The Co-operative University: Notes towards an achievable ideal

By

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'The past we inherit; the future we build'
(Durham Miners' Banner)

'What is now proved was once only imagin'd'
(William Blake, Proverbs from Hell)

Abstract

The Co-operative University is a timely and achievable project. It is both a creative response to the multiple crises of present-day systems of higher education and a vehicle to promote a new social purpose for lifelong learning and social change in a disordered world. By the standards against which they are measured, UK universities are successful institutions for promoting conventional models of education and research.

In contrast, though not in competition, the Co-operative University should operate from a very different charter: to discover better solutions to collective problems through learning and research organised on democratic principles. Its task is to support engaged citizens through innovative curricula and pedagogy to work collaboratively to develop new ways of approaching the most urgent problems of our times. It is an institution that builds outwards from a local focus to the international frameworks that shape all societies and futures in a globalized world.

Challenge

What kind of higher education is needed to meet the known dangers of our unequal and disordered world? In what ways can a higher education nurture the skills and imagination needed to build sustainable forms of society that secure the welfare, wellbeing and security of the world's millions? What can be done to discover and disseminate the knowledge, ideas and understanding to strengthen democratic values and practice throughout society? Who should provide that education, how and to whom?

George Monbiot (among many others) has recently argued for a new kind of politics to replace the neo-liberal agenda that has shaped the world for the past

quarter century. In place of relentless, environmentally unsustainable and unequal growth, he claims that a new political narrative of community, creativity and democracy is needed. His is a voice among others trying to articulate ideas for a future in which the ruthless logic of global capitalism, driven by corporate power and with its narrow, individualised consumerist aspirations, its war economies, and its weakened democracies, is replaced by institutions that value democracy, solidarity and peaceful coexistence. The future they are searching for is one in which engaged citizens will thrive in the secure enjoyment of their human rights and their creativity.

What kind of higher education institutions can facilitate the development of such a social order in a new framework of international relations? The idea of a Co-operative University at least carries the promise of exploring these themes and to ensure that emerging answers are widely debated. The Co-operative College wishes to explore the idea of a cooperative university and to consider in detail issues such as: governance, pedagogy, curriculum, fees and social purpose.

Such details are crucial but premature and too constrained by both the current logic of state policies towards higher education and the prevailing, powerfully supported models of the modern university. The Co-operative University will become worthy of support to the extent that it is different in its aims and in its forms of learning and research. Crucially, it will succeed to the extent that is facilitates social changes that build to support a society that is based on respect for human rights, is fair in its distribution of resources and life chances and in which human beings can flourish to the full extent of their capabilities.

Higher Education in England

For both individual citizens and governments, higher education has to have relevance for the solutions of the major problems of our times. Through research and education they are in principle well placed to do so but struggle to fulfil their promise.

Universities in the UK, in England in particular, are trapped in a number of different crises and constraints for which neither they nor the state have policies to overcome. They have not enough money. Their expansion is driven by debt. Staff morale is low. Lecture halls are crowded. Student demand remains high but satisfaction is low. The system as a whole remains stubbornly elitist. Students are mired in debt that many will never repay.

The academic model that informs the system is hardly relevant to the changing needs of either learners or the needs of society in the 21st century. Like the school system on top of which they sit, universities have become exam factories. They are managed as if they were business enterprises and the state expects them to earn their own keep in a competitive market place.

Higher education has become a commodity. Universities are not institutions that are loved; they are valued for investment returns and the occupational life chances they offer. They are restricted in their development by policies to

restrain rising levels of public expenditure and to shift the financial burden of funding them from the state (and tax payer) to learners and their families.

Over the past half-century of university expansion, the failures and weaknesses of the system have been exposed. In doing so, the outlines of a better alternative have become clearer. Were it possible to build the institutions of higher education from scratch, few would defend doing so on the basis of our current models of the university.

Against the combined weights of tradition, bureaucratic inertia and corporate power, which have penetrated deeply into what people – particularly well-represented middle class people – understand and expect higher education to be, change is difficult to achieve. Thankfully, it is not so difficult to imagine.

Firstly, there are different traditions of higher education from which to draw strength and inspiration for the future. There is a radical streak to education in Britain that is now muted that challenged prevailing ideas and values governing the organisation of economic and political life. There is a tradition of working class education that exposed the link between knowledge and power. The ideas of liberal adult education in universities and in bodies like the WEA have a continuing relevance to the cultural life of the nation but they were not robust enough to fend off the neo-liberal attacks from the state that emasculated them. Community educators, in the UK and abroad have articulated models of teaching and learning that are democratic in inspiration, inclusive and committed to strengthen the cultural and political resources of a wider society, not just the aspirations and hopes of individuals.

