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Cooperatives and business schools: Why the disconnect?

Management Learning

1–19

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq**Olga Kuznetsova**

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Abstract

Business schools are not neutral purveyors of teaching and research about how to organise. More often than not, they sell a very particular form of knowledge and act as outlets for a form of life in which a cooperative economy is ignored. Using international evidence, our article shows that cooperatives lack adequate intellectual presence in academia in research or education. We explore the disconnect between academia and the cooperative economy in a search for explanations and justifications. Our analysis suggests that this state of affairs denies the cooperative sector an opportunity to both address its skill shortages and acquire the organisational capabilities needed to boost the impact of cooperative enterprises. Equally important, this normalises the situation where business schools can continue to ignore alternative business models. We conclude by suggesting that there would be societal and scholarly gains from accepting the cooperative sector as a legitimate and valuable constituent of any modern economy, and that this should be reflected in the teaching and research of business schools.

Keywords

Alternative organising, business education, business schools, cooperatives

Introduction

In 2013, the news broke that one of the larger banks in the UK, the Co-operative Bank, had a shortfall in its capital of about £1.5 billion, putting it at the brink of collapse. Much of the blame centred on the incompetence of the directors. Rob Harrison, editor of *Ethical Consumer* magazine and an activist for the ‘Save Our Bank’ campaign, argued that the implementation of cooperative principles in the management of mutual societies was predominantly a question of training and education:

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‘You need to spend lots of money on training people because they aren’t necessarily going to turn up with all you need to manage a complicated company. And for me it would be far better to look at what is in place to train members to be effective directors’ (*The Guardian*, 23 November 2013).

The Co-operative Bank story with its revelations of management incompetence was an early impetus for our interest in the relationship between business educators and cooperatives (hereafter coops). These are organisations that the International Cooperative Alliance – the apex coop organisation – defines as ‘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’ (International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), n.d.(a)). Our interest was spurred further by evidence in the literature that people in coops have a lower education level than their counterparts in stock companies (Chevallier, 2011; Fiordelisi et al., 2023; Pestana Barros and Gomes Santos, 2003). It was also clear to us that there is a lack of educational programmes about and/or for coops offered by business schools, and coops are neglected in management and economics textbooks and research programmes (Kalmi, 2007; Parker, 2018).

The lack of collaboration between academia and coops has been highlighted as a matter of concern not only in academic literature (e.g. Adler, 2016; Mangan, 2019; Parker et al., 2014). When declaring 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives, the United Nations (UN, 2013) emphasised the importance of enlisting the academic community to mainstream the coop business model in order to facilitate the spread of humanistic values, encouraging societal gains from organisational pluralism and participatory economic democracy. However, 10 years later, in its 2023 report, the UN General Assembly, while praising the contribution of coops to social development across the world, acknowledged that there was still insufficient knowledge about, and education provision for, the coop business model (UN, 2023). We agree, and in this article argue that the disconnect also permits business schools to ignore alternative business models which, according to the UN, are particularly suited to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In neglecting coops, business schools may be failing to fulfil their responsibilities to society as centres of learning, training and research by focusing on certain organisational configurations while ignoring others.

Our evidence in this article suggests that the single most important non-mainstream business model, the coop enterprise, is currently absent in most business schools most of the time. It seems to us that if business schools want to be more than ‘just an ideologically driven finishing school’ (Parker, 2018: 131) than they need to expand their horizons to incorporate forms of ownership and control which are currently relegated to the periphery of their interests, and stop graduating students who are unaware of organisations with democratic structures. This resonates with increasingly strident demands that business schools should try harder to become laboratories for pro-social economics, activist scholarship and critical pedagogy with implications for helping businesses and communities tackle urgent social and environmental challenges (Gray, 2023; Örténblad and Koris, 2023; Prieto et al., 2021).

There are considerable gains from accepting the coop sector as a legitimate and valuable constituent of a modern economy and reflecting this in the teaching and research of business schools, and it is a good time to do this. The 2024 Labour government in the UK, where we are based, pledged to double the size of the coop and mutual economy. At the same time, the UN has asked member states to leverage the socio-economic impact of coops as a part of their second International Year of Cooperatives action with its theme for 2025 being ‘Co-operatives build a better world’ (International Year of Cooperatives (IYC2025), n.d.).

Our contribution is in conversation with the literature principally concerned with the ‘business of business schools’ (Parker, 2018; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). This includes the insights into the

purpose and civic mission of business schools (e.g. Colombo, 2023; Ferlie et al., 2010; Hoffman, 2021; Warren and Tweedale, 2002), the application of management learning to serve broader societal interests (Engwall and Rickard, 2011; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011; Learmonth et al., 2012; Lindebaum and Hibbert, 2024; Reedy and Learmonth, 2009, among many others), the debates on ‘prevailing epistemic regimes’ affecting curricula, pedagogies and research (British Academy of Management (BAM), 2024: 2) and the pertinence of ‘re-situating the study of management in its broader historical and philosophical nexus’ (Starkey et al., 2019: 591).

