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Management Learning

Cooperatives and Business Schools: Why the Disconnect?

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Abstract:	<p>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 paper shows that cooperatives lack adequate intellectual support from academia in terms of 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.</p>

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Cooperatives and Business Schools: Why the Disconnect?

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 paper 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: '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

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3 members to be effective directors' (*The Guardian*, 23/11/2013).
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5 The Co-operative Bank story with its revelations of management incompetence was
6 an early impetus for our interest in the relationship between business educators and
7 cooperatives (hereafter coops). These are organisations that the International Cooperative
8 Alliance – the apex coop organisation – defines as 'an autonomous association of persons
9 united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations
10 through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise' (ICA, nd(b)). Our interest
11 was spurred further by evidence in the literature that people in coops have a lower education
12 level than their counterparts in stock companies (Pestana and Gomes Santos, 2003;
13 Chevallier, 2011; Fiordelisi *et al.*, 2023). It was also clear to us that there is a lack of
14 educational programmes about and/or for coops offered by business schools, and coops are
15 neglected in management and economics textbooks and research programmes (Kalmi, 2007;
16 Parker, 2018).
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33 The lack of collaboration between academia and coops has been highlighted as a
34 matter of concern not only in academic literature (e.g., Adler, 2016; Mangan, 2019; Parker *et*
35 *al.*, 2014). When declaring 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives, the UN emphasised
36 the importance of enlisting the academic community to mainstream the coop business model
37 in order to facilitate the spread of humanistic values, encouraging societal gains from
38 organisational pluralism and participatory economic democracy (UN, 2013). However, ten
39 years later, in its 2023 report, the UN General Assembly, whilst praising the contribution of
40 coops to social development across the world, acknowledged that there was still insufficient
41 knowledge about, and education provision for, the coop business model (UN, 2023). We
42 agree, and in this paper argue that the disconnect also permits business schools to ignore
43 alternative business models which, according to the UN, are particularly suited to advance the
44 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In neglecting coops, business schools may be failing
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3 to fulfil their responsibilities to society as centres of learning, training and research by
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5 focusing on certain organisational configurations whilst ignoring others.
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8 Our evidence in this paper suggests that the single most important non-mainstream
9
10 business model, the coop enterprise, is currently absent in most business schools most of the
11
12 time. It seems to us that if business schools want to be more than ‘just an ideologically driven
13
14 finishing school’ (Parker, 2018:131) than they need to expand their horizons to incorporate
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16 forms of ownership and control which are currently relegated to the periphery of their
17
18 interests, and stop graduating students who are unaware of organisations with democratic
19
20 structures. This resonates with increasingly strident demands that business schools should try
21
22 harder to become laboratories for pro-social economics, activist scholarship and critical
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24 pedagogy with implications for helping businesses and communities tackle urgent social and
25
26 environmental challenges (Gray, 2023; Örtenblad and Koris, 2023; Prieto *et al.*, 2021).
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31 There are considerable gains from accepting the coop sector as a legitimate and
32
33 valuable constituent of a modern economy and reflecting this in the teaching and research of
34
35 business schools, and. it is a good time to do this. The 2024 Labour government in the UK,
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37 where we are based, pledged to double the size of the coop and mutual economy. At the same
38
39 time, the UN has asked member states to leverage the socio-economic impact of coops as a
40
41 part of their second International Year of Cooperatives action with its theme for 2025 being
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43 ‘Co-operatives build a better world’ (IYC2025, nd).
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47 Our contribution is in conversation with the literatures principally concerned with the
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49 ‘business of business schools’ (Parker, 2018; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). This includes the
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51 insights into the purpose and civic mission of business schools (e.g., Colombo, 2023; Ferlie *et*
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53 *al.*, 2010; Hoffman, 2021; Warren and Tweedale, 2002), the application of management
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55 learning to serve broader societal interests (Engwall and Rickard, 2011; Hodgkinson and
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57 Starkey, 2011; Learmonth *et al.*, 2012; Lindebaum and Hibbert, 2024; Reedy and Learmonth,
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3 2009, among many others), the debates on ‘prevailing epistemic regimes’ affecting curricula,
4 pedagogies and research (BAM, 2024:2), and the pertinence of ‘re-situating the study of
5 management in its broader historical and philosophical nexus’ (Starkey *et al.*, 2019:591).
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10 Pulling together these questions are ideas about the ‘legitimacy’ of business schools in
11 terms of their ability to represent all those who have a stake in their activity in an inclusive
12 way (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). Legitimacy, as conceptualised by Suchman (1995), is a
13 broadly shared perception of something being desirable, expected, proper or appropriate
14 within some socially constructed systems of values. Social disconnects within such systems,
15 as noted by Howieson and Robson (2023) should give reason and evidence for testing the
16 legitimacy of institutionalised practicalities. In our case, a concern with legitimacy has
17 enforced our believe that the disconnect means that business schools ‘underperform’
18 (Morsing and Rovira, 2011) in meeting societal demands that attribute value to participatory
19 and democratic forms of governance and organising. We explore the disconnect between
20 business schools and coops by exposing the differences that rise out of their respective value
21 systems and discuss the problems caused by this state of affairs.
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37 Our research question ‘why the disconnect?’ might appear simple but without the
38 answer it would be impossible to argue for practical changes and justify their plausibility. To
39 focus firmly on the disconnect, we have opted to forgo an extensive introduction to the world
40 of cooperative economy beyond some general statements about the cooperative model and its
41 underlying principles. Instead, following a section on the method, we begin by exploring the
42 relations between coops and business schools, including investigating their ideological
43 compatibility. We then ask whether business schools can be incentivised (Lindebaum and
44 Hibbert, 2024) to end the disconnect, and conclude that this would require developing
45 relevant operational capacity. The disconnect has developed out of some influences specific
46 to business schools and coops. However, up to now neither has been subjected to meaningful
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3 societal pressures or incentives to engage so no meaningful efforts or resources have been put
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5 into developing relevant scholarship, expertise and programmes. With the help of our
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7 evidence, we demonstrate that: (a) the failure of academia and coops to relate and collaborate
8
9 is counterproductive and goes against the interests of both parties as well as society; (b) there
10
11 are no irrevocable causes for the rift; hence, connection is possible; (c) closing the disconnect
12
13 is likely to produce multiple scholarly and practical gains, which we describe.
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19 **Methods**

