

Co-operation - and Universities and CollegesCO-OPERATIVE STUDY AND RESEARCH

by

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Universities and Colleges, it is well known, have two functions: teaching and research. In both fields they are enjoined to seek excellence and to remain independent, searching for the truth according to their lights without subjecting themselves to the temporary or partisan needs of this or that outside interest. It is a noble ideal, and like most other ideals, not always observed to the full in practice. Nevertheless, it is there as the guiding star to which reference can be taken from time to time, and over the years certain practical methods have been evolved to ensure that even in the rough and tumble of real life the general guidelines to the ideal are preserved without straining or hampering actual work unduly.

University Teaching and Research

Thus in teaching, Universities are quite prepared to meet the needs of outside bodies for special courses with particular emphasis on this or that aspect as long as the staff are allowed to teach according to their own conscience the truth as they see it with the free-ranging openness expected from University courses. Of course, the teaching also has to be at an intellectual level appropriate for University work.

In research, the other half of the Universities' activities, similar broad guidelines may lead, and have in

the past indeed led to more difficult and complex demarcations. Much research, particularly in the natural sciences but also in the social sciences, is funded from outside, by bodies of various kinds, including private profit-making companies. Some problems arising therefrom have clear solutions: thus it would be unacceptable for any discoveries to be kept secret for the benefit of one firm only, giving it a competitive advantage over others: scientific investigation must be open, its results available to benefit the whole of mankind. Yet the granting of a patent often involves temporary secrecy and results affecting national security and military matters may involve even greater conflict. Again, a firm or trade association may wish to pursue certain lines, when the researchers paid by them might feel that other lines are more promising. Research sponsored from outside may be wide and general, or narrow in scope and there comes a point of narrowness demanded by the sponsor at which the University will refuse to accept the task, and the funds, as incompatible with its overriding ideals.

These are some of the difficult and blurred boundary lines which arise in the case of outside sponsorships. Much research and almost all teaching does, however, arise out of the decisions of members of the Universities themselves. They decide what courses to put on, in the light usually of their own professional views of what a degree demands, in the light of their own special abilities and interests, and in the light of what the market, the outside world requires - as well as, in these days of stringency, in the light of what the available resources will permit. In the end, University courses and Special Subjects within them will contain what University staffs think they ought to contain.

Research (apart from the sponsored research noted above) is even more unforced and idiosyncratic, depending almost entirely, merely subject to the resource constraint,

on what individuals and groups are interested in. University research is, broadly speaking, of two kinds. One is research by members of the staff themselves, as part of their contractual obligations as University teachers. While the area of their interest is entirely their own, and cannot be dictated or limited by anyone in the University, they have a variety of sources to draw on to support it. The University itself will provide some facilities, such as books and journals in the Library, laboratories and assistance, possibly some secretarial help, duplication, travel expenses, perhaps even research assistance. If the scheme is very costly, outside aid may be available. There are, on the one hand, the Government-financed bodies, particularly the Research Councils (Science, Medical, Social Science, etc.). There are also private foundations, among which the Leverhulme, Nuffield, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations are possibly the best known, but there are many more. Funds are always limited and applications are therefore competitive, but a good project will almost invariably be supported, provided that it satisfies an Advisory Committee of experts that it is indeed a good project. Two things should particularly be stressed here. One is that the funds available may be quite large, permitting, say, the employment of several research assistants for several years, or the acquisition of large apparatus. The other, that the initiative comes entirely from the researcher - though he may know, and take into account, the predilection of one or other awarding body.

The other type of research is carried out by post-graduate students, as part of their work for a higher degree. This is partly an educational process: by undertaking their researches under supervision, young people learn how to go about it, the actual discoveries being in the nature of a by-product. Yet they may be quite valuable, or give valuable hints for future work, either by the student himself or by someone else who reads the thesis.

Some research students finance themselves, but most are financed by scholarships out of public funds and certain foundations, including the Universities themselves. Again the initiative for the topic rests largely with the student himself, though the final choice must be the result of mutual consultations with the University Department and the Supervisor as to what is feasible, what resources there are, and what may be worth doing from the point of view of the science concerned.

Why Further Co-operative Interest?