Pulling together these questions are ideas about the ‘legitimacy’ of business schools in terms of their ability to represent all those who have a stake in their activity in an inclusive way (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). Legitimacy, as conceptualised by Suchman (1995), is a broadly shared perception of something being desirable, expected, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of values. Social disconnects within such systems, as noted by Howieson and Robson (2023), should give reason and evidence for testing the legitimacy of institutionalised practicalities. In our case, a concern with legitimacy has enforced our belief that the disconnect means that business schools ‘underperform’ (Morsing and Rovira, 2011) in meeting societal demands that attribute value to participatory and democratic forms of governance and organising. We explore the disconnect between business schools and coops by exposing the differences that rise out of their respective value systems and discuss the problems caused by this state of affairs.

Our research question ‘why the disconnect?’ might appear simple but without the answer it would be impossible to argue for practical changes and justify their plausibility. To focus firmly on the disconnect, we have opted to forgo an extensive introduction to the world of cooperative economy beyond some general statements about the cooperative model and its underlying principles. Instead, following a section on the method, we begin by exploring the relations between coops and business schools, including investigating their ideological compatibility. We then ask whether business schools can be incentivised (Lindebaum and Hibbert, 2024) to end the disconnect and conclude that this would require developing relevant operational capacity. The disconnect has developed out of some influences specific to business schools and coops. However, up to now, neither has been subjected to meaningful societal pressures or incentives to engage so no meaningful efforts or resources have been put into developing relevant scholarship, expertise and programmes. With the help of our evidence, we demonstrate that: (a) the failure of academia and coops to relate and collaborate is counterproductive and goes against the interests of both parties as well as society; (b) there are no irrevocable causes for the rift; hence, connection is possible; (c) closing the disconnect is likely to produce multiple scholarly and practical gains, which we describe.

Methods

The study is based on evidence from many sources. Some was generated from interviews with academics and coop practitioners from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Fiji, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the UK. We also used transcripts from three webinars and two round-table discussions of the Cooperative University Working Group (UK), which provided information on coop-led knowledge production and training provision. Details about the history of cooperative education were collected at the Co-operative Heritage Trust (UK) and the National Co-operative Archive (UK). We also rely on personal experience as business school academics who have been writing on coops and alternative business and involved in the coop movement in various ways, which justifies the use of researcher’s judgement in selecting the sampling frame (Miles et al., 2013).

A problem-centred expert interview (PCEI) method was used for its ability to provide rich nuanced insights from individuals with highly specialised knowledge, professional authority and expertise (Murray, 2016; Witzel and Reiter, 2012). PCEI is in essence an egalitarian dialogue in which the ‘problem’ is explored jointly from various angles and with a focus on potential solutions (Döringer, 2021). Using experts as a methodological approach was found useful by other scholars (e.g. Dörfler and Eden, 2019) since this offers a way to deputise for a larger pool of relevant knowledge bearers and guarantee a sufficient sample variation (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). The use of PCEI allowed us to reach a data saturation point (Saunders and Townsend, 2016) at 17 interviews, similar to Dörfler and Eden (2019) and obtain 22 hours of video and audio recordings.

We recognise that PCEI comes with limitations. In some cases, experts who agree to be interviewed may have stronger opinions or specific interests related to certain aspects of research topics, leading to self-selection bias. Our research may also suffer from a sample bias due to selecting interviewees based on their reputation. The participants were included based on their publications, attributed impact track (as defined by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), n.d.), overall professional visibility, association with relevant networks and organisations (business schools, coops and their apex bodies). We used both the recommendations of other experts and our own field knowledge. To identify experts, we worked with a generic definition of ‘a person with a high level of knowledge and skills in a particular area’, business education and coops in our case. Accordingly, the sample comprises educators, researchers, leaders of coop apex organisations and cooperators, which ensured that the object of the interviews was within a consistent shared context. The interviewed ‘academics’ included students, doctoral researchers, tutors, professors, a journal editor and a business school dean. In some cases, the background (academic/non-academic) was overlapping.

Potentially, our selection may not fully represent the diversity of opinions or perspectives on the topic. Although no lack of consensus was identified across the sample, using the expert-based approach, we believe, allowed for capturing a wide range of perspectives and to explore the arguments at appropriate depth. The experts provided knowledge and viewpoints that helped to problematise the phenomenon of disconnect and treat it as a matter to be examined and addressed.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English to ensure data equivalence and followed the responsible research protocol as summarised in Miller et al (2024). Participant anonymisation was not requested by the interviewees, but in this article, we designate them using the format ‘country/profile (A-academic; P-practitioner)/participant’s ID’. The interviews were mostly conducted during 2020–2023 (the first took place in December 2019), both online and in-person at different locations; some involved more than one expert at a time. Four in-person recorded interviews took place during a conference, five during research visits to *Mondragón Cooperative University*, *Akademie Deutscher Genossenschaften* (Academy of German Cooperatives) and *KU Leuven*. These visits also offered an opportunity to discuss and observe examples of coop-centred business education, to collect printed and digital resources shared by the hosts and to register additional narrative evidence for the project research diary.