Much innovative work on experiential learning, distance learning, work-based learning and on new forms of accreditation of learning as well as community development practice, has taken place across higher education institutions but has not altered fundamentally their form or function. Nor has it challenged the deeply institutionalised hierarchies of status and academic excellence that stratify the system as a whole.

Despite the often-proclaimed global 'success' of UK higher education, state-funded universities are no longer unique in their ability to offer accredited higher education or to undertake research of international importance. There is a growing number of private universities, corporate universities serving the needs of particular employers and fast-growing, complex world of Think-Tanks, Research Foundations and internationally funded research programmes such as the EU Horizon programme, as well as the R@D work of commercial companies and, indeed, of public bodies and ministries, that feed the growth of knowledge. Growing distance-learning opportunities through modular online, open courses (Moocs) and the commercialisation of learning materials through the Internet have all weakened the monopoly universities once had in higher education.

The challenge for the Co-operative University is to build on the past but not to resurrect it and to forge a new future for a form of higher education radically different to the ones we currently have. It is to define a distinctive mission with

unique models of governance and curriculum to enable forms of higher education to flourish within a clear, social purpose remit.

What should higher education mean?

Higher education institutions have always produced skilled people: priests, lawyers, doctors and engineers, to name just a few. Across the world, pressure on universities to train more skilled people is intense. Training and education are not inconsistent but they do not necessarily go together.

A higher education worth the name nurtures in its students a love of learning. It sharpens and deepens their curiosity. It enables the development of critical understanding. It thrives on open, unconstrained dialogue among people and it builds the competencies to practice skills and to make a positive contribution to the collective life of society.

Given the threats facing all modern societies, especially those of climate change, economic failure, ideological radicalisation, rising levels of inequality and of conflicts of class, ethnicity and gender as well as the ever present threat of war in the world's danger zones, it has become an existential necessity for more citizens to understand and evaluate critically the decisions that are shaping their lives.

Knowledge, however, is not enough. The problems we all face require new solutions and their discovery must lead to actions and policies for change. Resolving differences of opinion about what those changes should be is the stuff of democratic politics.

Since learning is for the individual an act of discovery and as societies change, it follows that learning and education must necessarily is become lifelong processes. The development and acquisition of knowledge is reflexive; they change both individuals and organisations. In doing so, new questions, challenges and opportunities open up, that demand new learning and debate.

In the world today, both societies and knowledge develop faster than our capacity to comprehend them. A feeling of being cognitively over-whelmed is pervasive. It leads many into a strong feeling of powerlessness and many more into apathy about politics. An improved ability to learn and to adapt and to share ideas is vital both for individual wellbeing and collective survival.

These are large and complex issues for detailed debate. They prompt questions about a different model of higher education for the future. Universities in the UK and elsewhere are held tightly in the logic of a neo-liberal policies framed intentionally to promote a model of development and prosperity that benefits the few, not the many and which is dysfunctional, unjust and unsustainable. Within that framework, universities have produced high-level research of global importance. They have innovated in their teaching methods and contributed significantly to the education and training of the labour force. But they have not worked well for the benefit everyone.

They are institutions in crisis and tightly constrained to reproduce the existing orders of society rather than to change them. Despite years of political pressure, they remain elitist in their recruitment, conservative in their academic ethos and as institutions that luxuriate in their past traditions and achievements they remain difficult to change.

The characteristics that should define the new model of a Co-operative University are implicit in the criticisms that can and have been made in the past, of the present system of higher education.

The new model should nurture the development of a co-operative university that is:

- based on co-operative values: democracy, sharing, self-help and dialogue;
- voluntary, open and free;
- managed and organised on democratic principles;
- supported to enable learners to work together through research and development to solve problems in their work places, communities and societies;
- founded on local groups that are simultaneously local, national and international in their work and their reach;
- guided by the idea that knowledge and discovery should be shared;
- networked with civil society organisations and other education providers;
- self-funded and free of state controls;
- supported to encourage and enable its members to produce high quality, relevant and change-oriented research that will be shared publicly and across all members and groups in the university;
- involved with the creative cultural life of the localities in which its members live and work.

