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# The Centre for Co-operative Studies in Co-operative Education and Research

## Olive McCarthy

The Centre for Co-operative Studies is a university research centre which promotes education, training, independent research and consultancy in all aspects of co-operative organisation, social enterprise and local development. It is the only third level centre or department in Ireland focusing on co-operatives. Co-operative research and education in the Centre aims to have both an academic and practical relevance. It takes an interdisciplinary, problem-centred approach and is conducted with a multi-disciplinary perspective, focusing on the practical solution of key problems in the real world. This paper examines the role of the Centre in co-operative education and research and explores the impact this has had on the co-operative movement.

## Introduction

The Centre for Co-operative Studies is a university research centre which promotes education, training, independent research and consultancy in all aspects of co-operative organisation, social enterprise and local development. It was founded in 1980, by a small group of co-operatively minded academics who wished to explore and promote the co-operative concept through research and teaching. The group came to a common understanding of the meaning of co-operation as a *process* and that co-operatives, as organisations, enable this process. They then developed structural guidelines to ensure the effective implementation of the co-operative process, which were developed in the very first publication of the Centre entitled *The Co-operative Idea*. Later, in 1995, it helped to inform the thinking surrounding the restatement of co-operative principles by the International Co-operative Alliance. This small yellow book, published long before I joined the Centre, continues to provide a solid foundation in the philosophy of co-operation and is a guide to those new to co-operatives and a refresher to those who wish to revitalise their understanding of what it means to be part of a co-operative. Thirty years on, it is still a compulsive read and to me, a gem.

Today, the Centre continues its work of fostering research, study and education about co-operatives. Its mission is

to promote, through its research, consultancy and educational activities, the continued growth of the co-operative movement, as an effective, locally-owned and democratically-controlled sector of the economy, designed to address the urgent needs and problems of the community.

This mission attempts to operationalise the university's mission in the important areas of co-operative entrepreneurship and local development, through its research-led teaching, by improving access to the university by means of

flexible e-learning and distance learning programmes, by helping to maintain a diverse, socially responsible and able student population and by continuing to support and develop lifelong learning. While being a research centre in its own right, the Centre continues to be closely allied with the Department of Food Business and Development in UCC. Many staff members of the Department choose to conduct their research through the Centre. The Centre goes beyond the usual goals of conventional business departments and centres by stressing (in addition to economic success) the social and cultural issues of building local, democratic participation in indigenous businesses, which have as their first priority the promotion of the well-being of the local community and its citizens.

The aim of this short paper is to examine the role of the Centre in more depth and, in doing so, to explore some of the impact it has had on the co-operative movement both in Ireland and internationally.

## Research agenda

Research into co-operatives in the Centre takes an interdisciplinary, problem-centred approach and is conducted with a multi-disciplinary perspective, focusing on the practical solution of key problems in the real world. All of the Centre's activities are focused on helping people identify their own problems and meet their own needs through co-operative, economic action. The user, not just as consumer, producer or worker, but also as owner and controller, informs the focus. This requires an on-going dialogue with conventional perspectives on, for example, food and development, in the broadest sense, in the context of ownership, democracy, power, control, competitive advantage and so on. Research and publication (and research-based teaching) in this area, examines the strong co-operative dimension to both food and development, encompassing agriculture co-operatives, credit unions, workers co-operatives, social enterprises and more.

The Centre for Co-operative Studies continues to research and teach on the new and evolving ways that communities have found to solve their problems. For example, it is conducting research into alternative food networks, including farmers' markets, and the existing and potential role of co-operatives in shortening the food supply chain, reducing food miles and giving food producers greater control over crucial issues such as price and marketing channels. Two papers on this research are contained in this issue. Its credit union research programme is growing in strength, as issues such as financial inclusion, combating moneylending and increasing financial capability become more important in society.

Thus, the Centre's research aims to have both an academic and a practical relevance. As such, there is a tradition in this field of study to publish in journals and other channels which communicate with both the academic community and co-operative practitioners. Our research is often funded by individual co-operatives or groups of co-operatives (for example, the Irish League of Credit Unions, The Co-operative Forum), and by government and State agencies (for example, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *Údarás na Gaeltachta*<sup>1</sup>), who identify particular problems or opportunities facing co-operative sectors and who seek to broaden their knowledge and information through research. Research which arises from teaching is also a key feature, whereby in the best co-operative tradition, practitioners on Centre educational programmes have the opportunity to conduct research as part of their learning which is later compiled and published by the Centre. The Centre publishes under its own name and all such publications are subjected to a blind-peer review process. It also publishes books, chapters of books, journal articles and reports with various publishing houses. An example of one such book is reviewed in the Book Reviews section later. Research is also disseminated at national and international conferences of academics and practitioners.

The Centre has built a young and dynamic team of researchers in the co-operative area over the past number of years and hopes to continue building this team through its research programme and through enhanced opportunities for 4<sup>th</sup> level research into the application of the co-operative model of business as an effective alternative approach for meeting societal needs across a range of activities. Although relatively little time and effort are spent on self-promotion, the Centre has been contacted by almost every major

co-operative sector in Ireland seeking assistance and services of one kind or another. The Centre continues to be the only Irish academic third level centre/department focusing on co-operatives.