The recorded and transcribed interviews were subjected to directed content analysis using a predetermined set of sub-themes in the interview structure which were informed by the initial state-of-the-art analysis of the disconnect. These sub-themes intended to capture the similarities, overlaps and differences in perspectives of coops and business education providers on managerial competencies, education/research/training content, cross-sectoral collaboration/knowledge exchange, pragmatic and ideological compatibility, and formats/desirability/plausibility of future collaboration. The analysis involved the mapping of connections in the evidence to the categories, which allowed us to focus on specific aspects of the data to expose misalignments in the perspectives of business schools and coops feeding the disconnect. The thematically clustered evidence

helped to explore in detail the manifestations and reasons for a disconnect as perceived by members of business schools and coops. This informs our conclusion that the disconnect is systemic in the context of business schools and the coop sector, but is not inevitable and is, in terms of social value, undesirable.

Coops in business schools: the invisibility problem

As institutions claiming to educate the business leaders of tomorrow, business schools seem well positioned to shape choices and actions. In practice, the 13,000 business schools on the planet often take a position that assumes corporations and managers as the default form of organisation, and everything else as history or exception (Parker, 2018). For decades, schools have been accused of indoctrinating students in the values of individualism and disregard for broader societal interests (Khurana, 2007). They have also been widely criticised for an increasing homogenisation of approaches in relation to what and how they teach and research (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; Ghoshal, 2005), and for the lack of diversity in the knowledge procured and disseminated, especially in relation to the impact this has on the enduring academic–practice divide (Lee and Morley, 2021). A growing number of heterodox voices also argue in favour of market plurality, framing coops as a counterbalancing force to market orthodoxy (Adler, 2019; Case and Deaton, 2020; Stiglitz, 2009). Despite all this, democratically run organisations such as coops are not a standard feature in academic debates, textbooks and teaching programmes in business schools.

The long-standing disconnect of business schools from the coop world can be explained to an extent by coops being different. They are democratically controlled organisations, based on collective ownership, run in accordance with the values of self-help, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In a definitional statement on cooperative identity the apex coop organisation International Cooperative Alliance reaffirms that all these characteristics of coops are derived from seven founding coop principles (ICA, 2017, n.d.(a), n.d.(b)), and which make coops distinct.

A number of our interviewees talked to us specifically about the importance of this distinctiveness and why coops make a difference in terms of social value. Coops are perceived and often self-identify as an alternative to a capitalist firm, although in an economy based on private property and governed by market forces, their freedom to be different is necessarily limited. Marx (1894/1981) may have described the coop under capitalism as a firm in which workers are ‘their own capitalists’ (p. 571) but coops have been distinctive enough to create a sort of ideological chasm which separates them from most forms of capitalist organisation.

However, when it comes to accepting the coop model as equal to the dominant capitalist forms of doing business, many business school academics reject the premise of their increasing importance in the modern economy on the grounds that coops are supposedly against markets and competition (Webster, 2023). Market fundamentalists tend to see coops as outdated and too left-leaning (Levi and Davis, 2008; Whyman, 2012). In practical terms, explains a business school senior manager, this translates into conversations like this one:

‘You know, I was a dean [in Australia], but they said, no, no, this [setting up a programme of cooperatives] is a crazy idea. You know, co-ops for hippies, people on drugs, and long hair, pointing ponytails. And I said, well, you know, I have a ponytail, but I’m not on drugs, and co-ops are basically a multi-billion-dollar business, internationally very successful. . . I was opposed by most people in the business school’ (UK/A/MA).

Others might criticise coops by portraying them as inefficient, slow in decision-making, and being risk-averse (Kalmi, 2007) and hence, they do not routinely appear in journal articles, textbooks or

teaching. When we checked the available records of allocated funding of the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, they were another testimony to the disconnect and its depth, with no dedicated calls for coop research.

This apparent disinterest is in contrast to the role that they play as people-centred wealth generators with a credible record of resilience to economic shocks. The scale of the coop economy makes it impossible to ignore. Currently, it provides jobs or work opportunities to more than 10% of the world's employed population through its three million organisations and its share of the global economy is reaching 15% (ICA, n.d.(b); International Labour Organization (ILO), 2013). In many countries coops are staples of the local economy and communities (Bretos and Marcuello, 2017). In Italy, for example, most of the independent local banks are cooperatives (Fiordelisi et al., 2023); there are regions where coops contribute 30% to the GDP value, with Emilia-Romagna being known as the country's coop heartland. Coops are especially prominent in agriculture, food processing, banking and financial services, insurance, retail, utilities, health and social care, information technologies and crafts. In the EU, agricultural coops have a 60% share in the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities (ILO, 2013). The focus on social value, community well-being and social capital accumulation lends the coop economy a social legitimacy that big corporations only aspire to achieve by spending millions on corporate social responsibility programmes and reputation management (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova, 2020). Why do business schools not teach about and research such a major part of the global economy?

