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Co-operative Research and Research Co-operatives

Thomas Swann (Loughborough University)

Abstract

Offering a proposal for how the gap in discussions of co-operative higher education around research can be bridged, Swann suggests a broad framework for a research co-operative that would be able to provide an institutional framework for supporting and funding academic research. This chapter explores co-production as one approach to research that draws implicitly on core co-operative values, such as democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, and highlights the challenges faced in neoliberal higher education to co-produced research. Discussing a research co-operative as a potential response to these challenges, Swann touches on a number of existing examples of platforms that in one way or another mirror the functions we might want to see in a research co-operative. This chapter also identifies recent developments in platform co-operativism as of potential importance to making the idea of a research co-operative a reality in the short, medium and long term.

Higher education, research and co-operation

In discussions of co-operative higher education,¹ a focus on teaching is often more prevalent than a focus on research. While higher education teaching has seen attention in relation to co-operative aspirations both in terms of how it is conducted and how it is institutionalised, for research only the former of these has been explored in any detail.² There are several strands of thought on how academic research can be conducted in co-operative ways, often centred around bringing non-academics into processes of research (design and practice) as

¹ See Joss Winn's bibliography for a comprehensive overview of the literature:

<https://joss Winn.org/2013/11/21/co-operative-universities-a-bibliography/> Accessed 6 March 2019.

² The discussion below highlights some of the contributions to research methodology discussions that have drawn on participatory, collaborative and co-operative principles. These primarily cover, however, the practice of such research rather than its institutionalisation.

participants, rather than as subjects to be studied, and in relation to discussions of the student as (co-)producer of knowledge. These attempts at aligning research with certain values, such as those that have defined the co-operative movement (e.g. democracy, equality, equity, solidarity), are important because just like in co-operative approaches to teaching, research can be a site in which we strive to transform the social relations we live in. Research is fundamental not only in its own right but also as a foundation for effective teaching, something as true of co-operative higher education as in mainstream contexts. To paraphrase Kant, teaching without research is blind. How would a co-operative structure support research? And how, in a higher education landscape of increasing precarity would a co-operative structure provide employment and financial security not only for teachers but also for researchers? This chapter addresses these and the overarching question of how co-operative principles, like those highlighted above, can inspire research – both its practice and its institutionalisation – as much as it has inspired teaching.

Before attempting to answer these questions, however, a more fundamental one might be, why do we need to take research practice out of mainstream, neoliberal higher education? While there might be good reason to want to do research in more co-operative ways within the mainstream, one of which I will discuss below in more detail, this does not necessarily entail that this must be done outside of mainstream (that is, non-co-operative) institutions. Notwithstanding moves to marginalise and ultimately eradicate certain disciplines from universities, most notably humanities subjects like philosophy and history,³ there is still an element of freedom to what we academics working in mainstream higher education are permitted to study. For some subjects that depend on corporate funding, such as many STEM fields, researchers may be told directly what to research and how, with funding linked to

³ Cruickshank, J. (2016). Putting Business at the Heart of Higher Education: On Neoliberal Interventionism and Audit Culture in UK Universities. *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(1):e3, 1-33. <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/olh.77>

specific projects with desired outputs. In other areas, however, the performance management academics are increasingly subject to comes down to the quantity and ranking of publications, not principally on the content or orientation of those publications. It could be argued then that if one wants to do research in a more co-operative way then one should just get on and do it. As long as it leads to publication in the right journals, no one will care about whether it is co-operative or not, whether it aims to contribute to social change or not.⁴ This may well be true, but at least in the UK, how academic performance is managed and whether people are hired or their employment is continued depends as much on securing funding grants for research as it does on publications. Funders like the UK research councils may well struggle to grasp the value of co-operative research practices (even within supposedly ‘transformative’ agendas) while fixed outputs are privileged in research assessment. Academics seeking to work in this way – whether they are teaching as well as researching or predominantly focused on research – will find it difficult to win funding and so secure their employment. They may be forced to abandon research oriented towards co-operation and social change in pursuit of secure employment. And this does not even begin to cover the low success rates for research funding bids. Alongside this is the related problem of academics being denied research time in workload models unless they can buy themselves out of teaching with research funding. Doing research properly is often difficult even with such buy-outs, but without them it may be impossible for many academics.⁵

