

Guest Editorial

This year's conference, *Skills for Co-operators in the 21st Century — Learning to Do, Learning to Be* explored what learning looks like in contemporary times, covering two main strands: *The Co-operative University* and *Learning for New Co-operative Times*. There was a huge variety of presenters both from the UK and across the globe including India, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, and Malaysia. As well as a focus on many aspects of the development of a co-operative university, the programme also covered different types of international co-operation, the social and solidarity economy and technology for co-operative knowledge production.

The two day conference had plenty to choose from in the range of panels, workshops, presentations and plenary sessions. On the first day, conference participants were able to attend a wide selection of workshops, presentations and discussions on topics such as co-operative education, co-operative social entrepreneurship, promoting inclusion in co-operatives and the challenge of making co-operative governance fit with existing UK higher education structures. Sessions on the second day included more of the thinking around the co-operative university, mapping the solidarity economy, how co-operatives and trade unions can work together, young people in co-operatives and co-operative learning technology. This special issue of the *Journal for Co-operative Studies* reflects the themes of the conference and includes three peer-reviewed papers and four shorter commentary pieces.

In the first peer-reviewed paper, David Davies and James Nyland's *Critical Thinking for an Engaged University*, the authors discuss the problems of reconciling the idea of universities as a public good with a social mission as well as an educational one and the fact they must now compete in a capitalist marketplace. They propose a lack of critical thinking in universities is creating a rift between universities and the issues facing society, and suggest building a critical curriculum based on social knowledge for action and a reimagining of what community engagement means in the modern context.

Some of these themes are echoed in Marie Huxtable and Jack Whitehead's peer-reviewed paper, *Living Co-operative Values in Educational Contexts*, which discusses the development of the co-operative university as an institution that is not merely about the creation and dissemination of academic and scholarly knowledge. It focuses on the importance of supporting people as part of a lifelong process to contribute to the 'flourishing of humanity' at many levels, individually and collectively.

Rosidah Rashid and Nasibah Ahmad's paper on *The Involvement of Youth in the Top Management of Co-operatives* describes the need to encourage more young people into leadership and management positions of co-operatives in Malaysia to provide succession-planning for a co-operative movement dominated by 'elderly' leaders. Their study highlights the lack of youth engagement in leadership of co-operatives and suggests a lack of policies or programmes to integrate youth development into its activities is a key problem.

In the first of our shorter articles Tony Webster and Olga Kuznetsova's *Harnessing Research for a 21st Century Co-operative Movement: Introducing the Co-operative Early Researchers Network*, they discuss how this new network provides a much-needed link between the co-operative and academic worlds. This, they argue will both help the co-operative movement make progressive changes and also increase its social impact. It goes on to outline the key areas of research identified by participants in the CERN panel discussion at this year's conference.

Alex Bird's paper, *Working Together — the Push Back from Co-operatives and Trade Unions Starts Here*, from the conference session by Pat Conaty, Alex Bird and Cilla Ross, outlines the author's research into the needs of self-employed people and highlights potential solutions from the co-operative and trade union movements as a response to their needs. It describes the increasingly precarious working conditions for today's self-employed and focuses on two

case studies from within a much wider study that are already working towards strengthening collective solutions and providing ways for individual workers to benefit from co-operative approaches.

Stephen McCusker's short paper on *Learning Through Architecture and Successful Capital Projects in the Post-Capitalist Co-operative Economy of Northern England* highlights how three co-operatives have combined values and principles within their capital projects to retain their ethics and integrity whilst enhancing their social and community importance.

Colin Waugh's think piece, *How the Co-operative Movement can Change Further and Higher Education for the Better*, mirrors some of the points in both Huxtable and White's as well as Davies and Nyland's papers in reflecting that we are in danger of losing the valuable social and personal development aspects of adult learning and argues that the co-operative university has the potential to reintroduce this.

Finally, Katarzyna Gajewska's article *Practices and Skills for Self-Governed Communal Life and Work: Lessons for Co-operators from One US and One German Egalitarian Community* presents the argument that the challenges of living in a community provide valuable lessons in personal growth and resilience. These communities also provide examples of organisational, decision-making and conflict management processes that enable the people living in them to work together to solve individual and communal issues. In conclusion the author posits that these processes, as well as a sense of fun and allowing people to be who they are, can help us shape more co-operative societies.

The papers in this issue clearly show how the co-operative movement has a strong social remit and a sense of being able to offer creative and pioneering solutions to many of the issues in the world today, and this is also reflected in the thinking around the development of a co-operative university. These papers highlight how co-operatives and co-operators continue to be innovators and horizon scanners, not only in ensuring young people are ready to drive change in the co-operative movement, or that people can develop the skills to work collectively more effectively, but also in developing a co-operative university that is ready to tackle head on the thinking and learning required to respond to the needs and issues of modern society.

We would like to thank all of the authors for their contributions, both to the conference and to this special issue of the journal. It has been a privilege to take part in the guest editorship of this special issue, and we look forward in anticipation to next year's conference for our centenary year as a College.

Dr. Amanda Benson, Dr. Cilla Ross and Dr. Sarah Alldred from the Co-operative College.