University is a unit within the Relations Department of RU. There are currently eight professionals working there: one director, five project managers and two service representatives.

The courses take place within the building of RU, meaning that physical resources (material, equipment and facilities) already exist for the day-to-day operation of the university and there has been no need for further investments. Participation in the Open University programmes is mostly financed by companies since they see the importance of educating their directors and staff, an important factor to raise their job satisfaction and keep good employees for longer time within the companies.

There is an emphasis on that the programmes and courses provided match the needs of both the individuals who would attend them as well as the companies, institutions and parts of society they would be serving. Therefore, the curriculum is constantly being updated to provide a relevant offer. This is a collaboration between RU academics departments and industry. Cooperation with the key clients (individual participants and companies) requires proper marketing, communication, networking and development activities.

The lecturers and researches come from both RU and industry, in approximately the same percentage. RU need to have teachers experience as well as connections to the industry. The industry lecturers are recruited using the current network based on their technical expertise. The courses also include guest speakers from universities and companies abroad.

5. ACTIVITIES

The Open University provides a varied range of courses with a focus on the application of theoretical knowledge to practice from the fields of technology, business and law, and more specifically engineering, the fishing sector, sea boat sector and tourism sector. The courses are focused on a specific topic, in which they combine hard and soft skills. All courses have an emphasis in soft skills and entrepreneurship and innovation is a topic that is increasing its importance in all OU courses.

Over 400 courses are provided annually, with 15 to 20 participants per course. The number of participants in the lifelong learning programmes is comparable or even exceed number of regular students enrolled in Bachelors and Masters programmes. While some courses are open, others are tailored made for a specific company or industry. The duration of the courses is very different, ranging from three-hour to nine months (two semesters). Mainly all the courses are tailored-made for executives and specialists, for people who have finished their studies and already have a degree however that are not interested in attending postgraduate study programmes. Courses are designed in a way that a university representative meets the executives of the companies or institutions to discuss their particular needs.

The courses do not include any formal evaluation; the completion of a course is recognised by a certificate/diploma. Short courses (up to three hours) are based on case studies and discussions. Participants usually receive a case study beforehand. The course starts with the teacher's introduction (30-60 min) that is followed by team work in small groups working on case studies, and concluded by discussions on the case studies. Longer courses are normally split into eight units; the duration of one

unit is eight hours (negotiation, change management and leadership are for example taught in this two semester courses).

An example of a course implemented by OU is the one designed in collaboration with the accountant association. This association of accountants obliges accountants to have continuous professional education in order to keep their license and this course enable them to both keep their operation and constantly develop in their work. Together with the association's management, the university identifies the professional needs of the association members. The output of this activity is the creation of curricula that meet the identified needs, which are defined by in collaboration with the accountant association.

The Open University also runs conferences, lectures and events in collaboration with industries, businesses, professional associations and organisations in Iceland that are focused on a specific topic of interest at that time and for which a registration fee is charged.



The collaboration with Icelandair

A successful example of a course design and implementation is the collaboration with Iceland Air, which started in 2011. At this time, Icelandair was working in research activities with RU and they expanded their activities getting involved in education and training as well.

The course started with a meeting with executives of Icelandair where their training needs, educational needs for the focus group of executives – middle executives, middle management and top executives are discussed. Three meetings have been conducted with a representative of the Open University, a person from the business department, and a person from Icelandair responsible for human resources. Finally, a study was carried out and a three-year contract to implement 'mini MBAs' was signed, made entirely for the middle management and executives of Iceland Air, one of the largest companies in Iceland. The aim of the course is to make their executives stronger, to make the leadership closer, to enrich the culture within the company. RU and Icelandair have, prior to this agreement, had a long-standing agreement and worked together on research projects, led by RU Industry Relations Executive, from which this cooperation with the Open University then comes.

6. OUTPUTS

The main output of the Open University courses is the increase in professional knowledge that fosters individuals' professional development and companies' growth. Attendees are provided with certificates after they complete the programmes/courses. The courses already have a good reputation in society and are well recognised, thus they give additional value to the professional profiles of the participants.

7. IMPACTS

The programmes and courses allow attendees to advance in their professional field with specific knowledge, making them more valuable in the labour market. For the country, a better skilled human capital positively contributes to the productivity and the economic growth.





Support & Influencing factors

8. SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

The RU Open University is a part of a Division within RU called Relations, which is headed by Johanna Vigdis Gudmundsdottir, Executive Director, who oversees all industry relations and belong to the university board. This situation allows Open University to be connected to the companies that RU works with in other capacities, e.g. regarding internships for students, funded masters' projects, and research collaboration. At the same time, the Relations Division is connected to the broader strategy of the university through the representation of the division director in the board. The top management of the university is highly supported with the industry relations and the Open University activities.

The main supporting mechanism for UBC is commitment of companies and employees to participate in the RU Open University courses. Implementation of courses is in line with the overall strategy of RU. There is no support in terms of co-financing from the government

9. BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

This fact might be perceived also as an obstacle: despite the wish of professionals to educate themselves, join classes and network with other attendees of the courses, they lack time.

