



IDEAS

TO CHANGE BRITAIN

Instilling co-operation into learning

the co-operative party

100 years of pioneering the future
1917-2017

Using this document

Our education policy document covers five key areas:

Co-operative approaches to childcare and early years 7

proposing co-operative and parent-led approaches to childcare, after school provision and Sure Start Children's Centres.

Raising school standards and accountability 11

tackling the accountability deficit in the UK's fragmented education system, from proposing alternatives to the unelected Regional Schools Commissioners, to reforming Ofsted to ensure co-operative education models are recognised and understood.

School services, youth and care 15

ensuring that young people have a voice in the way youth services are run and exploring co-operative approaches to foster care – protecting local services at a time of cuts to local government budgets.

Co-operative schools 19

championing the schools pioneering co-operative governance, curriculum and ethos, and presenting policies to ensure every school is accountable, inclusive and engaged with its community.

Co-operative further and higher education 24

embedding co-operative values and principles in further education and lifelong learning, and proposing alternatives to the marketisation of higher education with plans for a Co-operative University.

An introduction to the Co-operative Party's 2017 policy process

The Party's policy process 2017 focused on two specific areas of policy – housing and education. This was driven by the views of conference 2016 and agreed by the NEC policy sub-committee. The reasoning behind the focus on these two areas in particular were:

- Recent shifts in wider UK public policy and government approach to these areas;
- The shifts in the nature of approach being pursued by devolved governments and regions;
- The strong local government focus of the Party and of the policy areas;
- Finally, Conference and the sub-committee's view that these were such important areas to improving society that the Co-operative Party needed as good and up to date a policy platform as possible.

The policy sub-committee produced two consultation documents on housing and education which included the existing Co-operative Party platform. Local and Regional parties, individuals and co-operative organisations were asked to comment on the consultation documents and existing platform. Alongside this the policy sub-committee posed four separate consultation questions which sought to gather individual experiences of the policy areas from around the country. The policy sub-committee hoped that this approach would encourage a larger number of individual contributors than in previous years, as well as helping to locate the new document in personal experience.

Following the launch of the consultation documents, a range of activity led to the generation of policy contributions, including:

- Nationally organised policy phone conference
- Wide range of regional and branch meetings
- Nationally organised local consultation meetings
- Meetings of self-organising networks within the Party such as the Women's Network
- Nationally driven email and social media support and promotions
- Meetings with subject area experts, organisations and charities

The policy sub-committee has issued the feedback documents alongside the report of the individual responses. These have shaped this new policy platform document on education, which will be discussed at conference and accepted by members following the final policy debate and during the policy sub-committee report back to conference.

These policy papers are 'living documents' which can be amended and expanded to take account of changing circumstances and environment. They are available to view and download at [party.coop/publications](#)

Who got involved

The policy sub-committee received over a hundred responses on the two policy areas, as outlined in the process. The policy sub-committee have now reviewed the responses and provided individual feedback to the organisations and Party units outlining where their suggestions have been incorporated into the final policy document to be discussed at conference.

The individual responses which focused mainly on local experience have been collated and a written report of their common themes and concerns has been provided. The policy sub-committee used these individual experiences and submissions to ensure that our proposed new policy platform reflected their concerns and wants.

Foreword

Education is embedded in the co-operative movement's founding principles, from educating members and employees, to inspiring new generations of co-operators. Co-operative values and principles - of participation, equal access to good education, concern for the community, and co-operation between co-operatives – continue to be relevant today. The Co-operative Party believes the UK's education sectors, from early years to lifelong learning, work best when our values and principles are put into practice. This paper sets out the Party's approach to putting co-operation at the heart of our education system.

Education is a devolved issue, and we recognise different approaches and structures are in place in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland regarding the delivery of educational services. Where applicable, this document has taken account of the different systems of education that exist around the UK. National and regional parties will continue to develop tailored policy. For example, in the coming months, the Scottish Co-operative Party will be looking at these policy areas in greater depth.