It is a sad fact that in all this varied activity in our Universities, matters of Co-operative interest play a very small part. Courses and research schemes on specific Co-operative topics are exceedingly rare, and even if they are found, they are found singly and ephemerally rather than in a continuous broad sweep. There is no sustained interest in the Co-operative Movement anywhere in the British academic world. This is surely a surprising fact. It is also a great pity.

There can be no doubt that greater University interest in Co-operative studies could do nothing but good. Knowledge, putting it at its lowest, can do no harm, and in the modern world it is hard to envisage any progress without it. Moreover, knowledge and interest often go together, and the British Co-operative Movement could do with more friendly interest in wider circles. It is surely its low profile which is at least in part responsible for the lack of active participation on the part of such public institutions as the Universities. Perhaps this should be particularly stressed. The Universities are very largely maintained by public funds. Their teaching and research goes on according to their own self-understanding as to what their role should be. To excite their interest in Co-operative matters would not require any new resource

necessarily, least of all from the Co-operative Movement itself. It would merely require a switch of resources already available and in use.

There is here a problem of demand as well as supply: we have to ensure that the information, the teaching derived from the Universities and Colleges, also reaches the Co-operative Movement. There is, let us remember, never a clear-cut line as to what is of interest to Co-operatives. Much research, from computerised stock control to democratic behaviour, may have been undertaken with general purposes in mind, but will be of immediate value to Co-operative societies, if they but know how to use it. It is here, perhaps, that the Society for Co-operative Studies has a much larger part to play than it has undertaken to play up to now: the transmission to Societies and other units of information about work that has been done in Accounting, in retail distribution or market research, in Sociology or Economics, and that could be applied in their day-to-day lives. Again, it is in part up to Co-operative Societies to ask the Extramural or Adult Education Departments of Universities to put on courses for them. Almost invariably, if a worthwhile class is formed, the University will find a teacher.

Yet the main weakness seems to lie with the supply. It will be evident from what has been said, as well as from the high cost of University-type research and teaching, that direct sponsorship by Co-operative Societies, while valuable, could play only a small part. Given sufficient funds, the Movement could initiate one or more research projects within broad stipulated areas and find an interested academic to take it on. Given even more funds, it could finance a Lectureship, with the guarantee of continued lecture courses in at least one University, as a national model or pacemaker. It would find, though, that in the current economic blizzard, the former covenant

for, say, seven years might not be enough, since Universities will be reluctant to take over the commitment of the Lectureship after that date, while dismissal of a lecturer can be a very costly business. Moreover, in the light of current rates of inflation, such a sponsorship would be an almost open-ended commitment at least in money terms. It would be possible, and certainly cheaper, to found one or more research scholarships for postgraduate students carrying the proviso that the research must be in an area of Co-operative interest. These should normally be attached to one or other institution, though they could be free-floating, leaving the appointee to find a University to work in, and in either case the sponsor would have some say in the appointment. The commitment here would be strictly limited, normally for three years at a time.

How to Interest the Academics?

Such efforts, though worth-while, would be comparatively costly and limited in effect. What would be far more promising would be to interest academics themselves in teaching and research of interest and value to the Co-operative Movement. Let it be stressed again that there are large numbers of people involved here, with varying specialisms and ideas, with access to large funds, and with very wide freedom to choose their field of interest. The resources involved will be spent in any case: why not ensure that some are spent in furthering Co-operative studies?

The key is the interest of academics themselves. Some are always looking for topics. Many are committed to Co-operation in an abstract sense, or come from a Co-operative background. Others again might feel that the Movement, both as a socio-political phenomenon, and as a set or purely business enterprises, offers exactly the concrete field of study they have been looking for. The potential, in its permutations and combinations, seems almost

endless. Our next step must be to try and tap it.

The principle is easy; it is the practical means that will be the difficulty. It is clear that there is no single royal road. It must be a concerted drive along many different approach routes: pilot studies and offers of funds and resources; personal contacts; advertisement and propaganda; the appeal to loyalties and the chance of discovery. Many ideas would be needed, and it might be a useful task for the Society for Co-operative Studies to supply them. It would certainly be one of the most cost-effective ways of applying our resources.