Options for being ‘research active’, and doing research in ways that reflect the values of co-operation (values such as democracy, equality, equity and solidarity), are therefore increasingly few, with teaching-only contracts increasingly being used to steer research

⁴ Mark Fisher makes a similar argument around content being unimportant as long as the package sells (Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*. London: Zero Books). Here, the content of research may well be unimportant to managers as long as it can be evidence of high research standing.

⁵ Universities and Colleges Union. (2016). UCU Workload Survey 2016. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8196/Executive-summary---Workload-is-an-education-issue-UCU-workload-survey-report-2016/pdf/ucu_workloadsurvey_summary_jun16.pdf Accessed 18 September 2018.

activity in certain directions that institutions deem as having more chance of success in research assessment processes like REF.⁶ What I want to suggest here is that a co-operative model of support for research may be a potential solution to these problems. Just as co-operative approaches have inspired models for teaching and for its institutionalisation in universities and colleges, so too can they inspire the practice and institutionalisation of research. A research co-operative could provide the formal structure that in one way or another allows its members to do research that might otherwise be impossible or difficult in mainstream higher education. In fields where little more than time is needed for research (e.g. philosophy), a co-operative model could offer ways to make that time available where it is denied in universities as they are today. In fields where financial and other resources are required on top of time, a research co-operative may present one way of allowing people to secure that funding and those resources, something I return to below as a central function of a research co-operative. Even in resource- and capital-intensive fields such as many STEM subjects, we can start to think about how a research co-operative could facilitate the kind of access that is currently only available to higher education and related institutions that meet UKRI criteria.

I begin in this chapter by considering what co-operative values might mean for research practice, focusing on co-production as one way of framing research that is transformative and empowering for all participants. This first part discusses what research inspired by co-operative values might look like. After highlighting turn to several examples that in different ways help shed light on how a research co-operative might operate, I briefly discuss the idea of the platform co-operative as something that may be relevant to discussions of a research

⁶ For instance, in preparation for the Research Excellence Framework exercise in 2021, universities have been accused of moving staff onto teaching-only contracts when their research does not meet institutional expectations. See, e.g. Morrish, L. (2019). REF2021: Adding Insult to Injury? <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2019/02/06/ref2021-adding-insult-to-injury/> Accessed 5 March 2019.

co-operative. This second part focuses on what the co-operative institutionalisation and support of research might look like. Finally, I suggest some of the steps forward for those who want to make a research co-operative a reality, before closing with a discussion of a possible hybrid model for how a research co-operative might, in the short term at least, have a relationship with mainstream higher education. Throughout this chapter, I will take for granted the assumption that co-operative higher education and co-operativism in general are good things that we should support and aim to extend. It is anticipated that readers of this book will be sympathetic to co-operation in general and co-operative higher education in particular.

Co-operative and transformative research

Just as co-operative principles can influence and inspire the way we teach in higher education, so too can they play a role in how we conduct research. When thinking about how to do research in ways that are in tune with principles of co-operation, we need to ask questions about the kinds of topics we choose to research, the methods we adopt, how we approach research subjects and participants and how we want the results of our research to be used. There are a range of perspectives on research that can help us answer these questions. One that is particularly useful in thinking about co-operative research is the idea of co-production.⁷ Co-production in research is well on the way to becoming established in social sciences and humanities and is used in a number of ways to describe a set of often quite dissimilar research agendas and projects. There are, however, certain core themes of co-

⁷ Facer, K., & Enright, B. (2016). Creating living knowledge: The connected communities programme, community–university partnerships and the participatory turn in the production of knowledge. University of Bristol/AHRC Connected Communities Programme. https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/75082783/FINAL_FINAL_CC_Creating_Living_Knowledge_Report.pdf Accessed 17 September 2018.

produced research that are indicative of how research can be done in co-operative and transformative ways.