Business education and coops: the origins of ambivalence

Why is there such a limited awareness of coops? – asks the prominent development economist Ha-Joon Chang. Coops themselves, he argues, might not be doing enough to affirm their wider societal relevance, make themselves more visible and seen as an element of the economic mainstream, not an alternative or peripheral model of business organisation (CoopNews, 2014). A business school academic we interviewed, also thought that it is a mistake to think ‘... that cooperatives are too pure to be tainted by business’ and that ‘this neglect is costing us all’ (UK/A/AM).

In a study of coop education, Miner and Guillotte (2014) report conflicting attitudes that exist in the coop movement. Individual cooperators find the relevance and impact of business education significant, but available programmes, which are few and far between, receive limited recognition and support from the coop sector as a whole. The lack of programmes is not the only reason for coops' invisibility, because the sector itself has issues with the ‘managerialism’ that supports the rest of the commercial world. There are common concerns that if coops adopt management systems designed for mainstream capitalist business, they run the risk of compromising the fundamental principles on which the coop movement is built, and will be pushed to put profit over the financial and social betterment of members. Further, outsourcing the execution of one core coop principle – education – is also seen to be a problem. For these reasons, coops have traditionally relied on ‘training from within’, educating members through their own coop colleges. From its inception, the movement had its own educational institutions with the emphasis on them being used as a means of human betterment; hence, the tradition of ‘implicit’ education focused on how to cooperate (Dawson, 1923) through participation and engagement.

A consequence of this education ‘from within’ is that new skills are harder to gain within an individual organisation and the limited experience it offers, particularly if the organisation is small in size, which is typical of coops. This could be a problem because there is evidence which suggests a correlation between managerial skills and formal business education. Slater and Dixon-Fowler (2010) found a significant positive association between CEOs with MBAs and corporate performance, even after accounting for several firm- and individual-level characteristics.

Importantly, this result is confirmed for microfinance institutions, organisations that have certain similarities with coops in that they pursue financial and social logics simultaneously (Pascal et al., 2017).

Conversations with members of the Mondragón Corporation, as well as academics and students of Mondragón University, revealed that, as far as the coop ethos was concerned, there was no mandatory training in coop values. Cooperators and students were expected to pick up the values of the movement through their everyday experience of being a member. In terms of skills development, however, this may not always produce the best results. One executive-level interviewee from a national coop association explained:

‘We have people who got stuck on boards without the right skill set and knowledge, but the reality is . . . taking a farmer off the farm to suddenly be a governor on an international exporting organisation . . . it’s quite challenging. And like I say, it’s a bit of a popularity vote, as opposed to who has got the right skills . . .’ (NZ/AP/RH).

From the early days of the movement, it has been suggested that success cannot happen ‘without a real knowledge of politics, economics, and finance, of business structure, of industrial and social problems’ (Woolf, 1914: 2), yet our interviews and the literature suggest that member education remains inward-looking (Emmanuel, 2007; Hannley, 2007). Coops seem to have a negative attitude towards ideas derived from outside or perceive external knowledge as only marginally relevant (Antons and Pillers, 2015). As the UK business school academics noted:

‘Universities in Britain, at least, but also in quite a few other countries [are] currently driven by market considerations . . . Had they been approached [by coops], a credible offer would have been made, you know, just “create a course and we’ll provide you with students” or something, but it’s not happening. It looks like cooperatives like to keep their distance’ (UK/A/JYM);

‘. . . the support from the co-op sector is very limited’ (UK/A/MA).

Coops may have good reasons to be suspicious of mainstream business education. There is substantial literature arguing that economic theories and free-market philosophy, which form the basis of much of the business curriculum, have a harmful impact on business students’ values and behaviour (Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana, 2007; Leavitt, 1989). This critique points at many issues that are of central importance to coops, including the theory–practice divide (Clinebell and Clinebell, 2008), the social purpose of business schools (Pettigrew and Starkey, 2016; Starkey and Thomas, 2019) and the dominance of a curriculum that promotes growth-oriented managerialism (Parker, 2018). The consequence of this suspicion, whether warranted or not, is that the production of knowledge on coops by coops is generally inward-looking. As a result, it appears mostly to be wanting in both scale and depth, and definitely in dissemination (UK Society for Co-operative Studies (UKSCS), 2019). Coop research has achieved comparatively little in terms of collecting primary data and generating theory. Despite the rich narrative about the sector’s achievements accumulated through the efforts of business historians, a systematic analysis of contemporary coop practice is largely absent. Coops assert that they drive social progress as value-based and resilient organisations instrumental in strengthening the economic power of marginalised groups and are models of workplace democracy and participatory practices. Yet, they are largely silent about the fact that coops are entrenched in capitalist markets and therefore need business expertise, strategic insight and managerial competence. As one coop expert put it:

‘A coop isn’t a sort of a socialistic model, it’s got a capitalistic skin; at the end of the day, they’re there to make profit for the members. You know, it’s not there to be nice to everyone. At the end of the day, it’s used as a community and social good component, but it’s also there to drive profit for its members’ (NZ/AP/RH).