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21 The study is based on evidence from many sources. Some was generated from interviews
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23 with academics and coop practitioners from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Fiji, Germany, Italy,
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25 New Zealand, Spain, and the UK. We also used transcripts from three webinars and two
26
27 round-table discussions of the Cooperative University Working Group (UK), which provided
28
29 information on coop-led knowledge production and training provision. Details about the
30
31 history of cooperative education were collected at the Co-operative Heritage Trust (UK) and
32
33 the National Co-operative Archive (UK). We also rely on personal experience as business
34
35 school academics who have been writing on coops and alternative business and involved in
36
37 the coop movement in various ways, which justifies the use of researcher's judgment in
38
39 selecting the sampling frame (Miles *et al.*, 2013).
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45 A problem-centred expert interview (PCEI) method was used for its ability to provide
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47 rich nuanced insights from individuals with highly specialised knowledge, professional
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49 authority and expertise (Murray, 2016; Witzel and Reiter, 2012). PCEI is in essence an
50
51 egalitarian dialogue in which the 'problem' is explored jointly from various angles and with a
52
53 focus on potential solutions (Döringer, 2021). Using experts as a methodological approach
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55 was found useful by other scholars (e.g., Dörfler and Eden, 2019) since this offers a way to
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57 deputise for a larger pool of relevant knowledge bearers and guarantee a sufficient sample
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3 variation (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). The use of PCEI allowed us to reach a data
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5 saturation point (Saunders and Townsend, 2016) at 17 interviews, similar to Dörfler and Eden
6
7 (2019) and obtain 22 hours of video and audio recordings.
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10 We recognise that PCEI comes with limitations. In some cases, experts who agree to
11
12 be interviewed may have stronger opinions or specific interests related to certain aspects of
13
14 research topics, leading to self-selection bias. Our research may also suffer from a sample
15
16 bias due to selecting interviewees based on their reputation. The participants were included
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18 based on their publications, attributed impact track (as defined by UKRI, nd), overall
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20 professional visibility, association with relevant networks and organisations (business
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22 schools, coops and their apex bodies). We used both the recommendations of other experts
23
24 and our own field knowledge. To identify experts, we worked with a generic definition of ‘a
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26 person with a high level of knowledge and skills in a particular area’, business education and
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28 coops in our case. Accordingly, the sample comprises of educators, researchers, leaders of
29
30 coop apex organisations, cooperators, which ensured that the object of the interviews was
31
32 within a consistent shared context. The interviewed ‘academics’ included students, doctoral
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34 researchers, tutors, professors, a journal editor, a business school dean. In some cases, the
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36 background (academic/non-academic) was overlapping.
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42 Potentially, our selection may not fully represent the diversity of opinions or
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44 perspectives on the topic. Although no lack of consensus was identified across the sample,
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46 using the expert-based approach, we believe, allowed for capturing a wide range of
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48 perspectives and to explore the arguments at appropriate depth. The experts provided
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50 knowledge and viewpoints that helped to problematise the phenomenon of disconnect and
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52 treat it as a matter to be examined and addressed.
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56 The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English to ensure data equivalence,
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58 and followed the responsible research protocol as summarised in Miller *et al* (2024).
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3 Participant anonymisation was not requested by the interviewees but in this paper we
4
5 designate them using a format ‘country/profile (A-academic; P-practitioner)/participant’s ID’.
6
7 The interviews were mostly conducted during 2020-23 (the first took place in December
8
9 2019), both online and in-person at different locations; some involved more than one expert
10
11 at a time. Four in-person recorded interviews took place during a conference, five during
12
13 research visits to *Mondragón Cooperative University*, *Akademie Deutscher Genossenschaften*
14
15 (Academy of German Cooperatives) and *KU Leuven*. These visits also offered an opportunity
16
17 to discuss and observe examples of coop-centred business education, to collect printed and
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19 digital resources shared by the hosts and to register additional narrative evidence for the
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21 project research diary.
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26 The recorded and transcribed interviews were subjected to directed content analysis
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28 using a predetermined set of sub-themes in the interview structure which were informed by
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30 the initial state-of-the-art analysis of the disconnect. These sub-themes intended to capture
31
32 the similarities, overlaps and differences in perspectives of coops and business education
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34 providers on managerial competencies, education/research/training content, cross-sectoral
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36 collaboration/knowledge exchange, pragmatic and ideological compatibility,
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38 formats/desirability/plausibility of future collaboration. The analysis involved the mapping of
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40 connections in the evidence to the categories, which allowed us to focus on specific aspects
41
42 of the data to expose misalignments in the perspectives of business schools and coops feeding
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44 the disconnect. The thematically clustered evidence helped to explore in detail the
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46 manifestations and reasons for a disconnect as perceived by members of business schools and
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48 coops. This informs our conclusion that the disconnect is systemic in the context of business
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50 schools and the coop sector, but is not inevitable and is, in terms of social value, undesirable.
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55 **Coops in Business Schools: The Invisibility Problem**

