

Co-operative approaches to leading and learning: ideas for democratic innovation from the UK and beyond

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Rapid change across the education system has become a norm of contemporary educational practice. The idea of the 'university' in the 21st century is being actively re-examined in the face of social, economic, cultural and political changes. Greater access to higher education, alongside sharpening economic and educational inequalities, have contributed to tensions and conflict around scholarship, learning and research. The very purpose of a university has been called into question (Barnett 2016). One significant approach to consensual leadership in the higher education context, which has received limited attention, is the idea of a co-operative university. The relevance of co-operation, co-operative values, principles and structures offers a useful way of thinking about democratic alternatives to neoliberal and neoconservative trends.

Keywords: co-operation, higher education, alternatives, university, values, democracy

Context and framework

The idea of a co-operative university is giving rise to new thinking about higher education (Swain 2017). The concept has been proposed for small scale ventures within and outside existing institutions, to whole universities as well as to systems of higher education. From the everyday building of structures to the utopian transformation of higher learning, co-operativism helps to highlight the potential for alternatives to the current system, particularly following the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (Ross et al 2017).

The nature of the university is changing. Higher education is currently in a state of flux that shows no signs of abating (McGettigan 2013). Crucial issues are up for debate. The relationship to the economy, the idea of a 'public university', the relevance of disciplines of knowledge, the means of funding, the relationship between research and teaching, and the role of various stakeholders including staff, students, senior managers, policy makers, communities and businesses, all offer considerable grounds for disagreement. The rapidity of change has been matched by the intensity of feelings over the conflicting desires to defend public education, make institutions more accountable and improve quality and access (McGettigan 2013; Eagleton 2015; Barnett 2016; Collini 2017). Metaphors of change circulate, with the solidity and tradition of universities starting to crack under pressure from globalisation and marketization. 'An Avalanche is Coming' warn the prophets of educational reform who posit the 'unbundling' of the university as it fails to compete with a multiplicity of specialist agencies (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013). Digital technologies have been an actual and symbolic part of the new landscape. For example, it has been suggested that MOOCs (massive open online courses) signal the end of the traditional university course now that information is, in theory, more freely available (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi 2013, MacFarlane 2011).

Contradictory tendencies of differentiation and *isomorphism*, by which organisations converge in structure and purpose under pressure from internal and external forces, have been unleashed. Various institutions, now incorporated into the university, were once

autonomous and still are in some countries – examples include polytechnics, higher education colleges, further education colleges, community colleges and teacher education colleges, a list which indicates the potential range of tertiary education. In Britain and elsewhere, much of this diversity has been reduced as institutions have been incorporated into a single model of a university [which Watson ref?]. Indeed, over recent decades, the enlargement of certain visions has complemented the closure of others. Innovative forms of widening participation in higher education, including access courses, foundation degrees or independent studies, have all been squeezed or replaced with more traditional and/or new entrepreneurial initiatives (Walton 2012; Yeo 2015). Rather than universities representing an elite education, we now find a hierarchy among similar-looking institutions; inequalities once marked out by a university education have been incorporated into the higher education system itself.

As part of the trend towards marketization, policy makers, senior leaders and administrators advocate ideological change which passes as a neutral response to supposedly 'inevitable' economic and political forces. Institutions compete within a so-called market place. In the UK, the Russell Group of universities have in-built advantages in terms of their established research capacity which attracts further income and embeds inequality. Both research and teaching are the subject of external audits and rankings, notably via the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the nascent Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In addition, a growing section of the education market is international. Higher education is seen in global terms, as reflected in league tables of world university rankings, for example via the Quality Standards (QS) system. Foreign students are attracted to those at the top of the tables and bring in high income. In addition, marketization was advanced substantially in 2012 with the introduction and increase in student tuition fees, currently just over £9,000 per year in England. The high costs of running institutions and the apparently insatiable desires to expand, create demands for greater margins which, in turn, intensifies the work process and has resulted in a degradation of academic labour [which Naidoo/ Enders ref?]. There

has been a corresponding and mounting imbalance in pay with vice-chancellor's income rising much faster than that of other employees (Khomami 2017).