Co-production of knowledge refers to practices whereby academics and non-academics collaborate on research and where the process of conducting research is as beneficial to the non-academic participants as the outcomes, i.e. the means as well as the ends are valued. As Bell and Pahl outline,⁸ co-production covers research that: ‘does not access a pre-existing reality but is active in the creation of reality’; ‘tease(s) out forms of knowledge extant within communities that are often overlooked or undervalued by more traditional forms of academic research, including embodied, emotional and tacit ways of knowing and representing the world’; is ‘produced and privileged by marginalised and oppressed subject positions’; and in relation to social change, ‘produce(s) knowledge of value for existing social struggles, in which academic co-producers themselves are embedded’.

The concerns that have motivated co-production have emerged through a range of research agendas and methodologies, such as Participatory Action Research,⁹ radical pedagogy and black, feminist and indigenous critiques of the kinds of approaches to knowledge production that dominate natural and social sciences. Rather than see those who take part in research projects as subjects to be studied or as sources of data to be collected and analysed, co-production sees participants as co-researchers, actively shaping both the research questions any project aims to answer, the methods used in acquiring those answers and the outcomes and their usefulness in non-academic terms. Crucially, both the outcomes – avoiding purely academic reports, articles, chapters and books and instead focusing on what is concretely and practically useful to participants – and the methods – which in themselves help, for example,

⁸ Bell, D.M., & Pahl, K. (2018). Co-production: Towards a Utopian Approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(1), 106.

⁹ Hall, B.L. (1992) From Margins to Center? The Development and Purpose of Participatory Research. *The American Sociologist*, 23(4), 15-28.

build confidence, develop knowledge and transfer skills – aim at being transformative in that they help create social change for the people involved. While some branches of co-produced research focus on areas like community health¹⁰ and poverty reduction through the IMF and World Bank,¹¹ more radical agendas situate co-production in discourses around challenging patriarchal, colonial and capitalist knowledge and agency. These more radical strands of co-production take a liberatory and emancipatory stance when it comes to social change and are often linked to political movements such as post-colonialism, feminism, anarchism and autonomist Marxism.¹²

As co-production is practiced as a transformative research agenda or methodology, it will always be subject to tensions between these more radical leanings and attempts at bringing parts of it in line with more mainstream political dynamics.¹³ In relation to co-operativism, however, co-production can be seen as offering a possible approach to research that embodies the core co-operative values. Co-production enshrines the principles of self-help and self-responsibility by engaging communities directly in the process of linking knowledge production to social change. Academic experts do not study situations and present solutions from the ivory tower, even if there was still such a thing; they instead facilitate participants co-researching and developing solutions themselves, seeing self-education as a crucial

¹⁰ Hinchliffe, S., Jackson, M.A., Wyatt, K., Barlow, A.E., Barreto, M., Clare, L., Depledge, M.H., Durie, R., Fleming, L.E., Groom, N., Morrissey, K., Salisbury, L., & Thomas, F. (2018). Healthy Publics: Enabling Cultures and Environments for Health. *Palgrave Communications*, 4(57), 1-10.

¹¹ Kamruzzaman, P. (2009). Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the Rhetoric of Participation. *Development in Practice*, 19(1), 61-71.

¹² Coleman, L., Durie, R., Eisenstadt, N., Firth, R., Franks, B., Gradin, S., Gordon, U., Milburn, K., Prichard, A., Rosedale, C., & Swann, T. (In preparation). Reassessing Co-Production: Towards Emergence, Horizontality and Transformation.