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57 As institutions claiming to educate the business leaders of tomorrow, business schools seem
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3 well positioned to shape choices and actions. In practice, the 13 thousand business schools on
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5 the planet often take a position that assumes corporations and managers as the default form of
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7 organisation, and everything else as history or exception (Parker, 2018). For decades, schools
8
9 have been accused of indoctrinating students in the values of individualism and disregard for
10
11 broader societal interests (Khurana, 2007). They have also been widely criticised for an
12
13 increasing homogenisation of approaches in relation to what and how they teach and research
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15 (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; Ghoshal, 2005), and for the lack of diversity in the knowledge
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17 procured and disseminated, especially in relation to the impact this has on the enduring
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19 academic-practice divide (Lee and Morley, 2021). A growing number of heterodox voices
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21 also argue in favour of market plurality, framing coops as a counterbalancing force to market
22
23 orthodoxy (Adler, 2019; Case and Deaton, 2020; Stiglitz, 2009). Despite all this,
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25 democratically run organisations such as coops are not a standard feature in academic
26
27 debates, textbooks and teaching programmes in business schools.
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33 The long-standing disconnect of business schools from the coop world can be
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35 explained to an extent by coops being different. They are democratically controlled
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37 organisations, based on collective ownership, run in accordance with the values of self-help,
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39 democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In a definitional statement on cooperative identity
40
41 the apex coop organisation International Cooperative Alliance reaffirms that all these
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43 characteristics of coops are derived from seven founding coop principles (ICA, nd(a), nd(b);
44
45 ICA, 2017), and which make coops distinct.
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49 A number of our interviewees talked to us specifically about the importance of this
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51 distinctiveness and why coops make a difference in terms of social value. Coops are
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53 perceived and often self-identify as an alternative to a capitalist firm, although in an economy
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55 based on private property and governed by market forces, their freedom to be different is
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57 necessarily limited. Marx may have described the coop under capitalism as a firm in which
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3 workers are ‘their own capitalists’ (Marx, 1894/1981: 571) but coops have been distinctive
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5 enough to create a sort of ideological chasm which separates them from most forms of
6
7 capitalist organisation.
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11 However, when it comes to accepting the coop model as equal to the dominant
12
13 capitalist forms of doing business, many business school academics reject the premise of their
14
15 increasing importance in the modern economy on the grounds that coops are supposedly
16
17 against markets and competition (Webster, 2023). Market fundamentalists tend to see coops
18
19 as out-dated and too left leaning (Levi and Davis, 2008; Whyman, 2012). In practical terms,
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21 explains a business school senior manager, this translates into conversations like this one:

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24 *‘You know, I was a dean [in Australia], but they said, no, no, this [setting up a programme of*
25
26 *cooperatives] is a crazy idea. You know, co-ops for hippies, people on drugs, and long hair,*
27
28 *pointing ponytails. And I said, well, you know, I have a ponytail, but I’m not on drugs, and*
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30 *co-ops are basically a multi-billion-dollar business, internationally very successful...I was*
31
32 *opposed by most people in the business school’* (UK/A/MA). Others might criticise coops by
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34 portraying them as inefficient, slow in decision-making, and being risk averse (Kalmi, 2007)
35
36 and hence, they do not routinely appear in journal articles, textbooks or teaching. When we
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38 checked the available records of allocated funding of the UK’s Economic and Social
39
40 Research Council, they were another testimony to the disconnect and its depth, with no
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42 dedicated calls for coop research.
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48 This apparent disinterest is in contrast with the role that they play as people-centred
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50 wealth generators with a credible record of resilience to economic shocks. The scale of the
51
52 coop economy makes it impossible to ignore. Currently it provides jobs or work opportunities
53
54 to more than 10% of the world’s employed population through its three million organisations
55
56 and its share of the global economy is reaching 15% (ICA, nd(a); ILO, 2013). In many
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58 countries coops are staples of the local economy and communities (Bretos and Marcuello,
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3 2017). In Italy, for example, most of the independent local banks are cooperatives (Fiordelisi
4 *et al.*, 2023); there are regions where coops contribute 30% to the GDP value, with Emilia-
5
6 Romagna being known as the country's coop heartland. Coops are especially prominent in
7
8 agriculture, food processing, banking and financial services, insurance, retail, utilities, health
9
10 and social care, information technologies and crafts. In the EU, agricultural coops have a
11
12 60% share in the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities (ILO, 2013). The
13
14 focus on social value, community well-being and social capital accumulation lends the coop
15
16 economy a social legitimacy which big corporations only aspire to achieve by spending
17
18 millions on corporate social responsibility programmes and reputation management
19
20 (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova, 2020). Why do business schools not teach about and research
21
22 such a major part of the global economy?
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31 **Business Education and Coops: The Origins of Ambivalence**