Complex ideas of ownership have confused the already ambiguous distinctions between public and private spheres (Tight 2006). The 'privatisation' of the university has been much commented upon (Bailey and Freedman 2012), not only with *private* universities, such as Buckingham, a trend expected to increase following the Higher Education Act of 2017, but also in research funding, book publishing and journal production. This system provides funding for scholarly networks but also excludes outsiders by charging high prices for access to articles and books, many of which can only be afforded by higher education institutions themselves (Ciancanelli 2007).

Alongside such 'capitalist enterprise', other meanings of ownership are both visible and contested, which lends significance to co-operative and mutual practices. Universities occupy a position at the locus of social contradictions, not least in terms of the hyper complex problem of who owns them. A review of community and mutual ownership in 2010 identified five historical models, aspects of which can all be discerned in higher education (Woodin, Crook and Carpentier 2010). Firstly, customary rights deriving from the access and use enjoyed by students, as well as staff, both past and present, generates feelings that they constitute the academy devoted to research and learning. Indeed, the intensity of current debates partly derives from the great sense of ownership by academic staff who consider themselves disinherited of these customary rights – a shift from self-managed communities to managers as the 'entrepreneurial *de facto* owners' (Boden *et al* 2012). Second, a related idea of the educational commons, draws sustenance from a long history of dispossession from the land. Common ownership over knowledge and disciplinary traditions are frequently viewed as collective legacies. Third, a charitable model of ownership is reflected in the sense of universities as educational charities, evidenced in the trend towards fundraising and supporting the public good through offering scholarships as well as core research, collaboration and teaching activities (Salmon 2011). Fourth, 'common ownership' was a term

used to describe municipal and state ownership for much of the twentieth century. Many redbrick universities such as Manchester and Sheffield had roots in their local communities and represented a form of civic development. In addition, in the UK at least, the central state retains a strong element of ownership over, and funder of, the 'public university'.

Fifth, 'the co-operative university' is generally conceived as one in which ownership is vested in common and collective bodies and should be devoted to the well-being of all. It is seen as addressing the ambiguity of ownership, lack of democracy and accountability, harmful divisions of labour and cultures of competitiveness (Boden et al 2012; Yeo 2015). Higher education tends to be viewed as an area that needs to be returned to common ownership as part of an attempt to construct a knowledge commons (Neary and Winn 2012). Mutual and co-operative forms of ownership can be identified in Oxbridge colleges, which are to some extent member-based organisations. For much of the Middle Ages, the university might have been considered a 'scholastic guild or corporation' dedicated to higher learning, an idea that persisted in the nineteenth century when Mark Pattison wrote of the 'university of the chancellor, masters, and scholars' as 'one corporation, and each of the colleges distinct and independent societies' (OED 2017). Co-operative and mutual models are helping to connect up these historical trends, which remain resources for rethinking higher education in the future. They have caught the imagination of those struggling with the multiple roles of different stakeholders involved with the university today.

The debate on ownership has also been amplified by the expansion of access to universities. Although we are now familiar with the notion of 'mass participation' in higher education (Trow 2007; Tight 2009), most people remain outsiders to a university education. However, the claims to access have been continually desired and demanded as a right - often on behalf of others - from Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* to claims for comprehensive reforms and universal rights in more recent times (Robinson 1971; McCowan 2012). In practice, of course, this assertion is limited by the caveat that it should only be open to those who are 'adequately equipped' to undertake, or 'benefit from', a

'university education', conundrums that are far from settled. The very definition of a university is closely linked to notions of universality and universalism; thus the fourteenth century Bible reflected a universalist meaning in referring to 'Thou, Lord of vnyuersitee, or of alle creatures' (OED 2017b). Any fully co-operative vision of HE will ultimately need to account for the educational needs of all, in or out of a university. But this idea comes not only from co-operative sources. Indeed, the recent historical acceptance that everyone is potentially educable, makes it difficult to justify the exclusion of people from centres of higher learning. Similar arguments, albeit with different emphases, are asserted by those who favour opening education up to the market as well as by critics eager to extend popular democracy. As a result, the very expertise of universities and their ability to legitimise and certify certain types of learning are coming under closer public scrutiny.