¹³ Ibid.; Bell, D.M., & Pahl, K. (2018). Co-production: Towards a Utopian Approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(1), 105-117; Enright, B., Facer, K., & Larner, W. (2016). Reframing Co-production: Gender, Relational Academic Labour and the University. In Jupp, E., Pykett, J., & Smith, F.M. (Eds.), *Emotional States. Sites and Spaces of Affective Governance* (pp. 37-52). London: Routledge; Eisenstadt, N., & McClellan, J. (In preparation). Foregrounding Co-production; Eisenstadt, N. (2014). We Just Provide the Tools - From Engagement to Co-production in Community Mapping. Paper Presented at Mapping Culture Communities, Sites and Stories, Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES), University of Coimbra, 28 May - 30 Jul 2014; Know Your Bristol. (2015). A Participatory Heritage Mapping Toolkit for Researchers and Communities. <https://knowyourbristol.org/resources/> Accessed 16 August 2018.

component of social change. Democracy is central to how co-production processes are determined and undertaken, with participants playing key roles in discussions about what is co-researched and how, and having a final say on whether a project goes ahead.

As well as research built around the idea of co-production, however, there are of course other forms of research that are transformative and that contribute to bringing about social change.¹⁴ In humanities, for example, research might be a solitary activity that, for the most part, involves the researcher working alone. In STEM subjects, research may be conducted by individuals or in groups, but it will not always be appropriate to centre the research around methods of co-production. In these cases though, research can still be transformative and have an impact on positive social change. While much of the direct research activity in these and other fields may not always be suited to an overall methodology of co-production, that does not rule out their embodying co-operative values in their wider academic milieus, how collaboration is negotiated when it is appropriate and in how their research priorities and outcomes involve and are directed towards non-academic communities (for example in the practice of making philosophical enquiry a more participatory activity¹⁵).

Transformative research in mainstream higher education

If research that chimes with the principles of cooperative higher education (such as democracy, equality, equity and solidarity) is something we think valuable and worth pursuing, insofar as it contributes to transformative social change, what is it in mainstream, neoliberal higher education that is holding this kind of research back? Of course, there are several examples of projects adopting co-production (see Bell and Pahl for a recent overview

¹⁴ Hall (1992).

¹⁵ Gordon, U. (2007). Practising Anarchist Theory: Towards a Participatory Political Philosophy. In Biddle, E., Shukaitis, S., & Graeber, D. (Eds.) *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations/Collective Theorization* (pp. 276-287). Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press.

and critical discussion¹⁶), but this does not mean that there aren't tensions in universities that mitigate against it and put in place barriers that often prevent researchers from doing co-production. As well as some of the problems identified above around research activity and time in general being reduced or excluded entirely in workload and performance management, there are also factors that impact specifically on the potential for co-operative research in mainstream institutions, such as: university ethics boards showing some level of conservatism in terms of research design; problems around remuneration for participation in co-produced research and ownership of outputs; and funders not recognising that the activity of co-produced research can be directly transformative and instead only acknowledging research with impact that utilises the results, abstracting them from any site of co-production and applying them elsewhere.

The structure of most higher education research funding demands that projects be determined largely in advance, with detailed research designs approved by ethics committees long before participants can be practically brought on-board and properly remunerated for the time they spend on a project (if this is ever a possibility at all). This creates a tension that might pull co-operative, transformative research away from activities that are genuinely democratic and emerging from engagements with non-academic communities. This is not to say that genuinely democratic engagement does not happen, but that when it does happen it does so in spite of these tensions. In many cases, academics will instead be going to communities with something like a pre-designed project and will attempt to garner support and participation. Similarly, in any situation where research is inspired by co-operative values, the academics will likely have more power than other participants and, depending on how remuneration is able to be negotiated, more support for their active role (they may be employed to do this

¹⁶ Bell, D.M., & Pahl, K. (2018). Co-production: Towards a Utopian Approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(1), 105-117.

research while others will have to find time on top of other commitments). Whether intentional or not, this disparity undermines how equal, or not, different partners can be in any project. More problematic, however, is the institutional power of the universities themselves in the research practice, and academics as well as other participants will be constrained and pressured by funding, ethics and reporting frameworks dictated by university managers. Research can easily become far less horizontal than the co-operative ideal would suggest, with universities as institutions at the top of the hierarchy determining the scope others have for autonomy. Finally, research that is supported by mainstream funding and higher education structures will often be pulled towards reinforcing and reproducing existing power relations rather than challenging them and trying to create alternatives.¹⁷ Like any established institution with some kind of power in society, universities have an interest in maintaining certain status quos and are intrinsically connected to neoliberal process of value.¹⁸ As such they will act both ideologically and functionally as barriers to research that is genuinely transformative.