A barrier is also perceived in the fact that the programmes are not (co)financed by the government. This means that the cost of course participation is solely on the attendees, which may entail a barrier for certain individuals. In most cases, the courses are financed by companies for their own employees.

10. FUTURE CHALLENGES

The aim of the Open University is responsiveness to the needs and demands of the labour market and industry.

However, there is a lot of competition regarding the offer of executive education and continuous learning programmes. The University of Iceland also provides external courses, although these are more general in nature. Additionally, there are several private training companies that also provide similar courses but without the rigour provided by the university. Open university programmes need to prove excellence in comparison to various consulting companies that are the main competitors to the Open University in this respect. The competitive advantage of Open University is to be part of RU, whose brand is very recognised in the country, and the close cooperation with academic departments.

One of the provided examples explains that sometimes companies ask for a specific tailored-made course specifically suited to the needs of their staff. The university designs the course in detail, finds lecturers and fulfils any other requirements that the company might have. However, there is a risk that after designing the course and obtaining the company's confirmation, the company may withdraw from the cooperation and contact the teachers directly at a lower price. Although this is not common, it has happened and a system needs to be designed to avoid it in the future.

Despite the close relations of lecturers with industry in the university's traditional programmes, the approach to teaching in lifelong learning programmes is significantly different, which demands some

training. This training takes place once a year and lecturers are trained in communication skills, how to use case studies effectively, to apply more direct teaching methods, to create more participatory lectures, etc.

Another challenge that needs to be discussed in the near future is the possible implementation of more courses that are based on distance learning, since ever more people are willing to do studies via the Internet.

11. CONTEXT

Currently, Iceland has a low unemployment rate and high utilisation of human potential at workplaces, so the perception of the labour force has changed. Industry is aware they need to keep their employees satisfied and well educated so they are increasing their investment in human capital.

Even when there is not a regulation that forces companies to provide education and training to their employees, companies are becoming more eager to educate their employees. This is often done through their participation in lifelong learning activities in order to be upskilled and update their knowledge. Education and training has become a normal practice in Icelandic companies and they are willing to do it during their working hours. While the economic crises led to lower enrolment in the courses, in the last two years this number has again risen.

The industry areas mostly represented in the courses are related to business, law and computer science, science, engineering and traditional business lines. However, due to Iceland's small population of 330,000, there is a need to constantly develop the study programmes to avoid saturation of the market.

The participants are typically university graduates, older than 25 years. They are professionals, executives or managers. The distribution of participants by gender is sometimes equal, but sometimes males prevail.

12. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The RU Open University is part of a Division within RU called Relations, which is headed by Johanna Vigdis Gudmundsdottir, Executive Director, who is also responsible for Industry Relations. Therefore, connecting the Open University to companies that Reykjavik University works with in other capacities is a success factor, e.g. regarding internships for students, funded master projects, and research collaboration.

Another success factor is the good relationship and communication that Open University has with industry. This allow them to have a better understanding of the education and training needs of the companies. The next step in the process, which also contributes to the success of Open University, is their ability to adjust the curriculum to meet labour market needs and the flexible structure of the programmes, which can be highly personalised and include industry input in both their design and their delivery. All Open University courses have a practical nature and are focussed on a specific relevant topic, while at the same time they are underpinned by the academic rigour that the university provides. The combination of the practical approach, the focus and the academic input is another success factor.



Further Information

13. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

As the main evaluation mechanism, the university measures the relevance of its courses in relation to the needs of the labour market. One indicator of evaluation is the number of registrations/enrolments in courses as they reveal what is required in the labour market – participants register in courses that provide knowledge relevant in the labour market. After completion of a course, participants are requested to provide feedback about the teacher, the teaching practice, the course material, the assignments, the services etc.

Often, there is also a project manager appointed by the Open University director who takes part in all the sessions of the course, observing and making notes. This person follows the course and assesses it in order to ensure that it meets the university's standards and thus perform quality assurance for the course.

14. SUSTAINABILITY MEASURES

Individual programmes are considered sustainable if there are enough enrolments. However, they do not implement particular sustainability measures.



15. TRANSFERABILITY

The Open University provides a general set up and a general approach to its programme and so it does not contain national specifics that would limit its transferability to a different environment or other countries with comparable attitude to human capital development.

After Open University successfully designed and developed a series of tailored-made solutions for certain companies, like the case of Icelandair, they started to be contacted by some other companies through a successful word of mouth promotion. Until now, if a particular course has worked out well, other companies contact RU for the purpose of doing something similar for their executives and managers – hence each case opens the door to future opportunities.

16. AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

The courses have not yet been awarded by external institution; however, they are already well-recognised by industry.

17. PUBLICATIONS AND ARTICLES

Annual Report of RU, 2014

http://www.ru.is/media/veldu-flokk/RU_AnnualReport_2014.pdf

18. LINKS

Open University: <http://en.ru.is/open-university/>;

RU: <http://en.ru.is/>

19. CONTACT PERSON



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johannavigdis@ru.is

20. REFERENCES

¹ Annual Report of RU, 2014

² <http://en.ru.is/open-university/>