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Citation for final published version:

Bowen, Robert , Morris, Wyn and Ivett, Schmidt 2022. Rural enterprise research: A systematic methodological review. Presented at: Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship, York, 27-28 October 2022. Proceedings ISBE Annual Conference 2022.

Publishers page:

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Rural Enterprise Research: A systematic Methodological Review

Topic: Rural Enterprise has been an established topic within Entrepreneurship research for some time. This is highlighted by a dedicated Rural Enterprise track at the annual ISBE conference, and an annual Rural Entrepreneurship Conference, which celebrates its 19th edition in 2022. Academic research on rural entrepreneurship is regularly published in highly ranked international journals, including Journal of Rural Studies, Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, and the International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business. Rural Enterprise includes a diverse body of research that investigates a range of issues, including agribusiness, tourism, and the impacts and adoption of management practices and innovation; with the research adopting a variety of research methods. Despite this rich body of research, few attempts have been made to understand the methodological diversity of Rural Enterprise research. Consequently, this paper conducts a systematic methodological review of published research to investigate and analyse the various methodological approaches adopted in Rural Enterprise research. As a Business research field, research has typically been dominated by quantitative methods, however, research methods have diversified more recently, with journals publishing qualitative and mixed methods research involving a variety of methodologies.

Applicability to the conference theme – ‘New Approaches to Raising Entrepreneurial Opportunity: Reshaping inclusive Enterprise, Policy and Practice Post-Pandemic’: This paper aligns with the conference theme by exploring existing and emerging approaches to Rural Enterprise research. Investigating the methodological approaches of research undertaken in this area, conversations can be developed regarding appropriate research methodologies, including new and innovative approaches. Despite the specific focus on Rural Enterprise, findings could offer valuable insights into research methods in the field of Entrepreneurship more broadly, enabling Entrepreneurship researchers to explore appropriate research methods. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the way that conventional environments have changed. As such, less conventional and more innovative research could be valuable in exploring emerging issues in novel ways.

Aim: The aim of this paper is to identify and evaluate methods employed in Rural Enterprise research. To achieve this, a systematic review of literature was conducted to identify published journal articles on the topic of Rural Enterprise, with the aim of evaluating the methods employed in each paper. This would allow for an understanding of how suitable methodologies are applied to the topic, and explore innovative methods, which could bring new ideas and enrichen the scope of research in this area. The authors take a pragmatist worldview towards research, advocating the ‘what works’ principle (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011) in using suitable methods for the aims of the research. This is underlined in the researchers’ experience in publishing research utilising a range of research methods, including questionnaires, interviews, mixed methods, case studies, action research, and auto-ethnography. While some criticism exists within the literature regarding less popular research methods, such as auto-ethnography, the findings of this paper could shed light on the use of such methods in different contexts, and help to reinforce the rigour of such methods.

Methodology: A systematic review of the methodologies of literature on Rural Enterprise is conducted based on an extensive search using the Scopus database, as the largest database of peer-reviewed literature. The search was conducted based on the keywords of ‘rural enterprise’ and ‘rural entrepreneurship’, with a criteria that findings should be from published journal articles in English, published before 17th May 2022. Following the completion of the search, articles were verified to meet the specific criteria. Articles classed as research notes and articles published in science-based journals were removed to ensure that they corresponded with the topic of Rural Enterprise. This yielded a total of 408 articles. Each article was documented with information regarding the methodology, with analysis conducted in identifying patterns within the use of methods across all articles.

Contribution: Initial findings show that the majority of published articles are based on quantitative research, in line with tendencies in Business research. However, examples of emerging methods are evident, such as participatory action research. An overview of the research points to a diversity of research settings. Furthermore, an evaluation of articles points to the increasing frequency of published articles in this area since 2016, with 223 of the 408 articles published since then. Contributions of this paper aim to provide researchers with a better understanding of suitable research methods used in Rural Enterprise research, as well as draw attention to innovative approaches, underlining aspects of rigour that can support the promotion of newer methods.

Implications for practice: Findings from this research could provide more direction to Rural Enterprise research by highlighting the richness of the body of existing research on the topic. This could enrich future research by identifying appropriate research methods and identify relevant emerging research, supporting the rigour of new methods that can be employed in Rural Enterprise research. Furthermore, the structure of the approach taken in this paper could act as an example for other research areas to follow in better understanding how research methodologies are used effectively.