It seems to us that simply celebrating cooperation is not enough to convey the immediate relevance of this form of enterprise to policymakers and scholars, let alone the general public. Our interviewees concurred with what many commentators believe: the absence of evidence-informed external critical comment stalls progressive changes in the sector and undermines its role as a credible constituent of pluralist socio-economies (Davies et al., 2005; Manley et al., 2023). To change this would require building evidence of best practice through analysis of the sector (Birchall, 2017; Novković et al., 2023) as well as the education of cooperators (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova, 2023). In sum, coops need academia and business education. Are business schools willing to respond?

Business schools’ indifference: prejudice or pragmatism?

There are very few business schools in the world offering customised programmes for and about coops and none in the UK where we are based. A plausible explanation is that because universities in Britain are increasingly driven by the necessity of producing income to cross-subsidise more expensive areas of education and research (Brown and Carasso, 2013) they are particularly sensitive to market conditions. In the UK, the lack of demand from coops themselves does not justify the expense of setting up and running such programmes. This may be true, but our evidence suggests that there are other relevant factors here too, including the lack of facilitative (professional) capacity in business schools, as was initially the case with providing ‘responsible’ management education (Burchell et al., 2015). A Canadian educator commented:

‘. . . certainly the big business theories and that would be helpful, but they need more kind of concrete tools, right? That’s directly relatable and catered to a cooperative business, which it has a unique set of needs and requirements. So, you can’t cookie cutter something from, say, Harvard Business School and deliver that directly. It’s gotta be shaped into the cooperatives’ context, right?’ (CAN/A/MV).

Although many management skills taught in business schools are applicable in coops, the difference cannot be ignored. A coop practitioner pointed out:

‘. . . The fundamental principles of decision making are driven by different outcomes, or different inputs, I guess. And that’s the thing that people keep coming back to: if I come from a corporate and I work in a coop, I continue to behave in that same fashion. [There is a] real difference: it’s sort of a different mind-set, I think; and the great thing within the coop environment, from my experience and talking to members, is that the culture is quite different’ (NZ/AP/RH).

People who see business schools as the bastions of the teaching of conventional management theories (Giacalone and Wargo, 2009) tend to be skeptical about how well business graduates fit into coops because management as a discipline is rarely attentive to ‘alternative’ organisational forms. Chandler (1962, 1984) argued that the demand for business education was linked to a historical move from owner control to shareholder capitalism run by professional managers. Such a diagnosis has shaped the language and values of business schools. As one interviewee put it: ‘the cooperative model has been seen as a bit hippie left field’ (NZ/AP/RH). Modern business education tends to emphasise competition as the most efficient mechanism for the distribution of resources contributing to a worldview that places ‘efficiency above equity’ (McCabe et al., 2006). When describing

business school training provisions for and/or about coops, our respondents from different parts of the world were unanimous in that

‘At the moment, there’s pretty much nothing. If you do law, accounting or business, there is nothing about cooperatives. To get the universities to pick this up seems to be very challenging, there just doesn’t seem to be the willingness’ (UK/A/MA).

Another academic shared her experience of teaching about coops:

‘. . . over the years, students have come up to me and said, “I never knew that that was an option. Gosh, I think that’s really interesting. I’d like to learn more about that and maybe work in a place like that”. And you know, they’re coming from a position of having known nothing about it’ (UK/A/AM).

One possible factor influencing the attitude in business schools is the long-standing conviction in certain academic circles that coops are inefficient and protectionist. The origins of this view can be traced back to the late 19th century and the writings of Maffeo Pantaleoni, a proponent of neo-classical economics (Gide and Foley, 1898). This opinion has not faded with the passage of time. In fact, according to Spencer Thompson (2015, 2016), who dedicated considerable effort to investigating the issue in relation to worker coops, it remains central to modern theories of the firm. Contract-based theories argue that firms exist because they minimise transaction costs by internalising certain market functions. Competence-based theories characterise the firm as a platform for accumulating productive capabilities that result in competitive advantages in the market. Although these schools offer different interpretations they have, as Thompson points out, one common implication: both argue that coop firms are inefficient and have no advantage over the traditional firm due to slowness of decision processes, pluralism of objectives, risk avoidance, etc. This makes it difficult to justify making coops a focus of attention in standard business courses, relegating them to a ‘special interest’ category.

A prominent Australian professor of business and labour history with decades of involvement in academia globally summarised his experience like this:

‘There is a lot of confusion among business academics about what a coop is. What is the problem is the level of ignorance even among people who are supposedly highly educated . . . Business schools are not interested. It is not an Australian issue; it is an international issue’ (AUS/AP/GP).

A prominent economist with a track record of being a dean in several business schools worldwide put it simply: ‘The degree of ignorance about the model is quite astonishing’ (UK/A/MA). An academic and practitioner from New Zealand adds:

‘. . . cooperatives, as you know, [create] 16% of our GDP, it’s huge. So, [students] should actually be aware of that whether they go and work for one or not. I think that’s a key part is whether you’re doing, let’s say, law, accounting or business, it should be incorporated as just one of the business models for consideration . . . And so, a lot of these students then leave, and they might want to set up a business, you know, they don’t actually consider the cooperative model as an opportunity to go into business. Because they’re not aware of it’ (NZ/AP/RH).

But what if business schools can learn from coops? The next section offers some evidence that this is indeed the case.