Co-operation

Visions for a co-operative university can be seen as utopian yet grounded. They draw strength from historical and contemporary developments in education. Indeed, higher learning was sought out well before the emergence of a dominant European tradition associated with universities at Bologna, Cambridge, Oxford and elsewhere. Roy Lowe and Yoshihito Yasuhara (2017. P. 6) have emphasised a 'co-operative' or 'mutually supportive' approach to knowledge production that created a crucial interconnectedness in the early development of universities. Learning itself has been characterised as a mutual process of human interaction as, in theory, it is not a finite resource and one person or group gaining knowledge does not necessarily mean that anyone else must have less (Fletcher 2000).

From the origins of the co-operative movement, education had a central place. The first successful consumer co-operative, the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, founded in 1844, helped to initiate an innovative tradition of developing new educational forms that would spawn libraries, reading rooms, classes and, in the twentieth century, film and cultural groups (Woodin 2011). The confidence in co-operative visions was bolstered by the multiplying size and strength of the movement which was a major influence upon the well-being of working class people – a quiet but nevertheless revolutionary force. In 1919, the Co-operative College was established as a higher form of education for the movement and some even hoped it would lead to the formation of a ‘co-operative university’ (Woodin 2017). There were of course limits and obstacles to this progress and Britain witnessed a prolonged decline in consumer co-operation especially visible from the 1960s. Co-operatives themselves were often wary of academic theory and favoured grounded knowledge that could be put to good use. In addition, the study of co-operation in higher education has typically been marginalised and divided across various disciplines, even in areas where it could have a major presence such as business and management (MacPherson 2015). Educational textbooks have typically neglected co-operatives (Hill 2000; Kalmi 2007).

However, the lack of attention accorded to co-operatives has started to shift in recent decades as co-operative models and hybrids have helped to meet changing needs of business, education and public services. A central part of this process was the recodification of the co-operative values and principles in 1995 by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). The definition of a co-operative is ‘an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise’. The co-operative values comprise self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity as well as the ethical values of openness, transparency, social responsibility and caring for others. The principles provide more direct guidance on how co-operatives are organised and include

voluntary membership, democratic control and economic participation by members; autonomy and independence, education and training, co-operation among co-operatives as well as contributing to the wider community (ICA 2017).

Policy makers have supported co-operative developments by encouraging multi-stakeholder models. Co-operative ideas have helped local authorities, some of which are 'co-operative councils', to think about creative and democratic ways of outsourcing what were previously state responsibilities, for example in housing and leisure. Education itself has also seen the dramatic rise of co-operative schools since 2008 which rapidly grew to over 850 schools but subsequently fell back to around 600. The legal models for such schools emphasise their purpose of defending co-operative values and principles and make provision for stakeholder groups, including staff, pupils, parents, communities, and potentially alumni, to play a role in a forum and thus influence the governance of their schools (Woodin 2012, 2015). Co-operative values and principles have been recognised as adding a significant ingredient to contemporary debates on education. They have nevertheless had to be adapted to the constraints of current legal and regulatory frameworks. It is difficult to imagine how schools or universities could be fully owned and controlled by members unless they were completely private organisations. Rather than fully-fledged co-operatives, they represent hybrids that may develop further in a co-operative direction. For example, trust schools depend upon adapting a charitable trust to enable co-operation between schools.