## **Development of educational programmes**

The Centre has also been heavily involved in researching and developing distance learning programmes to meet the needs of people involved in a broad range of co-operatives, social enterprises and local development initiatives. These programmes help bring the university to the community and to break down any barriers people may experience in accessing appropriate third level education. The suite of programmes includes the Diploma in Credit Union Studies, the Diploma in Social Integration and Enterprise, the BSc in Mutual and Credit Union Business, the Diploma and BSc in Rural Development, and the MBS in Co-operative and Social Enterprise. The research and development of these programmes has been largely funded by the co-operative sector and the course fees and expenses of individual students are often paid by the co-operative or credit union with which the student is involved.

Each module/course on these programmes is delivered using a combination of text-based modules, tutorials, lecture presentations, inter-university seminars and/or web-based delivery. Distance education lectures are held at various centres throughout Ireland, depending on the number and geographical spread of students. The main purpose of the lecture is to facilitate the learning process, assist in the completion of assignments and build up a team spirit within the group. The distance-learning module differs from an ordinary training manual in the way it is structured. It incorporates a number of techniques to assist with self-instruction giving the students flexibility and freedom to plan their learning in a way that best suits them. The MBS in Co-operative and Social Enterprise is unique amongst the programmes, in that it is delivered entirely by e-learning. This means that participants can take the programme from anywhere in the world. The only proviso is that they must have 2 years' experience as an employee or a volunteer in a co-operative or social enterprise. So far, students have taken the programme from as far away as South Africa and Timor-Leste.

The success of these distance learning programmes is indicated by consistently high enrolments. To date, there have been over one thousand graduates from these programmes, representing co-operatives and social enterprises

of every kind. Many of these graduates held or progressed on to hold influential positions within their co-operatives or with co-operative representative bodies, such as directorships with the Irish League of Credit Unions. Some graduates progressed to PhD studies.

## Other activities

The Centre has been a unifying force within the university and has helped to link business with science. Through its various programmes, it has brought all departments in the College of Business and Law together in delivering co-operative education programmes. And although co-operative education and research form the bedrock of what the Centre does, staff are also involved in a wide range of other related co-operative activities. For example, an extensive Resource Room is maintained to provide information, advice and support to existing and potential co-operative groups, to registered students and to the general public. A consultancy service is also offered, any income from which is retained by the Centre, rather than the individual staff members, and used to conduct further research into co-operatives. Its consultancy is very specialised, in that it brings expertise on co-operatives not readily available in the private sector. Staff members serve on committees which advise government on co-operative matters, are regularly invited to speak on co-operative issues in Ireland and internationally, organise conferences on co-operative research (for example, the 1998 and 2005 International Co-operative Alliance, Co-operative Research conferences), and host visiting academics and students who wish to conduct research on co-operatives. More recently, it has hosted academics from the University of Mondragon and Gdansk Business College.

The Centre maintains a website at [www.ucc.ie/ccs](http://www.ucc.ie/ccs) which contains further details on all its activities, including a list of publications.

## Conclusion

Almost 30 years since the establishment of the Centre for Co-operative Studies, the co-operative model is now facing renewed relevance given the current environment which puts an enhanced value

on accountability, public ownership and active citizenship. The increasing interest in the co-operative model in speaking to today's agenda and problems is particularly exciting for the Centre and presents new opportunities for co-operative education and research.

The relevance to Ireland of new kinds of co-operatives emerging through Europe and North America for the provision and enhancement of services previously managed by the State, voluntary bodies and religious orders, with particular emphasis on the provision of services to rural areas, will be of key relevance, given the continuing growth in cutbacks at national level. New forms of co-operative development in childcare, eldercare, transport, disability and health will also be examined. The renewed importance of locally-owned financial institutions in an increasingly globalised financial sector will also warrant detailed research. These priority areas relate clearly to national and international policy agendas in the areas of agriculture and food, health, finance, environment, and citizenship.

The links between co-operatives and food will deserve particular scrutiny. Research in this area aims at enhancing the management of the co-operative as an interface between highly sophisticated and globalised food industries and ecologically sustainable rural and urban areas. Effective co-operatives, owned and controlled by farmer-users, compete successfully on a global stage as well as building the sustainability of their local rural economies. New varieties of agricultural co-operatives (eg New Generation Co-operatives in the USA, and co-operation between farmers and consumers in Community Supported Agriculture Co-operatives in Japan, the USA and in parts of Europe) are having a major positive impact on rural development and are increasing the viability of small to medium sized farms. The co-operativisation of food across the food supply chain will continue to be a key research priority. Furthermore, a greater focus on the consumer within the food chain will also be important.

Finally, the Centre is anxious to build on existing and new international collaborations in co-operative education and research and very much welcomes interested parties to make contact at any time.

**Olive McCarthy is a lecturer and researcher with the Centre for Co-operative Studies and the Department of Food Business and Development at University College Cork, Ireland.**

## References

- 1 The State authority charged with the promotion and preservation of the Irish language. Community co-operatives are a key feature of Irish-speaking (Gaeltacht) areas.