Advancing pluralism

Business school negativity towards the coop model provokes a defensive reaction on the part of the coop community. Johnston Birchall (2017), a scholar and movement champion, formulated a question that was probably pondered by many coop thinkers: ‘Why should we try to fit co-operatives into a conventional economic theory that is essentially hostile to them?’ (p. 27).

Most business schools claim to be keen to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals and global challenges so it seems an opportune moment for relations between business schools and coops to change. A pluralist approach to what business school academics study, perhaps reframing it as ‘organising’, should provoke a wider acceptance of forms with multiple institutional logics (Pache and Santos, 2010; Parker et al., 2014). Rising inequalities and a populist backlash against liberal democratic governance, combined with the climate and ecological crises, means that many corporations have found that their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and state regulators very much depends on their performance as responsible citizens, protectors of the environment and creators of social value. Business education ignores this context at its peril and could play a central role in advancing progressive ideals through curriculum, research and engagement.

For example, the recent pandemic has awakened interest in the preconditions for business resilience. Coops have a well-documented record of being stable employers and showing better endurance through crises than conventional enterprises of similar size, active in the same sectors and present in the same communities and regions (Billiet et al., 2021; Birchall and Ketilson, 2009; Roelants et al., 2012). Research on coops shows that it is their decision process that results in more resilient organisations (Chevallier, 2011) but inclusive decision making is not well understood (Battilana et al., 2017; Battilana and Lee, 2014), making this an important issue awaiting research. In addition, coops do business in ways that address multiple social goals (OECD, 2020a,b) and have proven to be especially effective in mobilising and creating community assets to boost local economies (Bianchi and Vieta, 2020; Manley and Whyman, 2021). In search of business models that can balance efficiency and resilience, business academics might learn from the experience of coop organisations, even if it means a revision of long-standing preconceptions such as that democratic governance incapacitates effectiveness. Cross-sectoral connectedness is unimpressive:

‘. . . there is only a handful of us in Canada who do this. There is maybe about 10 of us in Canada, that maybe 15 people, maybe 20, something like that, that are active activists, academics that work with the cooperative sector . . . That’s kind of how it works here. I anticipate that in most parts of the world, except probably Italy; is a little different because of the size of the cooperative sector and how entrenched the social cooperative movement is in Italy’ (CAN/A/MV).

Coops have always been laboratories for social innovation (Novković, 2008; Pek, 2021; Zaunseder, 2022) and can enrich traditional research in many relevant areas of organising. They provide a context to explore the social dimensions of employment, leadership, work/life balance, well-being, equality, participation, accountability, organisational culture, place management, regional regeneration and so on (Case and Deaton, 2020; Manley and Whyman, 2021; Webster et al., 2021). Coops are living demonstrations of concepts such as empowerment, organisational citizenship, followership and more (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021). As an academic and cooperative educator put it:

‘if you’re teaching people about cooperative ways of working, you’re teaching them how not to sit in an office, following orders and working all the hours that God sent without having any control over your working day. It’s a fundamentally different way of getting people to engage in business. I think the reason

cooperatives should be in business schools is so that students can learn about completely different ways of doing business' (UK/A/AM).

The opportunities for research gains and knowledge advancement are clear, so why are so few academics interested in coops? In the earlier sections, we considered the ideological and scholarly reasons for the disconnect. Next, we consider the practical impediments.

Coop scholarship as career choice

Our data suggested that where universities do collaborate with coops and offer dedicated degree programmes (Belgium, Canada, Italy), the initiative came from the coop side, be it an individual large and prosperous coop or an association representing smaller organisations, or a combination of the two. By making a financial commitment, the sponsor creates an opportunity for the university to expand its teaching and research portfolios. Crucially, within the university it is usually individual academics interested in cooperation who led the way. Through their research, they are part of coop networks and become a point of contact when coops start looking for partnership with higher education. Their role is very important because their expertise and awareness provide a stepping stone for wider collaboration. However, such foundations are vulnerable: we have been told that a programme or module can disappear following the departure of a well-connected academic.

Our interviewees claimed that the pool of academics in business and management disciplines involved in coop studies is rather small. Indeed, if we analyse the proceedings of the annual meetings of the *Academy of Management*, we can see the problem. In 2021, there were over 1400 sessions with more than 5000 articles presented. The largest scholarly association in the field of management with members from more than 120 nations, and the publisher of journals that are the most prestigious in the field offered only a single session linked to the theme of coops and only one of four articles included in the session mentioned coops in the abstract. This is not an unusual situation. One of the co-authors recalls their experience of chairing a research area on collective ownership at one of the European learnt societies that promotes heterodox approaches, but year after year, there was a struggle to recruit a credible number of presenters.