Education is at its best when schools, parents, students and communities work together, and when they are part of the decision-making process. This approach is at the heart of co-operative education: schools and youth services supporting children to feel valued and to take responsibility for themselves and their communities; childcare which involves and includes parents and staff; further and higher education which treats students as learners and active participants, not consumers; and a profession in which staff feel valued and rewarded for their contribution.

Today, education can too often be characterised by fragmentation and competition, rather than collaboration. For example, in England, academisation has resulted in a fragmented school system, where the profit motive and the role of private organisations has grown at the expense of the involvement of, and accountability to, local communities

and elected representatives. Similarly, in higher education, the marketisation of the sector, as it is opened up to new providers, sees students as consumers and universities as competitive businesses.

Meanwhile, across the sector, the pace of change and cuts to core funding have created serious concerns for parents, pupils and professionals. Further education institutions warn of a looming funding crisis and communities across the country are coming together to protest cuts to school budgets. This impacts childcare too, where reduced funding and increasing demand for places puts many independent and not-for-profit providers at risk, further leaving the market open to commercialisation by big for-profit chains.

As England undergoes one of the most radical restructurings of the education system since the 1944 Education Act, co-operative approaches are being pioneered with a great degree of success, showing that a better way is possible in hundreds of primary, secondary and special co-operative schools - be it through their curriculum, their ethos and pedagogy, or their governance structures. The Co-operative Party believes that applying co-operative values at a local level ensures better outcomes for young people and learners, and meaningful community involvement, despite the current climate for the sector.

And co-operation in education is not limited to schools. There is rich heritage and leadership shown within local authority and community collaboration, early years' provision and a potential for further development within Further and Higher Education.

Co-operative approaches to childcare and early years

British parents pay more for childcare than almost any other developed country, with couples contributing on average a third of their salary for pre-school care.¹

And while childcare costs are prohibitively high across the country, in London the situation is amplified, with a part time nursery place costing parents in the capital 36% more than elsewhere in Britain.

Conversely, the sector is one of the lowest waged. Wages have stagnated below inflation in the sector, with increasing numbers of employees paid the minimum wage, while the costs for parents has consistently risen faster than the rate of inflation. On average, early years professionals earn less than half the median hourly wage of qualified teachers².

Government policy has commercialised the childcare sector, with the majority of provision in England now from profit maximising businesses. Larger nursery chains buy up smaller and independent nurseries, and as a result, parents are increasingly seen as consumers rather than participants, with limited choice of provider or voice in their children's care. This homogenisation of the sector brings additional risks – in Australia a lack of oversight and scrutiny of the sector saw ABC Learning buying up small nurseries and establishing significant market

¹ Compared to the OECD average of 15% of net family income - see <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/doc-server/download/8116131e.pdf?Expires=1502193345&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=2EA8D2F04FF5055834CA39A4D256CE1>

² <http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1159248/early-years-pay-and-conditions-survey-2016>

dominance. In the financial crash, the business went bust and 18,000 children¹ were left without childcare overnight.

Rather than better funding early years care, the Conservative Government's policies are putting it under further strain. Nurseries are expected to make savings, which, in a sector where about 80%² of running costs are staff salaries, further depresses wages. The doubling of free childcare in England to thirty hours is a good policy on paper as parents desperately need intervention to make the service more affordable – however its implementation is putting the sustainability of the sector at risk as the government funding per free hour doesn't cover the providers' costs, and means nurseries with high demand for free provision become loss-making.

Furthermore, the reduction in the range and number of services provided by Sure Start in some areas, and the closure of many Sure Start children's centres elsewhere, is hugely concerning. More than 350 Sure Start children's centres have closed in England since 2010, with only eight new centres opening over that period. The Co-operative Party believes that investment in early years should be a priority.

Ideas

Co-operative nurseries

Co-operative nurseries are showing that there is a better way to deliver high quality, affordable childcare. There are already different models and examples showing how the movement can offer an alternative to the profit-maximising sector – taking longer-term approaches to investing in improvements, embedding co-operative values in the delivery of care, and involving parents in a much more active way in their children's pre-schooling.