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33 Why is there such a limited awareness of coops? – asks the prominent development
34
35 economist Ha-Joon Chang. Coops themselves, he argues, might not be doing enough to
36
37 affirm their wider societal relevance, make themselves more visible and seen as an element of
38
39 the economic mainstream, not an alternative or peripheral model of business organisation
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41 (CoopNews, 2014). A business school academic we interviewed, also thought that it is a
42
43 mistake to think ‘...*that cooperatives are too pure to be tainted by business*’ and that ‘*this*
44
45 *neglect is costing us all*’ (UK/A/AM).
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49 In a study of coop education, Miner and Guillotte (2014) report conflicting attitudes
50
51 that exist in the coop movement. Individual cooperators find the relevance and impact of
52
53 business education significant, but available programmes, which are few and far between,
54
55 receive limited recognition and support from the coop sector as a whole. The lack of
56
57 programmes is not the only reason for coops' invisibility, because the sector itself has issues
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3 with the ‘managerialism’ that supports the rest of the commercial world. There are common
4
5 concerns that if coops adopt management systems designed for mainstream capitalist
6
7 business, they run the risk of compromising the fundamental principles on which the coop
8
9 movement is built, and will be pushed to put profit over the financial and social betterment of
10
11 members. Further, outsourcing the execution of one core coop principle – education – is also
12
13 seen to be a problem. For these reasons, coops have traditionally relied on ‘training from
14
15 within’, educating members through their own coop colleges. From its inception, the
16
17 movement had its own educational institutions with the emphasis on them being used as a
18
19 means of human betterment; hence the tradition of ‘implicit’ education focused on how to co-
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21 operate (Dawson, 1923) through participation and engagement.
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26 A consequence of this education ‘from within’ is that new skills are harder to gain
27
28 within an individual organisation and the limited experience it offers, particularly if the
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30 organisation is small in size, which is typical of coops. This could be a problem because there
31
32 is evidence which suggests a correlation between managerial skills and formal business
33
34 education. Slater and Dixon-Fowler (2010) found a significant positive association between
35
36 CEOs with MBAs and corporate performance, even after accounting for several firm- and
37
38 individual- level characteristics. Importantly, this result is confirmed for microfinance
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40 institutions, organisations that have certain similarities with coops in that they pursue
41
42 financial and social logics simultaneously (Pascal *et al.*, 2017).
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47 Conversations with members of the Mondragón Corporation, as well as academics
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49 and students of Mondragón University, revealed that, as far as the coop ethos was concerned,
50
51 there was no mandatory training in coop values. Cooperators and students were expected to
52
53 pick up the values of the movement through their everyday experience of being a member. In
54
55 terms of skills development, however, this may not always produce the best results. One
56
57 executive level interviewee from a national coop association, explained: ‘*We have people*
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3 *who got get stuck on boards without the right skill set and knowledge, but the reality is ...*
4
5 *taking a farmer off the farm to suddenly be a governor on an international exporting*
6
7 *organisation... it's quite challenging. And like I say, it's a bit of a popularity vote, as opposed*
8
9 *to who has got the right skills... ' (NZ/AP/RH). From the early days of the movement, it has*
10
11 *been suggested that success cannot happen 'without a real knowledge of politics, economics,*
12
13 *and finance, of business structure, of industrial and social problems' (Woolf, 1914:2), yet our*
14
15 *interviews and the literature suggest that member education remains inward-looking*
16
17 *(Emmanuel, 2007; Hannley, 2007). Coops seem to have a negative attitude toward ideas*
18
19 *derived from outside, or perceive external knowledge as only marginally relevant (Antons*
20
21 *and Piller, 2015). As the UK business school academics noted: 'Universities in Britain, at*
22
23 *least, but also in quite a few other countries [are] currently driven by market considerations*
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25 *... Had they been approached [by coops], a credible offer would have been made, you know,*
26
27 *just "create a course and we'll provide you with students" or something, but it's not*
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29 *happening. It looks like cooperatives like to keep their distance' (UK/A/JYM); '...the support*
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31 *from the co-op sector is very limited' (UK/A/MA).*
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38 Coops may have good reasons to be suspicious of mainstream business education.
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40 There is a substantial literature arguing that economic theories and free-market philosophy,
41
42 which form the basis of much of the business curriculum, have a harmful impact on business
43
44 students' values and behaviour (Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana, 2007; Leavitt, 1989). This critique
45
46 points at many issues that are of central importance to coops, including the theory-practice
47
48 divide (Clinebell and Clinebell, 2008), the social purpose of business schools (Pettigrew and
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50 Starkey, 2016; Starkey and Thomas, 2019), and the dominance of a curriculum that promotes
51
52 growth-oriented managerialism (Parker, 2018). The consequence of this suspicion, whether
53
54 warranted or not, is that the production of knowledge on coops by coops is generally inward
55
56 looking. As a result, it appears mostly to be wanting in both scale and depth, and
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3 definitely in dissemination (UKSCS, 2019). Coop research has achieved comparatively little
4
5 in terms of collecting primary data and generating theory. Despite the rich narrative about the
6
7 sector's achievements accumulated through the efforts of business historians, a systematic
8
9 analysis of contemporary coop practice is largely absent. Coops assert that they drive social
10
11 progress as value-based and resilient organisations instrumental for strengthening the
12
13 economic power of marginalised group and are models of workplace democracy and
14
15 participatory practices. Yet, they are largely silent about the fact that coops are entrenched in
16
17 capitalist markets and therefore need business expertise, strategic insight, and managerial
18
19 competence. As one coop expert put it: *'A coop isn't a sort of a socialistic model, it's got a*
20
21 *capitalistic skin; at the end of the day, they're there to make profit for the members. You*
22
23 *know, it's not there to be nice to everyone. At the end of the day, it's used as a community and*
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25 *social good component, but it's also there to drive profit for its members'* (NZ/AP/RH).
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31 It seems to us that simply celebrating cooperation is not enough to convey the
32
33 immediate relevance of this form of enterprise to policymakers and scholars, let alone the
34
35 general public. Our interviewees concurred with what many commentators believe: the
36
37 absence of evidence-informed external critical comment stalls progressive changes in the
38
39 sector and undermines its role as a credible constituent of pluralist socio-economies (Davies
40
41 *et al.*, 2005; Manley *et al.*, 2023). To change this would require building evidence of best
42
43 practice through analysis of the sector (Birchall, 2017; Novković *et al.*, 2023) as well as the
44
45 education of cooperators (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova, 2023). In sum, coops need academia,
46
47 need business education. Are business schools willing to respond?
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54 **Business Schools' Indifference: Prejudice or Pragmatism?**

