Co-operative Higher Education

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The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 marks a paradigm shift in Higher Education in England. At the core of this shift is the status of students as consumers, the reduced independence and autonomy of universities, as well as opening up the sector to new higher education providers. These new providers will be granted immediate degree awarding powers, which will be monitored on a probationary basis.

There is an implication within the Higher Education and Research Act that these providers will support the competitive business model approach. However, there is nothing within the current legislation that would preclude a more radical form of university from being established: a co-operative university, based not on markets and privatisation but on collaboration and co-operation.

There is strong synergy and shared heritage between the values of the co-operative movement and academic values: sharing, collaboration, open membership, democratic member control, autonomy and independence, concern for community and the power and importance of education (Realising the Co-operative University, Dan Cook, 2013). 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.

The University of Mondragon in the Basque Country in Spain is an example of a well-established co-operative university and offers one model on which a new co-operative university in the UK could be developed. A new co-operative university can build on the success of the schools co-operative movement with more than 800 schools in the UK gaining co-operative status since 2006.  This network, the third largest in the country (behind the faith based schools) shows there is an alternative to the state versus private sector approach towards the delivery of public services. It can be a pathway to learning for a better society.

A co-operative attitude already informs the section of the Bill which proposes a Sharia compliant model of student finance. This alternative financial model is constructed on the secular principles of co-operation, communal interest, equality of benefit and mutuality.

The co-operative principle for higher education has been the focus of recent research undertaken by academics at the University of Lincoln ‘Beyond Private and Public – a framework for co-operative higher learning’ (Neary and Winn 2017), funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation; as well as their ongoing research on ‘Co-operative Leadership for Higher Education’, funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This type of alternative co-operative provision is not simply a matter of different management and governance structures, but is based on a fundamentally different view on the nature of the state in capitalism. The free market view is that the state intervention should be reduced to a minimum, although paradoxically strong regulation is needed in order to facilitate marketization. This is very evident in the new Higher Education and Research Act. For those who defend public education the state is a neutral arbiter that can be put to use for the defence of the public good.

The history of the co-operative movement in the UK is that it has never been incorporated within a statist model, but is international in its outlook and orientation, containing within it the possibility of generating a new form of social life which is close to the idea of the commons or commonwealth as a definition of public provision. The co-operative movement does not depend on the state, indeed its ideal expression requires its dissolution and replacement with new forms of human association not grounded in models of political society.

If that sounds utopian, that is the point. In a hostile climate where radical debate is being shut down it is vital to develop new critical imaginaries based on radical academic histories and traditions that inform the co-operative movement. We would anticipate working towards a co-operative model of higher education which is genuinely inclusive, creative, relevant, challenging and driven by rigour and critical thinking.

The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) offers the possibility to carry out this radical re-imagining within the proposed new legislative framework. This can be taken forward most effectively by using the collective lobbying power of the co-operative movement and its institutions in the UK as part of a group that could include, along with the Co-operative College, the Co-operative Party and Co-operatives UK.

The inclusion of co-operative practices and principles in the new Higher Education legislation might not change the corporate logic on which it is based, but it will remind law-makers and those who wish to create new universities that another world is possible, built not on capitalist values but as part of a co-operative commonwealth.

The Co-operative College has started exploring a model for the creation of a co-operative university. A Co-operative University Working Group (CUWG)[[2]](#footnote-2) has been created after a process of consultation with different partners from the Higher Education sector. The broad purpose of the group is to explore a) a federated co-operative university model b) how the Co-operative College might work towards acquiring degree awarding powers as a secondary co-operative.

To this end we are:

* Considering likely demand for a co-operative university
* Producing a draft proposal/institutional design for a federated co-operative university
* Developing a business plan for a co-operative university
* Designing a set of principles and considering other associated outputs
* Considering how the Co-operative College might acquire degree awarding powers
* Considering quality assurance for co-operative higher education

We would like to propose that the Co-operative Party and its members agrees to adopt the promotion and support of co-operative higher education as part of its education policy.

1. <http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/27564/> & <http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/26917/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.co-op.ac.uk/our-work/researching-co-operatives/co-operative-university-working-group-cuwg/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)