¹ <https://www.ppbadvisory.com/experience/abc-childcare-and-learning-centres-avoiding-a-childcare-crisis>

² https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2015/10/The_cost_of_providing_childcare_analysis_of_respons-es.pdf

For example, over 60% of parents at the Co-operative Childcare are members of the co-operative, so receive a share of the profits – which worked out at a 3% discount in 2011 or over £150 per year¹.

At the other end of the spectrum, small parent-led co-operatives opening up in communities where there is a lack of affordable childcare or where parents are looking for a greater involvement in their children's care are a growing trend. For example, Grasshoppers in the Park nursery in Hackney was set up by parents who all have a say in how the nursery is run and can reduce their fees by contributing time and skills, from storytelling and laundry to maintaining the website.

However, new entrants to a childcare market dominated by big profit-maximising companies struggle with a number of barriers – including access to premises and high upfront costs. The lack of competition in the sector, and further barriers to entry, should form part of a review by the Competition Markets Authority, and further appropriate steps should be taken to rebalance the market.

In the meantime, the Government should create a co-operative childcare catalyst fund to provide start-up loans so that co-operative and parent-led nurseries can access premises and employ the staff required to get Ofsted approval to open. Local authorities should be supported to work with existing childcare providers to encourage them to explore co-operative models, as Edinburgh Council, a co-operative council, did by working with after-school and daycare providers to access funding and advice on becoming co-operatives, and to create the After School Club Co-operative Charter².

Some co-operative nurseries also report a lack of understanding of co-operative approaches from Ofsted. This means the positive impact of greater contribution and involvement of parents is not recognised and rewarded. Training for Ofsted inspectors should include co-operative approaches to early years provision.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/social-enterprise-network/2012/jun/07/cooperative-childcare-private-equity-nurseries>

² http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/news/article/1540/new_co-operative_charter_to_boost_childcare

Sure Start and Flying Start

Sure Start children's centres are one of the last Labour Government's finest achievements, and they should remain at the forefront of endeavours to transform the way services are delivered for young children and their families in England. We believe the reduction in the range and number of services provided by Sure Start in some areas, due to cuts to local authority budgets, has been damaging.

More can be done to give communities a sense of ownership and involvement in the remaining Sure Start services to improve services and empower parents who use them. Community ownership can help remove barriers and develop trust, so that the organisation is accessible to people who otherwise would be less likely to use the services.

The UK and devolved governments should recognise the advantages of the 'community mutual' model for Sure Start, and work to ensure the development of the model. In particular, consideration should be given to converting existing Sure Start/Flying Start centres to the 'community mutual' model, as well as using it as a model for the provision of new services.

Raising school standards

We believe that when schools work together they are better able to share best practice and support each other to improve. While the reality of the current educational system in England is that the local authority role has been severely restricted, co-operative schools are coming together into co-operative cluster arrangements to provide mutual support; procure back office services and resources; and share expertise.

No young person deserves an inadequate education. However, the Conservative Government's approach to ensuring that underperforming schools improve is to reduce the role of the local authority and push through academisation. The assumption behind the Education and Adoption Act 2017 is that local authorities are not capable of helping schools to improve – but Ofsted ratings show the reverse is true, and that sponsored academies are more likely to become, and stay, inadequate than maintained schools.

We also believe that the mechanisms for evaluating school performance are out-of-date and unaccountable. Ofsted lacks an understanding of the value of co-operative approaches to education, and fails to scrutinise the new school structures to the level needed. And by replacing representative local authorities with unelected Regional Schools Commissioners, the Government has created a worrying accountability deficit.

Ideas

Collaborative approaches to school improvement

Working collaboratively helps to avoid duplication and raise standards, by allowing school leaders to better focus on the effective leadership of teaching and learning and enabling best practice to be shared.