Yet, there are a number of reasons why co-operative ideas are pertinent to the current time, particularly following the 2007-08 financial crisis and the subsequent imposition of austerity measures from 2010. They engage directly with the confusion over public and private and are able to query the assumptions of both of these clusters of ideas, activities and structures. Co-operatives are private bodies but often act in democratic and ethical ways in meeting common needs. They speak a language of business and also one of public purpose. Opportunities for social action are constructed upon voluntary participation while lines of democratic accountability do not stifle the potential for entrepreneurial activity. Co-

operativism also makes connections between informal participation, collaboration and formal institutional structures which help to sustain co-operative values. Furthermore, across the world today, the co-operative movement remains a sizeable force. The largest 300 co-operatives have a combined turnover in excess of \$2.533 trillion. With a billion members in 100 countries, co-operatives have been estimated by the UN to have supported over half of the world's population (Eurisce 2016). The scale of these co-operatives helps us to think about the potential transformation of large-scale institutions and the whole system of higher education.

Beyond the general attractiveness of co-operativism, the idea of a co-operative university is being applied to different aspects of higher education and has not yet taken on a tangible shape. Analysis is carried out at different levels. Dan Cook has argued that co-operative universities are both 'realistic and desirable' (Cook 2012: 58) in emphasising that 'co-operative principles are academic principles' (Cook 2012: 20). This reflects a parallel with co-operative schools and reveals how the general nature of co-operative values can be applied to various settings (Woodin 2015). For instance, suggestions have been made to convert existing provision; develop smaller co-operative units within universities; and to build new institutions (Juby 2011; Winn 2015).

The work of Mike Neary and Joss Winn has been essential in leading work in the area, through research as well as the Social Science Centre in Lincoln (Social Science Centre 2017). They accentuate the potential for a co-operative university to help overcome divisions of labour by the creation of 'member scholars' and view the student as a producer, drawing upon Walter Benjamin's classic essay, the Author as Producer (Benjamin 1973). In addition, Stephen Yeo has pointed to the relevance of co-operative membership, autonomy and ownership to the higher education system as a whole that could be remoulded to encourage collaborative and co-operative action. Under this umbrella, students would be able to access a broad range of options across the system. A federated system of higher education is indeed one option being pursued by a working group at the Co-operative College, alongside

the possibility of the College collaborating with existing universities and gaining degree awarding powers (Boehm 2017). One specific proposition from Rebecca Boden, Penelope Ciancanelli and Susan Wright has been to create a 'trust university' in which ownership resides in a non-revokable trust to help ensure that institutions are focused upon their key purpose of teaching and research. It aims to provide a measure of protection against the managerialism of senior leaders. Employees and students would be classified as trust beneficiaries, able to make use of university resources and ensure accountability to society in terms of its core purpose (Boden et al 2012). This model, which draws inspiration from the John Lewis Partnership, bears some relation to the trust model for co-operative schools and also to the charitable model of ownership outlined above (see also Cook 2012; Glatter 2015).

The range of perspectives mirrors a dilemma inherent in co-operatives, between far-sighted, visionary and utopian affinities on the one hand and prosaic, structural and realistic tendencies on the other. At one end of the scale, technical models may be easily understood and adapted to a range of settings but may only offer limited change in appealing to a wide audience. By contrast, radical alternatives speculate about wholesale transformation encompassing pedagogy, structures, ownership and divisions of labour. They set the bar very high and embed the co-operative university within broader social movements. However, if co-operative models are successfully applied to higher education, it does not follow that they will automatically become active co-operative social movements. While multi-stakeholder models are necessary, the sense of ownership and control can also become blurred. The example of 'new mutualism' from the 1990s suggests that considerable support, training and work is needed to disseminate co-operative ideas. There are no guarantees that come with co-operative designations, and long-term change on the ground is not always easy to bring about, especially where co-operatives find themselves in a hostile environment. It is a paradox that the process of transition towards self-managing co-operative structures, infused by a co-operative dynamic, may need to be carefully managed.