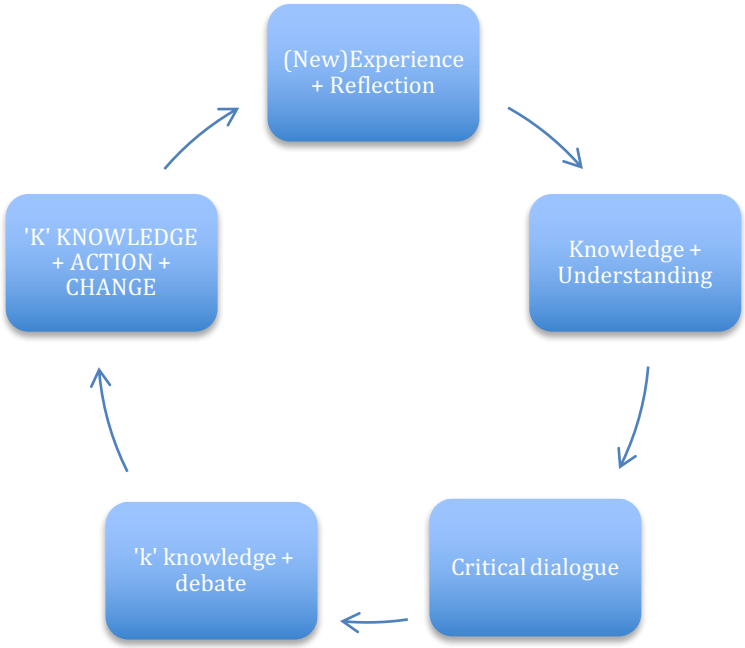
The Co-operative College could stimulate the development of the university through support of its local groups in respect of fund-raising, management and curriculum support. The college could organise an annual conference of the university and be responsible for the registration, accreditation and collaboration of local groups to ensure that their work is published and widely disseminated.

The College could help local groups draw upon volunteer resources of expertise to enable members to benefit from and strengthen the skills, experience and knowledge of people in their localities and communities. In this way, the university could strengthen the knowledge capital and agency of diverse communities of learners. It could play a key role in turning back the forces in modern society that divide communities and alienate people from politics and public life.

In my view, the underlying rationale of the Co-operative University should be on purposeful, democratically inspired social change and the discovery of better ways of bringing it about. It is emphatically not a vehicle to promote a particular political programme. Its remit should be to discover new ways of thinking about

collective problems and of disseminating its discoveries. Its role is to draw on the knowledge resources of its members and their communities, to build on what they know, on what they can discover and share and to facilitate rigorous assessment of that work through public debate.

The principles of learning to guide this work can be imagined in this formulation:



The key idea is that through dialogue people can transform personal knowledge and experience – 'k' – into public knowledge – 'K' that is made accessible to all.

Adult educators and community development specialists, including professionals in the field of human resource development, have known models like this for many years. It is a way of approaching education and personal development and social change that can be derived from the experience of civil rights movements, the women's movement, campaigns for the sustainable environment, for peace and many others. In its liberal education forms – and often in voluntary groups and local societies (including artists' colonies) - it has generated important work and discovery in creative literature, local history, archaeology and the visual arts. There is a spirit of creative collaboration and solidarity that connects the elements of this history that the Co-operative University should emulate and develop.

Formal institutions of higher education have been resistant to the application of such principles to their work. They are necessarily pre-occupied with forms accreditation of student performance, academic standards and funded research programmes that reflect the interests of those paying them. Such pressures feed the professional identities of academics and focus their innovative work on their particular areas of subject expertise. It is a model of learning and research that

contributes little to the democratisation of public life or the need for radically new ways of approaching collective problems.

The promise of the model of learning and research proposed for the Co-operative University is that it broadens out the base of expertise on which a creative higher education can rest. It is inclusive and open and strengthens democratic agency. It can catalyse the creative energies of communities and strengthen bonds of solidarity in an enriched public sphere.

Finance and Governance

In the age of austerity, scepticism about such ideals invariably focuses on money and accountability. How can such an institution be funded? Who will pay for it? How can it be governed? How can its standards and principles be measured in its results?

The Co-operative College provides the organization and framework for stimulating the growth of Co-operative University initiatives across localities where there are sufficient local members to begin the journey of discovery.

The development principle to be followed is that of national support for local initiative. National support builds from the centre to create a governing body that is elected democratically. Its remit is to work out the principles governing the formation, support and work of local groups and the best means to keep them informed of each other's activities and achievements.