Many of the co-operative trusts established in the last year in England are clusters of primary schools, sharing responsibility for working with all schools in the trust. Increasingly school improvement is becoming a priority of the national network of co-operative schools, the Schools Co-operative Society.

Schools should also be enabled to work together to procure back office services and resources such as SEN and school improvement support, as happens with successful co-operative cluster arrangements, and exam boards should be publicly owned or not-for-profit with a strong public service ethos.

The Government should enable collaboration for school improvement via co-operative models by encouraging more co-operative trust schools to become academy sponsors, enabling them to formally support other co-operative schools. There should also be support for the development of school improvement co-operatives like the ones created in Leeds and Manchester.

Accountability and governance

As exemplified in Scotland and Wales, local authorities should continue to have a role in planning school places, fair funding, managing admissions, the care of excluded and vulnerable children, and providing additional support to schools. Education should be not-for-profit and not part of a profit-making market system. Our children and their education is too important to be left to the market.

Under the new school system in England, this accountability deficit is typified by the introduction of Regional Schools Commissioners – created to oversee academies and free schools. Instead of complementing the role of the local authority, these unelected positions have replaced local representatives' roles and gained additional powers. Now, oversight and scrutiny sits with just eight Regional Schools Commissioners rather than the hundreds of local authorities, and no democratic structures for education at a regional level still exist¹.

The Co-operative Party believes that Regional Schools Commissioners and the Head Teacher Boards that support them are undemocratic and unaccountable education structures. All schools in receipt of public funding should be accountable to publicly elected bodies – the role of local authorities in schools oversight and governance should be restored and directly elected mayors should have strategic oversight of education in their regions.

Reform of Ofsted

Ofsted plays a key role in improving standards in schools, nurseries and other providers of care for young people. However, the watchdog is in need of overhaul to guarantee consistency, ensure better understanding of co-operative approaches to education, and to ensure academy sponsors and chains are subject to greater scrutiny. There should also be a formal role for peer review so that schools can collaborate to help each other to improve and share best practice.

Currently, Ofsted is able to inspect but not judge the chains and trusts running academies. The Co-operative Academies Trust has invited Ofsted to inspect them – and we agree that all trusts should be open to scrutiny. The performance, motivations and governance of the organisations who ultimately own and run our schools should be subject to rigorous monitoring to enable proper accountability. The Co-operative Party proposes reform of the powers of Ofsted so that they can have proper oversight of academy trusts and sponsors.

¹ <https://www.teachers.org.uk/edufacts/regional-schools-commissioners>

“ “We are particularly concerned that large, national MATs are not transparent and can be dominated by business interest, leading to schools being run as profit making businesses.”

SOUTH WEST PENINSULA CO-OPERATIVE PARTY COUNCIL

Ofsted should also gain a better understanding of co-operative approaches to education. Currently, some schools and nurseries report a lack of knowledge of the sector, resulting in the greater participation of students, staff and parents not being properly recognised compared to non-co-operative models. Co-operative models in education should form part of the training for all Ofsted inspectors.

School services, youth and care

Education is not confined to the classroom – and services provided outside schools and nurseries also play an important role in the development of young people, such as care, catering, child and adult mental health, and play services.

Many of these services are provided by the local authority or NHS, and are facing serious cuts to funding. This impacts young people's ability to access the services they need, and puts additional pressure on schools and teachers to meet the gap left by reductions in services. The Co-operative Party is clear that for our youth services to remain effective, they must be properly financed by central government in a way that ensures funding is linked to need.

“ *It is now apparent that spending cuts to local services and government programmes already hit young people disproportionately. As councils drove ahead to shed services in face of major budget cuts, throughout the UK youth clubs and projects, young people's volunteering schemes and range of voluntary led youth programmes have all been lost. At the centre of all there were hundreds of thousands of young people.”*

CO-OPERATIVE PARTY MEMBER IN WEST SUSSEX

Co-operative approaches provide better ways of working, whether it is mutual models to continue to deliver important services, or structures which ensure users and staff have a voice in the way services are designed and commissioned.