Co-operative alternatives

These proposals and analyses of co-operative education draw upon a number of innovative models from around the world. The most noted of these is Mondragon University in the Basque region of Spain which grew out of the highly successful Mondragon complex of co-operatives that includes high-tech engineering industries as well as the Eroski chain of supermarkets. Its origins lay in the 1940s when the Catholic priest, José María Arizmendiarieta established a technical college which supported the development of co-operative business in the town of Mondragón that was still suffering from the Spanish Civil War. Education was to be central to the development of worker co-operatives and their development into a leading group of businesses. The university itself was founded in 1997 when three existing educational co-operatives came together to form faculties of the university – a secondary co-operative. Faculties specialise in engineering which dates back to the early days of the movement; business and management established in 1970 but emerging out of the technical training of bookkeepers and secretaries; and humanities and education, formed in the mid-1970s when there was a demand for teachers in the final days of the Franco regime. They have been complemented with a faculty of culinary arts and sciences in the last few years (Freundlich 2017; also Neary and Winn 2017).

The University has adopted a co-operative structure centred upon a model of representative democracy. Each of the three co-operative faculties are independent and their governing bodies comprise one third workers, one third students and one third collaborating institutions such as co-operatives, local government and foundations. The general assembly is divided into three in order that each constituency elects 3-4 members to the board which in turn appoints the dean who then names his/her associate deans and directors who must also be approved by the board. This structure has been hailed as providing a useful model for universities elsewhere. In particular, the multi-stakeholder representation provides a level of

formal accountability for key decisions. It locates the shared ownership of a university in the various stakeholder groups (see Wright et al 2011; Matthews 2013).

It is a private university in which staff must buy a share in the business, approximately €15,000, which can be paid in stages. Consequently owners exert a great influence over their university. But the power to control the institution also depends upon the wider political, social, economic, cultural and educational context. Indicative of a general situation facing co-operatives, Mondragon has to manage a series of dilemmas which result from attempting to develop co-operative action in a capitalist marketplace and public sector which may not always be attuned to its needs. For example, as a small university, with approximately 4,000 students, and more part-time ones, it does not have the scale to embark on large initiatives. Public policy is mainly concerned with public universities rather than small private initiatives and Mondragon finds itself cut off from public money for research funding (Freundlich 2017).

While the democratic structure looks impressive in theory, the reality can fall short of aspirations if the dynamic of stakeholder groups does not invigorate democratic governance. An ethos of stakeholder participation needs to be actively nurtured in successful co-operatives. For example, student participation has changed over recent decades and, according to Fred Freundlich, an academic in the business school, many students have adopted a 'consumer model of education'. While some students are interested in the University because it is a co-operative, many more are attracted by the fact that it is affiliated with a successful and prestigious group of enterprises which they hope will provide good jobs, a key purpose of worker co-operatives. Yet managing these conflicting concerns has been difficult in times of austerity:

When the university, when the faculties, pay attention, dedicated time and resources to encouraging student participation, then it tends to work better. But since the great recession it has been hard to find enough resources to do that. The general culture doesn't support student participation in co-operative governance. Western consumer

culture doesn't tend to promote this kind of aid ... they are not the most dominant values in the culture (Freundlich 2017).

Thus, co-operative values may be recognised but can be drowned out by other values, dominant formations and discourses. Welcoming and sympathetic environments are crucial if co-operatives are to thrive (ILO 2002).

In addition, the cultural specificity which lies at the heart of Basque co-ops and gives them strength, is the very factor which can potentially isolate the University from the mainstream. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong commitment to promoting the use of the Basque language (Euskera) which is an integral part of Basque identity and politics. The University also plays an important role in regional governance and economic development. But bilingual education creates resource and timetabling difficulties, especially for those who would like to pursue advanced degrees in English and other languages. This makes it hard to attract students from Spain, let alone from further afield, who might provide greater income and diversity. Obviously moving too far from the origins of the University would lead to a loss of purpose and integration into the mainstream but it makes it difficult to establish partnerships and collaborate with other institutions. Retaining a distinctive and co-operative identity within this powerful set of contrary forces poses a great challenge for Mondragon. That it has so far withstood these pressures has been a major achievement and helps to explain its importance for both educators and co-operators.

