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How to cite this article:

Webster, T. & Kuznetsova, O. (2018). Harnessing research for a 21st Century Co-operative Movement: Introducing the Co-operative Early Researchers Network (CERN). *Journal of Co-operative Studies* 51(2), 37-42. <https://doi.org/10.61869/AXBQ5709>

Harnessing Research for a 21st Century Co-operative Movement: Introducing the Co-operative Early Researchers Network (CERN)

Tony Webster and Olga Kuznetsova

Introduction

Earlier this year, Olga Kuznetsova of Manchester Metropolitan University and I were asked by the Co-operative College in the UK to help organise a new network, which would bring together new researchers from all over the world interested in co-operatives and the solidarity economy. The aims are to share ideas, help the researchers develop themselves and to work closely with the co-operative movement to assist it in building its strength for the future.

Co-operative Early Researchers Network (CERN) was born in January 2018 to offer a home for a new generation of co-operative scholars and in a recognition that links between the co-operative and academic worlds have not always been as strong and productive as both really need them to be.

Individual academics have always been involved in co-operation, and heroic efforts have been made by this journal to build a bridge between the two worlds. But there is a need to place relationships between them on a more organised footing to allow the two worlds to help fashion a stronger position for co-operation in the 21st century. The marginalisation of co-operation from the mainstream, especially in business studies and economics during the high tide of Thatcherism in the 1980s and 1990s is well documented, and thankfully that deep alienation of co-operation from academia has receded in recent decades. Modern thinkers and public intellectuals like N. Chomsky, E. Olsen, J. Porritt, A. Sen, J. Stiglitz, who argue in favour of market plurality, endorse the co-operative model as a viable and promising alternative to market orthodoxy (Porritt, 2007; Stiglitz, 2009). In the same vein, an EU-commissioned report recognises co-operatives as a principal sector in advancing social economy (European Union, 2012). And yet, experts agree that co-operatives has been off the research radar for some years and miss on new knowledge that the latest developments in business and management have contributed to (Roelants et al., 2012). This created gaps in a systematic scholarly analysis of this form of socio-economic practice and its dynamics and by implications, the humanistic and social values of the co-operative movement are slow to find adequate representation in business, management and economic research and the practice of the modern corporate world.

The observations made decades ago (Davies et al., 2005; Weiss, 1977) remain valid: the lack of collaboration between academia and co-operatives significantly weakens the impact of the co-operative business model in influencing the social orientation and the priorities of mainstream business. There is a more disconcerting side to this: within the co-operative movement itself, views on how to run a business are typically framed by outdated conceptual underpinnings (Laliberté, 2013; Sanchez Bajo, 2013). This not only limits a wider social impact of co-operation; equally important is that a research-informed scholarly feedback about the established co-operative practices has not been strong enough to incite progressive changes in the co-operative sector.

In this respect, a timely encouragement has come from the United Nations that recently highlighted the need for (a) enlisting the academic and research community to mainstream the co-operative business model; (b) establishing a network of international experts in co-operative

studies in order to define and prioritise research topics in collaboration with the co-operative movement and other stakeholders (United Nations, 2013). The scope for a more productive and fruitful relationship between the co-operative movement and academia remains huge, and CERN is an initiative intended to build it from the bottom up, particularly through new generations of researchers who are early in their career, and who will be the academic leaders of the future. In this way, the plan is to build deep and organic links between this new generation and the co-operative movement, which will produce research and work better fitted to the needs of the movement, in the process imbuing this generation and their successors with a radically different — and productive — relationship with the movement.

The Role of CERN

So what will CERN do? It will work with co-operators, more experienced academics, the Co-operative College, and others to develop new research projects of special value to the movement, and to share ideas and experiences which enhance researchers as academics, and particularly as ones actively engaged in the co-operative movement. The greater emphasis placed upon 'impact' by the universities and research funding bodies means that there are powerful career incentives for emerging academics to engage with wider communities like the co-operative movement, and while this is not the reason why CERN members are enthusiastic about the network, it does mean that their efforts to work with co-operators will be given much greater support by their universities than has been the case in the past, and this can only be of benefit to all concerned. CERN is eager therefore to engage directly with the movement.

Co-operative scholarship indeed has a huge impact promise, because despite being a mighty economic force with a wide-ranging social imprint, co-operation occasionally tries "to navigate the difficult sea without the right compass" (Dash, 2013: 43), not having its management systems and tools optimised to effectively absorb external knowledge. The hit-and-miss situations in co-operative practice can be avoided if the co-operative sector learns to benefit from innovations and the general advances in managerial know-how to complement its successful, but somewhat conservative, tradition of growing knowledge by delivering training and nurturing professionals from within their own system. In this respect, the value of CERN is that it helps to recruit the intellectual talent of early career researchers external to the movement into co-operative studies. In a long run, this would hopefully encourage business schools to embrace more profoundly the needs of the co-operative movement via their training and teaching programmes. This is a particularly timely task and a response to calls to correct the focus of traditional education provision by business schools and ensure a tighter fit with changing business conditions and practices (Audebrand, 2016).

The benefits associated with building the CERN community include the increased awareness of the importance of research on co-operatives. This will enhance the credibility and attractiveness of this research area, which in turn contributes to theoretical understanding and intellectual capacity to advance theoretical scholarship in the field. The inevitable knowledge sharing within CERN would help develop methodological rigour and test novel approaches and techniques specific to co-operative scholarship and its unique proximity to practical users.