Ideas

Youth services

While the role of local councils in school provision is being diminished, councils are still responsible for a wide range of other services for young people.

Young people must be given the ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and we believe that co-operative approaches offer important lessons for the delivery of youth services through applying principles of participation, co-operation and self-help. Furthermore, being involved in the development of services gives young people a range of transferable skills from an understanding about budgets to project management experience. For example, Lambeth Council set up the Young Lambeth Co-op, a youth organisation that allows young Lambeth residents to join as members, and to choose and commission services.

Co-operative approaches to school support services

Following the decision of the last government to hand budgets for school meals from councils to individual schools, Labour-led Plymouth City Council worked with schools to pool resources and create a new local authority trading co-operative company, CATERed.

49% owned by 67 schools and 51% owned by the Council, CATERed operates on the basis of one school, one vote. It enables schools to protect the service by pooling budgets, increase employment opportunities, and ensure local sourcing arrangements.¹

The Co-operative Party believes that when services are under threat from cuts to local authority budget cuts, or when the local authority decides to externalise a service, there should be a 'right to try' for

¹ <http://www.educateringmagazine.co.uk/news/2015-06-04-school-meal-co-op>

employees, service users and the wider community, giving them the option and a timeframe of six months to consider taking over the service by establishing a co-operative or social enterprise.

When services are moved outside the local authority they should be 'asset locked' to ensure that assets of all types (including any surpluses) are locked within the organisation or transferred to another asset locked organisation on winding up. This is critical to preventing asset stripping or demutualisation as occurred with the building societies in the 1980s and 1990s.

Supporting teachers' co-operatives

The overwhelming majority of supply teachers deliver their work through agencies and umbrella companies. These organisations can be exploitative for the teachers using them and expensive for the schools employing them.

The government should support supply teachers and other freelance or peripatetic staff in the sector, such as music specialists, educational psychologists and SEN professionals, to organise into co-operatives. For example, Swindon Music Co-operative was set up by music teachers following Swindon Borough Council's decision to close down its instrument teaching service. Similarly, First Call Supply Teachers Co-op provides an alternative for supply teachers who are otherwise dependent on commercial agencies.

However, First Call have had difficulty in obtaining status as a teachers' agency from local authorities and face stiff competition from big players who use their market dominance to offer uncompetitive incentives to organisations using their services. The government has a key role to play in removing the barriers to recognition of alternative structures such as these by local authorities and academies, and by reviewing monopolistic behaviour by players in this market.

Foster care

Foster care is increasingly a market dominated by private agencies who charge councils to be able to place children with their foster carers. Between 1999 and 2014, over 3,000 registered independent foster care agencies were set up, creating a fragmented service. This makes it expensive for councils, as many are for-profit companies where money is spent on dividends rather than on the service. Between 2014-15, eight commercial providers made around £41 million in profits¹, at a time when local authority budgets are increasingly under strain from budget cuts.

Co-operative models, where staff are members with a say in how the service is run and a stake in the organisation's success, provide an accountable alternative to the for-profit approach, as demonstrated by the Foster Care Co-operative².

Scotland leads the way in tackling this issue, and have made it illegal for commercial for-profit firms to provide foster care. The Co-operative Party believes this should become the case across the rest of the UK to ensure public spending is focused on the best possible outcomes for young people in care rather than shareholder profits.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2016/jan/11/why-let-fostering-agencies-profit-caring-children>

² <https://www.fostercarecooperative.co.uk/>

Co-operative schools

The co-operative movement has a long heritage in education – in the 1900s, the Rochdale Pioneers set up a school, and today that legacy continues. In the last ten years, a growing number of co-operative schools and places of education in England have offered an alternative vision of learning to the increasingly fragmented and commercialised sector that has been created over the last decade.