Africa has also witnessed the expansion of co-operation into higher education in recent years where some similarities have emerged despite the very different context. Co-operative development in many sub-Saharan African countries has been closely tied into economic development and connects to a history of colonialism and independence. Indeed, the UK Co-operative College was a recognised provider of services for the Colonial Office during the postwar period. In many African countries, following independence, the development of co-operative businesses was also tied into state formation and government policy. Linda Shaw (2011) investigated six co-operative colleges encompassing a total of 8,000 students in east

and southern Africa including Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia and Ethiopia. She highlighted that many of the colleges were struggling to develop with few skilled teachers and were suffering in the face of competition from other providers. One option was to expand via a university route, which carried risks as well as opportunities. There was a danger of providing generic degrees that met wider objectives while weakening links to the co-operative movement. Thus the challenge for colleges was 'to meet popular demand for non-co-operative-based courses and survive financially, whilst not distancing themselves further from the needs of the co-operative movement' (Shaw 2011: 73).

Two colleges have since made the jump to university status, Moshi Co-operative University in Tanzania which organises a number of regional outreach centres, as well as the Co-operative University of Kenya (CUK). Universities often need to attract school leavers who may not have experience of the movement or ultimately work in co-operative destinations. For example, Moshi, as a university college, jumped from 150 students to over 2,000 in a short space of time (ICA 2014). In the long-run there is a concern about losing touch with the co-operative movement although this may be offset if universities can stimulate growth in co-operatives, as well as a sympathetic awareness, which inevitably may be a generational development. For instance, Moshi's mission statement emphasises the need 'to provide quality education, training, research and advisory services to enhance co-operative development' (Moshi 2017). In Kenya, where co-operatives contribute 43% of GDP, CUK works to convince government, non-governmental agencies as well as the wider population about the importance of a co-operative university (CUK 2017a and 2017b). The other option may be that such alternatives merely get incorporated into a mainstream dominant model of the university. In the promotional material for CUK, there is an emphasis upon the importance of generic co-operation between government, university and the wider co-operative movement which, while essential, will need to complement rather than replace the importance of close connections with actual co-operative networks (CUK 2017a). There was always a tension at the heart of the project, in the words of Higher Education, Science and

Technology Minister Hon. Professor Margaret Kamar, to become 'an important global university in cooperative studies ... My ministry expects ... the Institution to become a world-class University for cooperative education and training' (JKUAT 2012). Negotiating these opportunities and constraints while promoting and celebrating the democratic nature of co-operatives will prove testing in the coming period.

Moreover, the changing and disputed meanings of a co-operative university help to connect it to a much wider range of radical experiments. There is a long tradition of alternative radical universities, from the European popular universities to the wide-ranging experimentation taking place in Latin America in contemporary times. Frequently, they adopt the name 'university' in order to question conventional conceptualisations of higher education (McCowan 2012). For example, UNITIERRA (University of the Land) in southern Mexico is an institution with no entry requirements and no formal qualifications on exit, which functions through a combination of seminars and workshops and pairing of 'students' with professional mentors in the workplace. It emerged out of the work of a number of social movements and is articulated in terms of a pre-figurative transformation of social life:

We believe that no real solution can come from above, from where the powerful merely distribute contempt, dispossession, exploitation and repression. For solutions we instead seek the reconstruction of society from below in the constant effort to recuperate 'verbs' such as to learn, to eat, to heal, to live: That is, to recuperate our autonomous capacities to live in dignity constructing a convivial mode of life (UNITIERRA 2017).

Finding ways for communities to 'recuperate' and activate learning is reminiscent of the Rochdale Pioneers' concern to 'arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government' for a co-operative purpose. Similar examples can be located in Brazil where a decentralised education system combined with a tradition of innovation among social movements within a strong civil society. Tristan McCowan (2016) has outlined a range of higher educational experiments which address co-operation on a regional and international

basis; foster local development; focus upon racial and ethnic identity; and promote social and political change as well as spiritual development. An assortment of alternative universities around the world could be added, all of them with links to co-operation, not only the Social Science Centre, Edinburgh's Ragged University (2017) and Free University Brighton (2017) but also Denmark's folk high schools (Højskolerne 2017), Swaraj University in India (2017) and Gaia University (2017) (see also Yeo 2015; McCowan 2016).