In contrast to this, it might be possible to explore the idea of a research co-operative, imagined as a separate institution from mainstream higher education that facilitates transformative research inspired by co-operative values as one way of navigating these tensions. In the following sections, I will look in more detail at how such a research co-operative might work, starting with some examples of initiatives that perform similar roles to a research co-operative. None of these examples fulfil all or even most of the criteria of a research co-operative (i.e. an institution run as a co-operative that supports co-operative forms of research) but they do suggest different ways in which the infrastructure of co-operative, transformative research can be conducted. Furthermore, while only one of these

¹⁷ Eisenstadt & McClellan (in preparation); Eisenstadt (2014).

¹⁸ Hall, R. (2018). *The Alienated Academic. The Struggle for Autonomy Inside the University*. London: Palgrave.

examples is formally linked to academic research, together they show how research, research-related activities and projects aimed at social change can be funded in different ways.

Experiment

A crowd-funding platform for scientific research, Experiment launched in 2012 (then under the name Microryza) (experiment.com). It operates as a standard crowd-funding site, with researchers providing public pitches for their projects and members of the public invited to donate towards them. At the time of writing, the site boasted almost 800 successfully funded projects with over 40,000 individual backers. Projects generally request around \$5,000 in funding with some asking for under \$1,000 and others as much as \$16,000. Experiment is aimed at pilot studies and small research projects and allows for non-academics (what they call independent scientists) to submit proposals as well as corporate researchers and those working for non-profits. The site promises research funding without overheads but does charge an 8% fee of the total raised on successfully funded projects.

Byline and Contributoria

Experiment is one of the few successful platforms focusing on academic research funding. More common, although still limited in number, are sites aimed at supporting investigative journalism, which although different to academic research still involves individuals and groups being supported in researching specific topics. Byline is a platform that allows members of the public to support the work of specific journalists or to donate towards journalists completing certain stories (byline.com). Contributoria, which operated in 2014 and 2015, worked along similar lines but asked members of the public to 'vote' for proposals for investigative stories (contributoria.com). Non-paying members could allocate a certain number of votes per month to stories they wanted to see funded, with paying members having a higher number of votes.

The Ferret

Sticking with the realm of investigative journalism, The Ferret is a platform that was started in 2007 in Scotland as a fact-checking service, examining claims made by politicians, public figures and organisations (theferret.scot). Like Byline and Contributoria, The Ferret aims to put subscribers and readers at the centre of decisions about reporting, but importantly it is also run as a co-operative with subscriber-members and journalists sitting on a board that makes decisions about the organisation collectively. Therefore, rather than having commissioning decided based on public popularity, here a board representing members judges whether to award funds to proposed projects. The Ferret is also committed to supporting diversity and has a fund available to facilitate contributions from 'Black, non-white and people of colour, as well as those from under-represented groups'. It also provides journalism training for these and other groups.

Edge Fund

Edge Fund is arguably the most radical of the examples discussed here, stating as part of their vision that '[w]e need to understand the systems and structures that give people the power to abuse others and the planet and then remove them and replace them with an alternative that is equitable, sustainable and just' (edgefund.org.uk). Through a focus on projects that make change happen, along the lines of a prefigurative politics, Edge Fund aims to finance social change initiatives and between 2012 and 2017 supported more than 170 groups, providing over £300,000 in funding. Applications for financial support are assessed by the collective of members and community and advisory groups. Edge Fund also involves the groups applying for funding in deciding ultimately how the total pot of available funds are distributed between them, practicing a form of participatory budgeting. Recent rounds of grants have supported organisations supporting with LGBTIQ and women asylum seekers, non-hierarchical social spaces, rent campaigning, disabled people's rights, anti-cuts activism and access to free

healthcare among others. Edge Fund's funding model is based on individual and organisational donations and they 'will not take money from any groups or individuals if that means going against [their] aims and values'.