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56 There are very few business schools in the world offering customised programmes for and
57
58 about coops and none in the UK where we are based. A plausible explanation is that because
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2
3 universities in Britain are increasingly driven by the necessity of producing income to cross-
4 subsidise more expensive areas of education and research (Brown and Carasso, 2013) they
5
6 are particularly sensitive to market conditions. In the UK, the lack of demand from coops
7
8 themselves does not justify the expense of setting up and running such programmes. This
9
10 may be true, but our evidence suggests that there are other relevant factors here too, including
11
12 the lack of facilitative (professional) capacity in business schools, as was initially the case
13
14 with providing ‘responsible’ management education (Burchell *et al.*, 2015). A Canadian
15
16 educator commented: ‘...*certainly the big business theories and that would be helpful, but*
17
18 *they need more kind of concrete tools, right? That's directly relatable and catered to a*
19
20 *cooperative business, which it has a unique set of needs and requirements. So, you can't*
21
22 *cookie cutter something from, say, Harvard Business School and deliver that directly. It's*
23
24 *gotta be shaped into the cooperatives' context, right?’ (CAN/A/MV).*

25
26 Although many management skills taught in business schools are applicable in coops,
27
28 the difference cannot be ignored. A coop practitioner pointed out: ‘...*The fundamental*
29
30 *principles of decision making are driven by different outcomes, or different inputs, I guess.*
31
32 *And that's the thing that people keep coming back to: if I come from a corporate and I work*
33
34 *in a coop, I continue to behave in that same fashion. [There is a] real difference: it's sort of a*
35
36 *different mind-set, I think; and the great thing within the coop environment, from my*
37
38 *experience and talking to members, is that the culture is quite different’ (NZ/AP/RH).*

39
40 People who see business schools as the bastions of the teaching of conventional
41
42 management theories (Giacalone and Wargo, 2009) tend to be sceptical about how well
43
44 business graduates fit into coops, because management as a discipline is rarely attentive to
45
46 ‘alternative’ organisational forms. Chandler (1962; 1984) argued that the demand for
47
48 business education was linked to a historical move from owner control to shareholder
49
50 capitalism run by professional managers. Such a diagnosis has shaped the language and
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3 values of business schools. As one interviewee put it: *'the cooperative model has been seen*
4 *as a bit hippie left field'* (NZ/AP/RH). Modern business education tends to emphasise
5
6 competition as the most efficient mechanism for the distribution of resources contributing to
7
8 a worldview that places 'efficiency above equity' (McCabe *et al.*, 2006). When describing
9
10 business school training provision for and/or about coops, our respondents from different
11
12 parts of the world were unanimous in that *'At the moment, there's pretty much nothing. If you*
13
14 *do law, accounting or business, there is nothing about cooperatives. To get the universities to*
15
16 *pick this up seems to be very challenging, there just doesn't seem to be the willingness'*
17
18 (UK/A/MA). Another academic shared her experience of teaching about coops: *'...over the*
19
20 *years, students have come up to me and said, "I never knew that that was an option. Gosh, I*
21
22 *think that's really interesting. I'd like to learn more about that and maybe work in a place like*
23
24 *that". And you know, they're coming from a position of having known nothing about it'*
25
26 (UK/A/AM).