There are historical parallels in operation here. These initiatives have partly responded to structural changes which have isolated some populations from learning. They address the needs of adult education which, for long periods of history has been closely associated with university provision. In Britain, the history of the University Extension in the nineteenth century and, in the twentieth, the emergence of tutorial classes in association with the Worker's Educational Association, and the rise of extra-mural departments of adult education, all met these needs. Adult educational innovations represented a compromise between conflicting interests and traditions, bringing together the worker's movement focused upon social change, as well as those concerned with liberal education and university standards. Universities were able to benefit from the experience of this engagement by developing new curricula and courses such as politics, philosophy and economics at Oxbridge. However, the workers were kept 'beyond the walls' with the result that the movement had a fascinating history but only a limited impact upon national university traditions. By contrast, the experience in the US was different with some changes in the mainstream with, for example, a network of community colleges and part time degrees, emerging at an earlier time (Goldman 1995).

Adult education is an area where it may be realistic to envisage some kind of co-operative university emerging in the short to medium term. The New Labour governments of 1997-2010, and particularly secretary of state for education, David Blunkett, understood the varied traditions of adult education but subsequently undermined them through measures that included cutting funding for 'leisure' courses and insisting that students progressed to higher

qualifications. Since 2010, drastic reductions in funding adult education have further debilitated a once strong provision of learning. It creates a context in which new possibilities become available, not least co-operative ones.

Summary of themes

The meaning of co-operativism in higher education cannot be tied down precisely at this historical moment. It is being used as a heuristic device to explore multiple possibilities across research, learning and structures at all educational stages. In part, this is very much in tune with co-operative ideals that are focused upon mutually beneficial action among co-operative groups. Indeed, many of the specific examples of co-operative universities have grown out of the demands of the co-operative movement itself, as with Mondragon or Moshi. They tend to be small scale universities in touch with their communities although, in the African examples, there were pressures to spread beyond their originating constituency. For other universities, responsibility to a specific constituency is less applicable because, although it is possible to fit co-operative principles into academic purposes, universities serve mixed constituencies that cannot easily be contained by an existing social movement. In some models, it is suggested that co-operative structures could help transform universities, a reversal of the bottom up principle which implies a long term vision of cultural change once structures are in place. In addition, while the co-operative university presents an opportunity to reconnect institutions with communities via structures of ownership and membership, it would be mistaken to view this as a simple return to small scale and local/regional institutions even though these are sometimes both desirable and feasible. If it is to gain traction, co-operative ideals must take account of multiple, conflicted and international communities which may or may not play a role in university governance. This parallels the problems faced by large co-operatives and employee owned business, such as Scott Bader, an international chemical business, which struggled to extend membership to all their workers in different plants around the world. Thus, complex co-operative models will

have to recognise identifiable groups while also forming collaborations nationally and internationally to share ideas and provide mutual validation.

As the specific and generic meanings of co-operation inevitably blur into one another, hybrid co-operative organisations can struggle to develop a distinctive vision. But small steps are necessary as a precursor to extensive transformation – prefigurative politics highlight the significance of political minutiae in terms of broader social visions (Rowbotham et al 1979). Again this is a protracted process and radical initiatives face the challenge of isomorphism in a highly regulated system where rewards are distributed according to a restrictive set of league tables. However, although dominant ideas are difficult to resist, change is taking place in diverse directions. Contributing to discussions of alternative co-operative models will nurture and improve the capacity to develop more practical proposals in the future, making them available as opportunities are created. Inevitably, these will continue to arise from the desire for education and learning across the whole population. Building bodies of knowledge around co-operative movements and possibilities is becoming an urgent task.

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