These observations bring out an important issue that has surfaced in our interviews. In order to expand the teaching offering, business schools need faculty members willing to build their academic careers on coop topics. However, career prospects depend on a record of publications in highly ranked journals, and that is not easy for coop scholars. We were able to identify only three articles exploring aspects of coop organisation that have appeared over the last 20 years in the *Academy of Management Journal*. The neglect of such topics may also be seen in the composition of various journal quality lists that often play a decisive role in performance metrics. Only *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* features in both the UK Chartered Association of Business Schools and the Australian Business Deans Council's journal quality lists, and the rank is middling. Although there are specialist journals outside these lists, their perceived lack of prestige makes them less attractive in the eyes of aspiring academics. *Journal of Co-operative Studies* – one of the movement's main journals is not in the academic journal guides. As the Editor-in-Chief explained in an interview, this is because it is a coop venture without the marketing and distribution reach of the publishing conglomerates that dominate the journal field, adding: 'Whenever you're outside the mainstream, it is hard to get noticed' (UK/A/AM).

Academic expertise is an important prerequisite for ending the disconnect because coops expect the university to be able to help develop courses. One interviewee noted that the group of coops that sponsored a programme at his university in Belgium 'wanted it to be tailored to the specific

needs of cooperative enterprises but they were not sure what those needs were' (B/A/FD). A quality-approved programme from an established university was important for them, but they expected the teaching to be led by academics who understood coop business. This means that efforts are needed by both coop organisations and the academic community to raise the profile of coop studies to make them a viable career prospect for researchers.

In summary, according to our interviewees, it is desirable that the students are trained by academics with coop expertise, but this is a constraint on the growth of provision, because one of the traditional channels of student entry – progression from a bachelor's programme to a master's programme – was not working. This is mostly the consequence of the fact that undergraduate modules on coops are rare and usually delivered as options. As a result, undergraduates are not given the opportunity to develop an interest in the coop economy. In the few cases in which business schools offer courses with an emphasis on coops, as we learned, it is typically for postgraduate students with coop-specific elements embedded in a conventional business school curriculum. However, the paucity of relevant learning materials was so great that it meant that it was the students themselves who had to supply case study material. Business schools do not have the career incentives, publication infrastructure or teaching materials to engage with the coop economy. What might be done about this state of affairs?

Discussion

Our respondents on both sides of the disconnect are clear. They want business schools to broaden their focus and recognise the relevance of alternative models of ownership, governance and control. We believe that unless schools address these gaps, they will struggle to keep up with societal demands attributing value to democracy, participation and inclusivity. If business schools genuinely want to address the aims of the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), the SDGs, or help low-carbon businesses, then they cannot afford to ignore the coop economy.

However, one of the problems is the perception of ideological differences. This may become less of a problem because there are signs of change in the language used by businesses which have found their most visible manifestation in the interest in corporate social responsibility, business ethics, corporate purpose, B-Corps and so on. Of course, this is not to suggest that the fundamental nature of business has changed, and we do recognise that such ideas can be used to merely polish reputations. Regardless, the consequences of this shift are potentially enormous. The basic assumption of competitive individualism as the foundation of the capitalist economy has received a powerful and compelling counterbalance which is publicly accepted by the public, governments and firms as an imperative for continued legitimacy. Business education cannot ignore this.

In response, many business schools have subscribed to the PRME seeing it as a platform to raise the profile of sustainability in business and management schools and to ensure they provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economy and sustainability while drawing attention to SDG agenda and aligning academic institutions with the work of the UN Global Compact (UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), n.d.). The signatories take it upon themselves to incorporate into their academic activities, curricula, and organisational practices the values of global social responsibility.

Setting aside the extent to which being a signatory actually demonstrates a great deal about the practice of a school, the visibility of initiatives such as PRME indicates that there could be far more common ground between coops and schools in terms of values and purpose than is commonly assumed. Taking PRME seriously could make it much easier to work with coops. 'The cooperative content should be there to challenge and transform and to radically critique existing ways of doing

business', argues one of the interviewed academics. 'There's a role for cooperatives, both in promoting better working practices, but also working practices that are less destructive of the environment. And, you know, I think business schools that don't address sustainability are dinosaurs' (UK/A/AM).

Whether specialist or general, if the ideological differences can be set aside, there is no credible reason why business schools could not increase the awareness of coops in their mainstream teaching. Our evidence shows the presence of common grounds upon which to strengthen the coops–academia connection, some encouraging examples of collaboration, and clear reputational and political incentives for business schools to engage. As organisations that prioritise social solidarity, organisational democracy and community-focused commitments, coops demand visibility.

Of course, it is naïve to anticipate a major expansion of customised coop-centred programmes. Demand cannot be substantial in the short term if only because in smaller coops, which currently make up the vast majority, training in business is normally only aimed at board members and managers. Many agree that it is a challenge to allocate funds even to these people: '... how do you make sure that your cooperative allocates money to ensure education and training of those individuals sitting on the board?' (NZ/AP/RH; also CAN/AP/EH). It is a different proposition for large coops, multinationals like Mondragón, Groupe Crédit Agricole or Zen-Noh, where boards of directors address complex strategic problems. They are more likely to support their members in acquiring advanced degrees and have the resources to do so. Indeed, as we already noted, in our sample of universities with a postgraduate course on cooperation, it was large coops that initiated and sponsored their provision, though there are counter examples. Webb (2020) reports that coop graduate educational programmes by St Mary's University in Nova Scotia (Canada), which was a part of our sample, were met with strong resistance from many large coops, who continued to send managers to standard MBA programmes. Our data also confirm the observation that 'today many cooperatives do not allocate adequate resources towards member education' (Hannley, 2007: 219). For many coops, education focuses on the specifics of coop practice rather than learning widely about organisation and economy (Emmanuel, 2007), but the movement, it seems, is not engaged enough with research to support this learning. A closer collaboration with business schools will place coops in a better position to understand themselves, their environment and their competitors.