What these examples show, and there are no doubt many more out there, is that there are already platforms and organisations that are experimenting, successfully in some cases, with different ways of distributing funding to research and activities that are in many ways similar to research or that, like the model of co-operative research discussed above, aim at facilitating social change. Decisions about whether to fund a particular project are based often on the kinds of principles that we might want to consider for research that fits within the scope of co-operative higher education. Crucially, several of these examples also suggest how such decisions can be done in ways that tends towards a democracy that is lacking in current distributions of research funding.

What is a Platform Co-operative?

One recent development in the co-operative movement that might be particularly applicable in the case of a research co-operative is that of platform co-operatives. Platform co-operatives are an attempt to take advantage of the availability of digital technology to allow for a decentralised form of co-operative where service users have quick and direct access to service providers. Platform co-operatives are counterposed to the idea of 'platform capitalism'.¹⁹ This refers to the business models of firms like Uber, where the firm acts as a platform that keeps both users and service providers at arm's length, merely facilitating transactions for nominally independent workers. For platform capitalism, all the risk and precarity lies with the worker. So how might platform co-operativism differ?

¹⁹ Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. London: Polity.

Platform co-operatives make the same use of digital networking technologies, such as smartphone apps, as capitalist platforms, but one crucial difference is that the platform is owned and controlled by the people doing the work, the users or a combination of both. Rather than relying on precarious labour to provide a service or product, platform co-operatives aim to ensure a greater degree of job and income security. This might mean developing the platforms themselves in collaboration with trade unions so that the working and payment conditions facilitated by the platform meet with definitions of ‘decent work’.²⁰ For platform co-operatives, the corporation extracting profit from the transaction is taken out of the equation and more of what users pay can be distributed directly to the employees. This model has been put in practice across the world in areas that are normally subject to the precarious work of the gig economy. Stocksy, for example, is a platform co-operative providing stock photography and cinematography (stocksy.com). Owned by the artists themselves, Stocksy returns 50-75% of the fees paid for image or video use directly to the artists and all co-operative members receive a share of the co-operative. Co-operative members, recruited through open calls for contributors, are able to control the co-operative through a range of democratic processes. Green Taxi Cooperative, a platform co-operative based in Denver, Colorado, was formed to offer drivers an alternative to Uber-type platforms and was supported logistically in its set-up by the Communication Workers of America trade union (greentaxico-op.com). Elsewhere, platform co-operatives specialising in food delivery have also been established, challenging the dominance of Deliveroo and, as with other examples, aiming to give workers more control over their work and a better standard of living.²¹

²⁰ International Labour Organization. (n.d.) Decent Work. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm> Accessed 26 September 2018.

²¹ Scholz, T. (2015). *Platform Cooperativism. Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy*. New York: Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

The examples discussed in the previous sections (Experiment, Byline, Contributoria, The Ferret and Edge Fund), while not platform co-operatives, do share the common feature of all being primarily online platforms. If these examples highlighted some of the ways a research co-operative might operate with regard to funding, then perhaps the platform co-operative model is worth considering with regard to employment security and long-term sustainability rather than project-based support. It should be noted, however, that authors such as Nick Srnicek have critiqued the idea of platform co-operatives as a challenge to the dominance of platform capitalism, arguing that ‘all the traditional problems of coops (e.g. the necessity of self-exploitation under capitalist social relations) are made even worse by the monopolistic nature of platforms, the dominance of network effects, and the vast resources behind these companies’.²² Instead, Srnicek proposes public platforms that involve ‘investing the state’s vast resources into the technology necessary to support these platforms and offering them as public utilities’.²³ Perhaps a research co-operative affiliated to a state-backed co-operative university could make such a platform workable as a site for co-operative, transformative research.