It is a vision of learning founded on co-operative values and principles. Co-operative Schools place a high emphasis on schools, teachers, students and the community working together to provide the best environment they can for young people, based on improving learning outcomes through co-operation rather than competition.

However, the wider education sector faces a growing number of challenges. Real-term cuts in school budgets threaten school standards and significant cuts to wider services such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), multi-disciplinary early years provision, housing support, and wider local government services, put additional stress on budgets and workloads.



The greatest concern for our Member schools at the moment is without doubt the extent of planned level of real-term cuts in school budgets. What is needed is a realistic recognition by central Government that public funding in education must be maintained if as a nation we are to ensure future generations have the skills and capability to fulfil their potential. "

The pressure for schools to accept voluntary or forced conversion to academy structures continues to create uncertainty in the sector, and pushes schools to adopt structures which are unaccountable through reducing the ability of local councillors to monitor and ending any control by the local authority. The role of profit-making business in education has grown – in the guise of providers of free schools, academy sponsors and outsourced contracts.

The Co-operative Party believes that the focus of the education system should be first and foremost on improving learning – and that the only way to deliver this for students, parents and staff is through properly funded not-for-profit institutions working co-operatively, situated at the heart of local communities, run in the public interest.

Ideas

Enable schools to adopt co-operative structures

Co-operative schools remain one way of ensuring that local communities have a say in the education that is provided for their young people. This creates a powerful relationship and the young people who are educated by them will be influenced to become active, values-driven citizens.

In England, there are hundreds of co-operative schools remaining, spanning most types of school, and they must be empowered to be at the vanguard of demonstrating the benefits of co-operation to their pupils.

Co-operative schools are state-maintained primary, secondary and special schools which sign up to co-operative values and principles. They have:

- A co-operative governance structure including a multi-stakeholder membership model giving a voice to parents, staff, student and the local community. We recognise that this won't be possible for all

co-operative schools, however, as some academies are required to adopt standards governance articles for technical reasons in line with particular government sponsor academies policy

- A co-operative ethos – driven by the co-operative values and principles
- Adopted a co-operative dimension to the curriculum and use teaching and learning methodologies which emphasise team goals, individual accountability, equal participation and co-construction
- A commitment to engagement with and accountability to their wider communities

Legislation should be amended so that all mainstream state funded schools and Further Education colleges in England can establish co-operative governance structures should they wish to.

In particular, the Co-operative Party believes that the Education and Inspections Act 2006 should be amended to enable co-operative schools to legally form under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Society Act 2014. It should also allow nursery schools to become co-operative trusts and to join co-operative clusters.

Existing charity law should be reviewed to ensure that the co-operative trust model is able to develop in as democratic and participative a manner as possible, as well as enabling schools to benefit from international associations.

Case studies

St Clere's Co-operative Academies Trust

In 2012, St Clere's secondary school and three primaries that comprised a local foundation trust converted into the first multi-academy trust in the country to incorporate co-operative articles of association. They have since sponsored additional primary schools and welcomed another secondary school to join the partnership.

The ethos of all schools in the Trust is centred on the Co-operative Values. Their CEO (a Local Leader of Education) says;

"by providing support to each other with these values in mind, we aim to improve educational standards in our schools and the local area so that every pupil can reach their full potential. We believe that it is a sense of shared responsibility – in which everybody has a vested interest and the opportunity to play their part – that will transform education in our community."

The Trust collaborates with other local primary and secondary schools including in jointly running a Sixth Form Centre.

Each school has a pupil council and representatives from each school meet to discuss cross-phase issues including transition. Pupils are supported to be active learners, capable of being tomorrow's leaders.

The Learning Trust for Excellence

Co-operative Trust schools are foundation schools that have a charitable trust to support them. A trust can have just one school, but the most common configuration is for a group of schools that have already worked in collaboration to form a shared trust to strengthen their partnership.

The Learning Trust for Excellence (LTE) comprises seven forward thinking schools based in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham. They are all primary schools, but they have included partners within their Trust from HE, secondary schools and the charitable sector.