Business schools have been receiving much internal and external criticism over decades (Colombo, 2023; Hoffman, 2021; Reedy and Learmonth, 2009) so betting on them to quickly solve the coops' invisibility problem through their teaching and research efforts might seem overly optimistic. Further, the idea that what is perceived as a stronghold of neoliberal capitalism would be sponsoring alternative values and principles for doing business might not be popular among the coop movement itself, as evidenced by attempts to establish separate coop universities (Noble and Ross, 2021). However, as we learned during our visit to Mondragón University such separatist ideas are also contested. Mondragón University embraces knowledge that might be useful outside the coop economy, without assuming that coops are the only end users of their graduates and research. For them, coops are a mechanism for social and economic betterment within a competitive environment, not in isolation from it.

Moving forward

Monika Kostera (1995) has argued in this journal that ideas about cooperation used to exist in business teaching in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, but that they have been forgotten as a result of the neoliberal wave that swept the continent from the 1980s onwards. Whether moving forward or remembering what has been lost, we believe that business schools can become a cross-sectoral knowledge and expertise broker ensuring that no value-creating element of a socio-economic

structure remains invisible. Our evidence made it clear why researchers, including early career, are reluctant to dedicate their time to developing the field: because as long as the coop economy stays a peripheral phenomenon, it will remain under-studied and underfunded.

Coop formats can be used for organising research, modernising governance, building infrastructures for value-based leadership, addressing the challenges of precarious labour and more (Noble and Ross, 2021), but the coop movement needs an enabling environment to realise its full potential (Dash, 2013), which cannot happen without an educational system that teaches and promotes the coop business model (Audebrand, 2016). Relying exclusively on the education that exists within the movement limits opportunities to challenge the lack of plurality within conventional business and business schools.

Since business schools claim to shape the attitudes and priorities of future business leaders, they are an obvious vehicle for promoting pluralism. A more engaged stance will also increase their legitimacy as an agent of change, not only through scholarship or learning but perhaps also by revisiting their own existing research priorities and organisational practice. As one business school academic suggested,

‘If you’re going to take cooperative education as meaning not just teaching about the business models, but if you’re going to talk about it in terms of teaching corporative principles and values, there’s a limit to how far you can teach democracy without actually doing democracy. It’s when you get to the social transformative thing that it becomes difficult to go beyond a certain stage in a traditional university’ (UK/A/JYM).

On the surface, the disconnect could be explained by some lack of demand on both sides, but it appears to us that more profound tensions are also at play. Modern business education has its origins in economic theories that assume *homo economicus*. This has resulted in a dismissive attitude towards ideas about collective action, exemplified in the principle of cooperation. Business schools will need to reconsider some of their dominant assumptions if they are to raise awareness of coops as legitimate mainstream businesses. But however difficult this might be, we believe that it is necessary in the light of the sustained and profound criticism of contemporary versions of capitalism which are complicit with deep inequalities and an inability to achieve greater social, economic and environmental sustainability. As organisations that prioritise social solidarity, organisational democracy, community-focused commitments and delivering societal good, business schools have much to learn from coops and possibly enrich existing management knowledge by expanding its contextual horizons.

There are an increasing number of initiatives and infrastructures that could link coops and business schools. For example, the ICA has a thematic Committee on Cooperative Research (CCR) with a mission to bridge academic research and the cooperative world. One recent example is an international conference hosted in 2024 by a British university organised and chaired by the business school Dean, himself a prolific coop researcher. CCR has also recently established a Young & Emerging Scholars Network to support and promote cooperative studies. In addition, there is no denying that the depth of the disconnect might vary across countries. In Canada, as we learned, where the cooperative legislative acts exist in each province, resources and research funding are directed towards mutual forms of organisations. However, a more typical situation is eloquently described by a chief executive of the New Zealand’s apex coop organisation: ‘The national education system does not help a bit to build awareness about coops as business organisations’, to the extent that ‘if people do not work in coops, they do not understand them’ (NZ/AP/RH). This means that there are practical consequences for the selection and implementation of strategies for business schools and coops in different countries. Other forms of organising and governance might bring

about equally valuable results, but democratic organising as practised by coops creates responsible agents invested in outcomes, which we believe makes democracy a ‘normative priority’ (Knight and Johnson, 2011: 20) for organising.

To conclude, the disconnect can be explained, but we believe that it cannot be justified or defended. There is no incompatibility between academic agenda of business schools and coops. What is missing currently is the relevant operational capacity and intent to initiate the change on the part of business schools, and the recognition on the part of coops that their members need wider training in organising. The disconnect can be mended, if there is will on both sides.

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