Framework and Requirements

With these practical examples and a broad overview of the idea of platform co-operatives considered, I now want to turn to what a research co-operative could look like. As well as concrete proposals for making co-operative research possible, there are more general elements of a research co-operative framework that are important in challenging the problems identified in mainstream higher education research process and practice discussed earlier. From the start, any research should be co-produced and emerge from engagements between researchers and community participants, whether in the actual practice of research or in the

²² Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. London: Polity, 68

²³ Ibid.

broader milieu of design and outputs. The application process for any research funding or for ethics approval, therefore, needs to be flexible and accessible enough that at little or no personal cost participants can collaborate from the outset. Perhaps formal applications could be limited to what can realistically be written in one day, or even one afternoon, with potential financial and practical support available to those applying. Bureaucratic mechanisms should be minimised and platforms used for applications should be as user friendly as possible. If decisions about funding and any necessary reporting were managed collectively and democratically, by the participants in the research as much as by researcher co-operative members, then the institutional power of funding bodies and universities could be challenged and those doing the research would have the fullest control possible over how they do it. With a research co-operative funding and supporting radically transformative research, the conservatism of institutional funders could also be overcome and the kind of change the research was aiming at bringing about would be up to the participants and the larger collective of co-operative members. Fundamentally, a research co-operative would need to be able to support research that was transformative on its own terms and as much as possible under its own conditions. Practically, that might mean finding ways to remunerate participants fairly or address the question of how long a project should be funded for (is the one-to-three year norm for most research projects really long enough to bring about transformations, even ones of limited scope?). In any case, how a research co-operative functions should be thought through in terms of how it enables and encourages research that is transformative and that reflects the values of co-operativism.

In the long term, we need to have in mind what is referred to in tech-development as a ‘minimum viable product’: what minimum, necessary and sufficient features would a research co-operative need to have in place to properly support transformative and co-operative research? Primarily, like any co-operative, it would need to provide its members

with a decent standard of living while allowing them to carry out their work in appropriate ways. This could operate through people being employed by the co-operative on a permanent basis, working on a project basis funded by the co-operative or, like the platform co-operatives challenging Uber and the like, having members work as freelancers but receiving work through the co-operative, perhaps with income security for periods of unemployment and sickness as well as paid holiday leave.

Income to support this could be generated by providing services such as consulting and conducting research for other organisations, or through taking an overhead on external funding co-operative members have successfully applied for. This latter option would of course depend on the co-operative having the kind of accreditation necessary for applying for funding from the mainstream funding bodies, allowing members of the co-operative to use their membership as a credential when applying for funding (in the same ways staff at universities can apply for research funding). While a research co-operative might at a certain level of development be eligible for recognition as an Independent Research Organisation and so be able to apply for UK research council funding,²⁴ affiliation with a co-operative university as a registered higher education institution might be more feasible in the short-to-medium term. Funding sources outside of research councils, such as charities, learned societies, business and civil society may also provide more accessible streams of revenue to make a research co-operative viable. But looking beyond applications for UK research council-type funding, there is a potential network of third sector organisations and charities as well as private sector organisations that could, on the one hand, be interested in paying co-operative members for research services and, on the other, be potential targets for funding applications for independent research. Within the co-operative higher education movement, a

²⁴ UK Research and Innovation. (2016). Eligibility for Research Council Funding. <https://www.ukri.org/files/legacy/documents/updated-eligibility-criteria-nov-16-pdf> Accessed 17 September 2018.

research co-operative could also provide research and related services to co-operative universities, such as ethics approval, conducted in ways more in keeping with co-operative values.

Working towards that long-term position, in the short-to-medium term, there are still functions a research co-operative could perform that would practically support transformative, co-operative research. Thinking in terms of this more immediate perspective, a research co-operative could support members' research activities, be they academics currently employed by universities or other institutions or independent researchers, through, for example, helping one another write grant proposals, facilitating access to academic journals, providing guidance in terms of an accepted standard for ethics or even making small grants available for low-cost research projects or for seed corn type funding to help get projects off the ground that might seek more substantial funding elsewhere. Drawing on members' expertise and experience, a research co-operative could in relatively early stages create training courses on co-production and similar research methodologies that would give members the tools to develop their own research practice. Again, these could be open to academics and independent researchers but also to potential participants in planned co-produced research projects. Financing for such initiatives could come from membership fees on a sliding scale so as to allow for cheaper access for those on low incomes and/or in precarious employment. Many of us in academia already pay membership fees to professional associations, so in its first years, a research co-operative could raise funds in the same way.