CERN at Co-operative Education & Research Conference in Manchester, May 2018

A first important step was taken at a special session at the recent Co-operative Education and Research Conference held in Manchester early in May. This was a discussion session at which the audience were asked about what they thought the priorities for CERN should be. The responses were extremely helpful and are already making an impact on future plans. The following areas of, and general directions of, research were identified both verbally and through a questionnaire distributed to the audience:

- The importance of engaging various groups (poor, the young) and wider public with co-operative ideas – this in itself was identified as a key area for future research. How, in particular, is this to be accomplished?
- Co-operation as a response to unemployment and insecurity of employment.
- Co-operation, place making, and communities. Rochdale was mentioned specifically, and a fascinating mapping exercise in New York was cited as an example of how research has enhanced policy and promotion of the solidarity economy in that city. This is an area where CERN can make an early contribution.

How to engage with wider communities and the movement is a key question, and here the audience offered some solid, practical and yet very insightful observations and suggestions:

- The importance of parity of esteem and full partnership between researchers and researched — that the researched are not ‘done to’ but have an equal voice in the research process and its outputs.
- The importance of ‘action learning’ in securing this aim.
- Development of conscious strategies to convert research findings into practical policy.
- A general commitment by researchers and CERN to take themselves and their research beyond the academic and engage in policy advocacy.
- Negotiate and conduct joint projects with Co-operative Councils.
- Engage with the International Co-operative Alliance Research Network and UKSCS.
- On EMPOWER SE and through the College and co-operative organisations organise stakeholder engagement events on the Co-operative University as a place to be and co-partner social entrepreneurs.
- The importance of theoretical underpinning of research.
- The importance of stakeholders having a role.
- The value of case studies.
- The involvement co-operatives and co-operators in research guidance for early researchers.

Unsurprisingly, partnership equality and democracy were key principles stressed by all those who responded. Co-operative research should be fully co-operative in nature, an equal partnership between researchers and co-operators, with research as a co-production of researchers and researched. These are principles which chime well with the prevailing views of CERN members.

In addition, responses saw a key role for the Co-operative College in helping facilitate CERN's engagement with the public and the movement. Responses were highly specific and practical, and have provided us with some important avenues to pursue:

- Build capacity in action research among non-researchers.
- Create opportunities for researchers and co-operators to meet and exchange ideas.
- Though questionnaires and other methods ascertain the research needs of co-operatives and co-operators and map them.
- Create a directory of researchers, and topics of interest.

- Use of REF impact agenda to strengthen link between co-operative research and co-operators — especially through the College becoming an impact facilitator.
- Ensure that CERN is fully engaged with the creation and work of the proposed new Co-operative University.
- Co-operative College to help with ethical approval of projects.
- Build FairShares labs (solidarity co-operative incubators) into each Co-operative University College (city).

The session gave some important pointers on how the Co-operative College can facilitate the efforts by CERN to reach out to communities and the wider movement, and CERN is now discussing with the College how to take the best of these suggestions forward.

A number of international areas for collaborative research were also identified, and these are going to become very important for CERN as it grows and expertise expands:

- Identifying best practice in co-operative solidarity between the global north and global south co-operatives.
- Migration/immigration.
- Ethnic diversity.
- Rights of indigenous peoples.
- Alternative lifestyles.
- Role of co-operatives in reconstructing civil society in post war zones.
- Co-operatives as agents for removing people from poverty.
- Environmental degradation.
- Amazon, Facebook, and Tesla.
- Role and impact of platform co-operatives that operate transnationally.
- Role of co-operatives in achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals.

CERN's Current Areas of Expertise

CERN's membership is growing, and as it does, its areas of knowledge and research also expand. Although the list is expanding all the time, at present, a sample of the research expertise of early career researchers includes:

- Examining the 'co-operative' ethos in collaborative governance frameworks: perspectives from black communities in Greater Manchester.
- Co-operative responses to gender in interwar Britain: an archival case study of co-operative movement visual culture.
- The co-operative character: Tracing the genealogy of character in the British co-operative movement.
- Co-operative place making and the re-building of co-operative social capital: A case study of contemporary Rochdale.

- Democratising ownership in the platform economy.
- Developing the social economy in the North East of England.

Immediate Plans

CERN is currently exploring a one day workshop later this year on “Building Local economies, communities and identities: Co-operatives and the social economy”. It is hoped to bring together academics, co-operators, and those involved in local economic development. We plan to develop a series of events on this theme, and are currently exploring possible sources of funding for it.

And Finally ... an Invitation!

It has been only a few months since CERN was created and now is an exciting time for its members to build legitimacy with their stakeholders. A number of doctoral students associated with CERN have gained, and are exploring, opportunities to work closely with the co-operative movement to inform their own studies, engage with local communities where they collect evidence, direct their research towards transformative practical outcomes by collaborating with local authorities, meeting co-operators, and hearing their voices. Most valuable, though, is that CERN encourages and supports its members to put their investigations to the scrutiny of potential users through dissemination and networking.

CERN is eager to reach out and engage with the wider co-operative movement. To this end, we would welcome co-operators with an interest in research to be part of the network. If you are interested, please email the CERN convenors: Professor Tony Webster (tony.webster@northumbria.ac.uk) or Dr Olga Kuznetsova (o.kuznetsova@mmu.ac.uk). CERN is looking forward to hearing from you and working with you!

The Authors

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Dr Olga Kuznetsova is Reader in Comparative Business Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her academic background training was in the field of banking and finance and economics. Her current research focuses on a wide range of the business and society issues, post-communist socio-economic transformation and emerging markets, the role of institutions and institutional theory, corporate governance and CSR.

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