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33 One possible factor influencing the attitude in business schools is the long-standing
34
35 conviction in certain academic circles that coops are inefficient and protectionist. The origins
36
37 of this view can be traced back to the late 19th century and the writings of Maffeo Pantaleoni,
38
39 a proponent of neo-classical economics (Gide, 1898). This opinion has not faded with the
40
41 passage of time. In fact, according to Spencer Thompson, who dedicated considerable effort
42
43 to investigating the issue in relation to worker coops (Thompson 2015; 2016), it remains
44
45 central to modern theories of the firm. Contract-based theories argue that firms exist because
46
47 they minimise transaction costs by internalising certain market functions. Competence-based
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49 theories characterise the firm as a platform for accumulating productive capabilities that
50
51 result in competitive advantages in the market. Although these schools offer different
52
53 interpretations they have, as Thompson points out, one common implication: both argue that
54
55 coop firms are inefficient and have no advantage over the traditional firm due to slowness of
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3 decision processes, pluralism of objectives, risk avoidance, etc. This makes it difficult to
4
5 justify making coops a focus of attention in standard business courses, relegating them to a
6
7 ‘special interest’ category.
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10 A prominent Australian professor of business and labour history with decades of
11
12 involvement in academia globally summarised his experience like this: *‘There is a lot of*
13
14 *confusion among business academics about what a coop is. What is the problem is the level*
15
16 *of ignorance even among people who are supposedly highly educated... Business schools are*
17
18 *not interested. It is not an Australian issue; it is an international issue’* (AUS/AP/GP). A
19
20 prominent economist with a track record of being a dean in a number of business schools
21
22 worldwide put it simply: *‘The degree of ignorance about the model is quite astonishing’*
23
24 (UK/A/MA). An academic and practitioner from New Zealand adds: *‘...cooperatives, as you*
25
26 *know, [create] 16% of our GDP, it's huge. So, [students] should actually be aware of that*
27
28 *whether they go and work for one or not. I think that's a key part is whether you're doing,*
29
30 *let's say, law, accounting or business, it should be incorporated as just one of the business*
31
32 *models for consideration... And so, a lot of these students then leave, and they might want to*
33
34 *set up a business, you know, they don't actually consider the cooperative model as an*
35
36 *opportunity to go into business. Because they're not aware of it’* (NZ/AP/RH). But what if
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38 business schools can learn from coops? The next section offers some evidence that this is
39
40 indeed the case.
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49 **Advancing pluralism**

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51 Business school negativity towards the coop model provokes a defensive reaction on the part
52
53 of the coop community. Johnston Birchall, a scholar and movement champion, formulated a
54
55 question that was probably pondered by many coop thinkers: *‘Why should we try to fit co-*
56
57 *operatives into a conventional economic theory that is essentially hostile to them?’* (Birchall,
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3 2017:27).

4
5 Most business schools claim to be keen to address the UN sustainable development
6 goals and global challenges so it seems an opportune moment for relations between business
7 schools and coops to change. A pluralist approach to what business school academics study,
8 perhaps reframing it as ‘organising’, should provoke a wider acceptance of forms with
9 multiple institutional logics (Pache and Santos, 2010; Parker *et al.*, 2014). Rising inequalities
10 and a populist backlash against liberal democratic governance, combined with the climate
11 and ecological crises, means that many corporations have found that their legitimacy in the
12 eyes of the public and state regulators very much depends on their performance as
13 responsible citizens, protectors of the environment, and creators of social value. Business
14 education ignores this context at its peril, and could play a central role in advancing
15 progressive ideals through curriculum, research and engagement.
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30 For example, the recent pandemic has awakened interest in the preconditions for
31 business resilience. Coops have a well-documented record of being stable employers and
32 showing better endurance through crises than conventional enterprises of similar size, active
33 in the same sectors and present in the same communities and regions (Billiet *et al.*, 2021;
34 Birchall and Ketilson, 2009; Roelants *et al.*, 2012). Research on coops shows that it is their
35 decision process that results in more resilient organisations (Chevallier, 2011) but inclusive
36 decision making is not well understood (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Battilana *et al.*, 2017),
37 making this an important issue awaiting research. In addition, coops do business in ways that
38 address multiple social goals (OECD, 2020a; 2020b) and have proven to be especially
39 effective in mobilising and creating community assets to boost local economies (Manley and
40 Whyman, 2021; Bianchi and Vieta, 2020). In search of business models that can balance
41 efficiency and resilience, business academics might learn from the experience of coop
42 organisations, even if it means a revision of long-standing preconceptions such as that
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3 democratic governance incapacitates effectiveness. Cross-sectoral connectedness is
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5 unimpressive: *'...there is only a handful of us in Canada that do this. There is maybe about*
6
7 *10 of us in Canada, that maybe 15 people, maybe 20, something like that, that are active*
8
9 *activists, academics that work with the cooperative sector... That's kind of how it works here.*
10
11 *I anticipate that in most parts of the world, except probably Italy; is a little different because*
12
13 *of the size of the cooperative sector and how entrenched the social cooperative movement is*
14
15 *in Italy'* (CAN/A/MV).

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19 Coops have always been laboratories for social innovation (Novković, 2008; Pek,
20
21 2021; Zaunseder, 2022) and can enrich traditional research in many relevant areas of
22
23 organising. They provide a context to explore the social dimensions of employment,
24
25 leadership, work/life balance, well-being, equality, participation, accountability,
26
27 organisational culture, place management and regional regeneration, and so on (Case and
28
29 Deaton, 2020; Manley and Whyman, 2021; Webster *et al.*, 2021). Coops are living
30
31 demonstrations of concepts such as empowerment, organizational citizenship, followership
32
33 and more (Kociatkiewicz *et al.*, 2021). As an academic and cooperative educator put it *'if*
34
35 *you're teaching people about cooperative ways of working, you're teaching them how not to*
36
37 *sit in an office, following orders and working all the hours that God sent without having any*
38
39 *control over your working day. It's a fundamentally different way of getting people to engage*
40
41 *in business. I think the reason cooperatives should be in business schools is so that students*
42
43 *can learn about completely different ways of doing business'* (UK/A/AM).