Conclusion

For those interested in exploring the potential of something like a research co-operative, a decision needs to be made about the nature of engagement with mainstream higher education. Broadly speaking, there are four options. First, we can take heart in the recent grassroots,

rank and file resurgence in trade unionism in higher education, whether in UCU in the UK or in member-led unions of precarious academics in the US and elsewhere. We can see that there might be some hope in reforming and even revolutionising higher education and decide to stay there, for all its current ills, and fight for something better. Second, we can jump ship, so to speak, and abandon mainstream higher education entirely, focusing our energy on reinforcing and expanding co-operative higher education and creating a new space for transformative research in it. The third option open to us is to combine these first two approaches. Realistically, any steps in the short-to-mid-term future will require a hybrid strategy, engaging with and trying to improve mainstream higher education research while trying at the same time to build autonomous, democratically-run alternatives. On the one hand, for all the reasons discussed in the previous section, any access to even semi-reliable income and research funding in the years to come will depend on inhabiting where possible existing higher education institutions. On the other, one of the best ways of creating change is to actively make it happen, and this can have an impact on existing institutions if certain co-operative practices in academic research are adopted in any future transformation in higher education. A hybrid model would allow co-operative members, where possible, to draw on resources from the universities where they have some level of employment or other affiliation.

A fourth approach, that runs along similar lines to the hybrid model, is to link a research co-operative directly to the establishment of a co-operative university. Such an affiliation might be the best option available to a research co-operative in so far as it provides the escape from neoliberal higher education while at the same time linking the alternative to an institutional framework that would potentially allow for access to funding and provide a constellation of functions within which a research co-operative can find a role. As well as potentially having access to research council funding through a co-operative university, a research co-operative,

being plugged into the broader co-operative movement, could also act as a guarantor of good practice in co-operative, transformative research. Through providing services to the co-operative movement and potentially to the private and third sectors, the income gained through this kind of approach might also allow a research co-operative to offer small grants to members not directly employed by a co-operative university to provide independent and precariously-employed academics the resources they need to get a project off the ground. Membership of the co-operative might also assist independent academics and those working in higher education in finding additional paid opportunities such as consulting and conducting research projects for other co-operatives, the private sector and governmental and non-government organisations. Furthermore, as members we might be able to support one another by facilitating friendly peer-review of application drafts, sharing successful applications, enabling collaborations and helping with access to research participants. Thinking longer-term, a research co-operative affiliated to a co-operative university might be able to provide members with a regular salary, both through allowing members to apply for funding through the co-operative – depending on what accreditation was available – and taking a small cut of any funding or income members make through work received as a result of being a member.

A research co-operative affiliated to a public co-operative university in this way could be an important step forward because it potentially combines the best elements of co-operative models of working and developments in the technology that would support platform co-operativism while keeping alive the ideal of publicly-funded higher education. A (to some degree) state-backed co-operative university might mitigate some of the pitfalls faced by co-operatives and move towards a public platform of the type suggested by Srnicek. An approach that takes research and potentially higher education as a whole entirely out of the public sector runs a risk of letting the state off the hook and allowing the burden of funding

higher education to fall elsewhere, i.e. on the academic teachers and researchers and students themselves. While the problems of neoliberal higher education are well documented in this volume and elsewhere, does this really mean that the public model of higher education should be abandoned in its entirety? Is there not perhaps an alternative that draws on the benefits of co-operativism while securing people's livelihoods and the service education provides to individuals and communities in a public model of funding and regulation? If this is possible, and quality education in line with co-operative values is achievable within a renewed spirit of public education, then is it not possible too that academic research, conducted similarly in line with the values of the co-operative movement, can find a place within this framework? However we try to answer these questions, it is clear that something needs to change if genuinely transformative research is to thrive and play a role in social change. A research co-operative – co-operative both in terms of its approach to conducting research and in the employment relations of its members – may form a part of how we respond to these and other challenges.