Each local group will be fully open to whoever is committed to the principles and values of the university. Their work will develop through democratic debate to identify the key issues on which they will focus their learning and research. Groups will make their own decisions and seek ways to secure local funds and to work with local, civil society groups where there is mutual benefit. As groups develop in confidence and achievement they can seek resources and funds from national and/or international agencies with guarantees about the propriety of their use from arrangements and administrative and legal support from the centre.

Within the values of the university, local groups will need to work out their own charter – their foundation principles – and arrangements for the management of their work and activities and set their requirements for members to work together. Issues they are likely to address include:

- University values;
- Learning principles;
- Roles within the group;
- Links with other civil society groups;
- Diagnosis and agreement of key problems to be studied;
- Research and development plans;
- Resources, including volunteers to help with specific tasks;
- Reporting and publication of results;

- Action plans for change;
- International links.

In respect of financial resources, local groups will work out budgets for rental costs, expenses and other headings together with the means to manage funds. It might be possible, where co-operative schools and retails stores exist, to use those facilities for the work of local groups.

Communities of Discovery

In the early phases of their development, local groups will benefit from central support and advice. They will be encouraged to map and draw upon the learning resources of their communities. They may be able to encourage contributions to their work from members of other groups such as the University of the Third Age (U3A) or *pro bono* help from academics in higher education. They will surely explore the possibilities of collaborative work with other organisations such as trades unions, churches, residents' groups or health-related self-help organisations.

During these first phases it is likely that their research will take the form of careful mapping programmes to identify the key problems they wish to focus on and to consolidate and reflect upon what is already known about them. This is the phase during which members will engage actively in sharing their experiences and interests in relation to particular problems.

At later stages in their development, building on their success in producing research and actions that promise change and new developments in the areas in which the groups have been working, it may be possible to develop and seek funding for new, ambitious research and action programmes.

During each of these phases groups will be encourage to report their work - either that of the group of or individual members - and make it public for wider debate. Local, regional and national *communities of discovery* will emerge and their work will be presented at the university's annual conference or at regional meetings. The internet enables communication among local groups and access to information that would have been inconceivable only twenty tears ago.

As groups develop, they will surely build working relationships with other bodies, including existing universities and colleges and work organizations to undertake jointly mutually beneficial work along agreed pathways and within the same principles of democratic practice.

Citizen Alumni

Members of the university are free to join and to leave. Each has the right for their contribution to collective projects to be acknowledged. Each becomes an alumnus of the university and would be encouraged through newsletters and meetings to be kept involved with the work they were once part of. The alumni, the 'graduates' of the Co-operative University are not only lifelong learners; they

will be encouraged to continue their development as lifelong citizens, as people actively engaged in seeking better ways to meet collective challenges and to nurture the creativity of individuals and groups across the public sphere.

Speaking Truth to Power

The Co-operative University functions to generate and disseminate new knowledge and understanding. It can do this because it works to bring people and groups together in ways that distil and consolidate what its members have come to know.

Its local groups are not in competition with one another or with other higher education providers. Its members work together and study to develop the work of the group and the democratic aims of the university.

Individual members will, of course learn a great deal. Their acknowledged contributions to the group may benefit their careers or qualifications. As individuals they will develop new skills and capabilities, especially that of engaging creatively with the public issues that demand new approaches and solutions. The informed and active citizen is the academic ideal of the Co-operative University. Their work will contribute to a stream of analysis and debates that challenges conventional wisdom and the political power of the status quo.

In this way, the Co-operative University will seek to strengthen the open society. Its work will be reflexive in that not only will it study social change; it will enact it bringing into being further changes requiring a yet deeper understanding and further evaluation and creative adaptations. There is no end view in sight. No orthodoxies are sacrosanct, either in the realm of political ideology or religious faith. Democratic higher education of the kind represented by the Co-operative University values no authority other than principles of reasoned debate and dialogue among informed citizens with equal rights to be heard.

Conclusion

The Co-operative University is a realisable ideal. It has a rich history on which to build. The Co-operative College can provide the initial support and stimulus to encourage its growth.

It is an institution that will grow, to use the cliché, 'from the bottom up'. Its charter, governance, resources and curricula are to be discovered in and through the work of its local groups working within the democratic and internationalist charter of the institution.

During the first moments of its development, people will be needed who will nurture its development and who will provide the inspiration and support for local groups. Their task is to render their work redundant as local groups take creative control of their mission.

The Co-operative College will play a key role in organising the annual and regional conferences in which local groups will share and disseminate their work. Over time, the 'central' function will develop and change in line with the discoveries of local groups.

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