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49 The opportunities for research gains and knowledge advancement are clear, so why
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51 are so few academics interested in coops? In the earlier sections we considered the
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53 ideological and scholarly reasons for the disconnect. Next, we consider the practical
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55 impediments.
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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 that 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 provides 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 1,400 sessions with more than 5,000 papers 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 papers 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 learned 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

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2
3 their academic careers on coop topics. However, career prospects depend on a record of
4 publications in highly ranked journals, and that is not easy for coop scholars. We were able to
5 identify only three papers exploring aspects of coop organisation that have appeared over the
6 last twenty years in the *Academy of Management Journal*. The neglect of such topics may
7 also be seen in the composition of various journal quality lists that often play a decisive role
8 in performance metrics. Only *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* features in both
9 the UK Chartered Association of Business Schools and the Australian Business Deans
10 Council's journal quality lists, and the rank is middling. Although there are specialist journals
11 outside these lists, their perceived lack of prestige makes them less attractive in the eyes of
12 aspiring academics. *Journal of Cooperative Studies* – one of the movement's main journals,
13 is not in the academic journal guides. As the Editor-in-Chief explained in an interview, this is
14 because it is a coop venture without the marketing and distribution reach of the publishing
15 conglomerates that dominate the journal field, adding: '*Whenever you're outside the*
16 *mainstream, it is hard to get noticed*' (UK/A/AM).

17
18
19 Academic expertise is an important prerequisite for ending the disconnect because
20 coops expect the university to be able to help develop courses. One interviewee noted that the
21 group of coops that sponsored a programme at his university in Belgium '*wanted it to be*
22 *tailored to the specific needs of cooperative enterprises but they were not sure what those*
23 *needs were*' (B/A/FD). A quality-approved programme from an established university was
24 important for them but they expected the teaching to be led by academics who understood
25 coop business. This means that efforts are needed by both coop organisations and the
26 academic community to raise the profile of coop studies to make them a viable career
27 prospect for researchers.

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30 In summary, according to our interviewees, it is desirable that the students are trained
31 by academics with coop expertise but this is a constraint on the growth of provision, because

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3 one of the traditional channels of student entry – progression from a bachelor’s programme to
4
5 a master’s programme – was not working. This is mostly the consequence of the fact that
6
7 undergraduate modules on coops are rare and usually delivered as options. As a result,
8
9 undergraduates are not given the opportunity to develop an interest in the coop economy. In
10
11 the few cases in which business schools offer courses with an emphasis on coops, as we
12
13 learned, it is typically for postgraduate students with coop-specific elements embedded in a
14
15 conventional business school curriculum. However, the paucity of relevant learning materials
16
17 was so great that it meant that it was the students themselves who had to supply case study
18
19 material. Business schools do not have the career incentives, publication infrastructure or
20
21 teaching materials to engage with the coop economy. What might be done about this state of
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23 affairs?
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31 **Discussion**