Having worked well together in the past, the collaboration was formally established with a view to inspiring excellence and furthering opportunity for all.

By forming a Co-operative Trust each school retains its individual autonomy and Governing Body while at the same time collaborating in

what the schools describe as “exciting opportunities for pupils, staff and wider community created through the power of collaboration.

Mixed stakeholder models in education

Communities, parents, students and teachers should be at the heart of our education system and involved in decision making in all schools. Therefore, parent teacher associations should become mandatory in all mainstream schools and each should have responsibility for appointing at least one third of school governors. Schools should provide numeracy, literacy and IT for parents, to enable them to better support their children and take part in running their school.

Every school should also be required to have an elected body for students, which will play an important role in setting its ethos and overall direction. Democratic student, parents and teacher organisations, and school governors, should be given the proper support to ensure they are able to articulate and guard the principles of co-operation. This will safeguard the long-term health of the school and increase the number of co-operators in our movement.

Co-operation on the curriculum

A failure to educate students and pupils in co-operative action and governance continues throughout the education system, which is holding back a new generation of co-operators. Co-operation helps to shape active, conscientious citizens, as well as being a better way of doing business.

This must be addressed through co-operative studies where appropriate on business courses and syllabuses, and through inclusion of the co-operative values and principles on the citizenship education national curriculum. Teacher training should include a module on co-operative values and principles to ensure those delivering the classes are well-versed and able to inspire pupils.

Co-operative further and higher education

The co-operative movement has much to offer post-16 education. At a time when the Conservative Government's policy is encouraging greater competition, the development of co-operative approaches seeks to demonstrate that the best education is provided when students, staff and institutions work together to ensure high quality teaching and learning.

In both further and higher education, reductions to funding are putting strain on the quality and variety of courses on offer, and fee-paying university students are increasingly treated as consumers in a commercialised market. The Co-operative Party believes that colleges and universities should be properly funded, and able to refocus on learning, with staff and students involved in decision-making about fees, executive pay and course design.

We also believe that learning should be open and accessible to everyone, at every stage of life. The Co-operative movement was founded on the principles of education of its members and the wider community, and we believe that workplaces, colleges, universities, communities and online courses should provide accessible learning opportunities.

Ideas

Co-operative university

The UK's university system has undergone significant change, and co-operative values and principles seem very far removed from the increasingly competitive, marketised system created by recent government policy. Universities are under increased funding pressure, putting many degree courses under threat. Meanwhile, fee-paying students are taking on greater financial burdens but are treated increasingly as consumers rather than active participants in their higher education.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 seeks to further encourage competition, making it easier for groups interested in providing higher education to gain degree-awarding powers. While the Co-operative Party is concerned about the detrimental impact this looks set to have on the sector, we are strongly supportive of work being led by the Co-operative College to explore developing a co-operative university. This would provide an alternative to those universities whose focus is increasingly on profit. Much like the Mondragon University in the Basque Country in Spain, the model seeks to involve students and staff in decision-making, from fees to academic salaries, and in developing their own learning.



The co-operative model is a real alternative because it is based on a different legal, governance and management structure, challenging the corporate business model with a framework organised around workers' ownership and democracy, as well as social solidarity."

CILLA ROSS, THE CO-OPERATIVE COLLEGE

Student voice in higher education regulation

As the higher education sector is deregulated, the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 also creates a new Office for Students, designed to regulate, fund, ensure quality, and widen participation of universities. While this new public body seeks to “put the student interest at its heart”, no students are represented on its board or have a role in decision-making. It is current students who are best placed to understand their experiences, represent the interests of their peers, and shape what more needs to be done to improve higher education.

The Co-operative Party is concerned that the office supposed to represent the interests of students fails to have any student representation and proposes reforms to this body which ensure that student representatives have at least one place reserved on the board and that the hiring panel for the appointment of senior roles like chair and chief executive should involve students.