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33 Our respondents on both sides of the disconnect are clear. They want business schools to
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35 broaden their focus and recognise the relevance of alternative models of ownership,
36
37 governance and control. We believe that unless schools address these gaps, they will struggle
38
39 to keep up with societal demands attributing value to democracy, participation and
40
41 inclusivity. If business schools genuinely want to address the aims of the UN Principles for
42
43 Responsible Management Education (PRME), the SDGs, or help low carbon businesses, then
44
45 they cannot afford to ignore the coop economy.
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49
50 However, one of the problems is the perception of ideological differences. This may
51
52 become less of a problem because there are signs of change in the language used by
53
54 businesses which have found their most visible manifestation in the interest in corporate
55
56 social responsibility, business ethics, corporate purpose, B-Corps and so on. Of course, this is
57
58 not to suggest that the fundamental nature of business has changed, and we do recognise that
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3 such ideas can be used to merely polish reputations. Regardless, the consequences of this
4
5 shift are potentially enormous. The basic assumption of competitive individualism as the
6
7 foundation of the capitalist economy has received a powerful and compelling counterbalance
8
9 which is publicly accepted by the public, governments and firms as an imperative for
10
11 continued legitimacy. Business education cannot ignore this.
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14
15 In response, many business schools have subscribed to the PRME seeing it as a
16
17 platform to raise the profile of sustainability in business and management schools and 'to
18
19 ensure they provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economic and
20
21 sustainability, while drawing attention to SDG agenda and aligning academic institutions
22
23 with the work of the UN Global Compact (UNPRME, nd). The signatories take it upon
24
25 themselves to incorporate into their academic activities, curricula, and organisational
26
27 practices the values of global social responsibility.
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31 Setting aside the extent to which being a signatory actually demonstrates a great deal
32
33 about the practice of a school, the visibility of initiatives such as PRME indicates that there
34
35 could be far more common ground between coops and schools in terms of values and purpose
36
37 than is commonly assumed. Taking PRME seriously could make it much easier to work with
38
39 coops. *'The cooperative content should be there to challenge and transform and to radically
40
41 critique existing ways of doing business'*, argues one of the interviewed academics. *'There's a
42
43 role for cooperatives, both in promoting better working practices, but also working practices
44
45 that are less destructive of the environment. And, you know, I think business schools that
46
47 don't address sustainability are dinosaurs'* (UK/A/AM).
48
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51 Whether specialist or general, if the ideological differences can be set aside there is no
52
53 credible reason why business schools could not increase the awareness of coops in their
54
55 mainstream teaching. Our evidence shows the presence of common grounds upon which to
56
57 strengthen the coops-academia connection, some encouraging examples of collaboration, and
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1
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3 clear reputational and political incentives for business schools to engage. As organisations
4 that prioritise social solidarity, organisational democracy and community-focused
5 commitments, coops demand visibility.
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10 Of course, it is naïve to anticipate a major expansion of customised coop centred
11 programmes. Demand cannot be substantial in the short term if only because in smaller
12 coops, which currently make up the vast majority, training in business is normally only aimed
13 at board members and managers. Many agree that it is a challenge to allocate funds even to
14 these people: *'...how do you make sure that your cooperative allocates money to ensure*
15 *education and training of those individuals sitting on the board?'* (NZ/AP/RH; also
16 CAN/AP/EH). It is a different proposition for large coops, multinationals like Mondragón,
17 Groupe Crédit Agricole or Zen-Noh, where, boards of directors address complex strategic
18 problems. They are more likely to support their members in acquiring advanced degrees and
19 have the resources to do so. Indeed, as we already noted, in our sample of universities with a
20 postgraduate course on co-operation it was large coops that initiated and sponsored their
21 provision, though there are counter examples. Webb (2020) reports that coop graduate
22 educational programmes by St Mary's University in Nova Scotia (Canada), which was a part
23 of our sample, were met with strong resistance from many large coops, who continued to
24 send managers to standard MBA programmes. Our data also confirm the observation that
25 *'today many cooperatives do not allocate adequate resources towards member education'*
26 (Hannley, 2007:219). For many coops, education focuses on the specifics of coop practice
27 rather than learning widely about organisation and economy (Emmanuel, 2007), but the
28 movement, it seems, is not engaged enough with research to support this learning. A closer
29 collaboration with business schools will place coops in a better position to understand
30 themselves, their environment and competitors.
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58 Business schools have been receiving much internal and external criticism over
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3 realise its full potential (Dash, 2013), which cannot happen without an educational system
4 that teaches and promotes the coop business model (Audebrand, 2016). Relying exclusively
5 on the education which exists within the movement limits opportunities to challenge the lack
6 of plurality within conventional business and business schools.
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11
12 Since business schools claim to shape the attitudes and priorities of future business
13 leaders, they are an obvious vehicle for promoting pluralism. A more engaged stance will
14 also increase their legitimacy as an agent of change, not only through scholarship or learning,
15 but perhaps also by revisiting their own existing research priorities and organisational
16 practice. As one business school academic suggested, *'If you're going to take cooperative
17 education as meaning not just teaching about the business models, but if you're going to talk
18 about it in terms of teaching corporative principles and values, there's a limit to how far you
19 can teach democracy without actually doing democracy. It's when you get to the social
20 transformative thing that it becomes difficult to go beyond a certain stage in a traditional
21 university'* (UK/A/JYM).
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35 On the surface, the disconnect could be explained by some lack of demand on both
36 sides, but it appears to us that more profound tensions are also at play. Modern business
37 education has its origins in economic theories that assume *homo economicus*. This has
38 resulted in a dismissive attitude towards ideas about collective action, exemplified in the
39 principle of cooperation. Business schools will need to reconsider some of their dominant
40 assumptions if they are to raise awareness of coops as legitimate mainstream businesses. But
41 however difficult this might be, we believe that it is necessary in the light of the sustained and
42 profound criticism of contemporary versions of capitalism which are complicit with deep
43 inequalities and an inability to achieve greater social, economic and environmental
44 sustainability. As organisations that prioritise social solidarity, organisational democracy,
45 community-focused commitments and delivering societal good, business schools have much
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3 to learn from coops and possibly enrich existing management knowledge by expanding its
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5 contextual horizons.
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8 There are an increasing number of initiatives and infrastructures exist that could link
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10 coops and business schools. For example, the ICA has a thematic Committee on Cooperative
11
12 Research (CCR) with a mission to bridge academic research and the cooperative world. One
13
14 recent example is an international conference hosted in 2024 by a British university organised
15
16 and chaired by the business school Dean, himself a prolific coop researcher. CCR has also
17
18 recently established a Young & Emerging Scholars Network to support and promote
19
20 cooperative studies. In addition, there is no denying that the depth of the disconnect might
21
22 vary across countries. In Canada, as we learned, where the cooperative legislative acts exist
23
24 in each province, resources and research funding are directed towards mutual forms of
25
26 organisations. However, a more typical situation is eloquently described by a chief executive
27
28 of the New Zealand's apex coop organisation: *'The national education system does not help a*
29
30 *bit to build awareness about coops as business organisations'*, to the extent that *'if people do*
31
32 *not work in coops, they do not understand them'* (NZ/AP/RH). This means that there are
33
34 practical consequences for the selection and implementation of strategies for business schools
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36 and coops in different countries. Other forms of organising and governance might bring about
37
38 equally valuable results, but democratic organising as practiced by coops creates responsible
39
40 agents invested in outcome, which we believe makes democracy a 'normative priority'
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42 (Knight and Johnson, 2011:20) for organising.
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50 To conclude, the disconnect can be explained, but we believe that it cannot be
51
52 justified or defended. There is no incompatibility between academic agenda of business
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54 schools and coops. What is missing currently is the relevant operational capacity and intent to
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56 initiate the change on the part of business schools, and the recognition on the part of coops
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58 that their members need wider training in organising. The disconnect can be mended, if there
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is will on both sides.

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