Co-operative studies

The Co-operative Party supports the development of courses focusing on the co-operative economy, and believes that the co-operative economy should feature on the curriculum for other relevant higher and further education courses, such as business studies, politics, economics and geography.

For example, the University of Edinburgh, in partnership with the University of St Andrews, have created an online course focused on the co-operative economy alternative. The central questions of the course are:

- What would happen if workers ran their own firms?
- Would worker-managed firms take the same decisions as their capitalist counterparts?

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chief-executive-of-new-office-for-students-announced>

- Could such an economy be efficient?
- What policies could be deployed to promote a co-operative sector?

The outline for the course explains 'There is widespread interest around the world in co-operatives as an alternative to the capitalist corporation, particularly since the financial crash of 2008. Economics and other social sciences can focus and sharpen the debate on co-operatives. Having taken the course, students will be better placed to participate in public discussion on co-operatives, or to join a co-operative or even start a new one'

Co-operative business practice and management courses should be developed too. Much as the Building Societies Association has worked with Loughborough University to develop a master's programme to cultivate future leaders of the mutual finance sector, co-operative business management courses would train the next generation of co-operative managers.

Further education

The further education and skills sector is under significant financial strain and faces policy instability. Its vital role in providing technical, community and vocational training is at risk, and many colleges have been forced to close.

“ *Further Education colleges can no longer make up gaps left by schooling because they have not got funding by 'incorporated status'.”*

SOUTHERN AND SOUTH EASTERN CO-OPERATIVE PARTY

The Co-operative Party believes that the further education sector needs to be properly funded if the UK is going to meet the looming skills gaps in many of our industries. Further education colleges are an important enabler of social mobility, and must be supported to ensure that our

workforce is well trained – ready and able to take on the changing world of work and access good quality jobs. Furthermore, we believe technical and vocational qualifications, and apprenticeships, should have parity of esteem with the traditional academic routes.

Further education colleges should be inclusive of and accountable to their staff, students and wider communities, through governance structures that ensure their active participation and an elected student body.

Apprenticeships are another key facet of post-16 learning, and the Co-operative Party is pleased that co-operative businesses lead the way on apprenticeships. We support the work of the Co-operative College in creating a co-operative apprenticeship programme.

Lifelong learning

The co-operative movement seeks to promote lifelong learning, providing education, training and information to its members and communities. Scotmid Co-operative, for example, has an academy¹ for their staff, ensuring access to ongoing training and development in the workplace.

The Co-operative Party believes education should be accessible and affordable to people at every stage of their life. New technologies, on the one hand, make this a more realistic prospect – but cuts in funding to educational institutions puts pressure on their ability to deliver it. The number of adults in further education has declined by around 800,000 over the past five years, while part-time university students are down 44% and mature students down 29% since 2008-09².

Universities and colleges, as referenced in our recent publication “6 Steps to Build Community Wealth”, are important anchor institutions

¹ <http://www.scotmid.coop/careers/the-academy/>

² <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/blog/Pages/Lifelong-learning-is-back-in-focus-how-do-we-rise-to-the-challenge.aspx>

across every region of the UK, and should be engaged and empowered to play a more active role in their local communities and economies. We believe that this should include actively widening access to learning opportunities, funded through the UK's industrial strategy. It should be delivered collaboratively between local authorities, local health organisations, local learning institutions and employers. Schools also have an important role to play, and should offer numeracy, literacy and IT for parents, to enable them to better support their children and take part in running their school.

Apprenticeships, as an important part of learning, should be open to all – not just young people but throughout lifetimes to enable people to re-enter the workplace or upskill. The Co-operative Funeralcare leads in this area, for example, with apprentices joining the businesses aged 18 to 67, some undergoing a career change and others entering the workplace for the first time¹. The Co-operative Party believes this best practice should be encouraged, helped with some additional flexibility introduced to the Apprenticeship Levy so that employers can spend it on more diverse programmes.

¹ <https://www.thenews.coop/105026/sector/community/coop-funeralcare-1500-apprentice/>

politics for people

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