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## THE ABOLITION OF THE UNIVERSITY

# Beyond Public and Private: A Framework for Co-operative Higher Education

Mike Neary and Joss Winn

University of Lincoln, GB

Corresponding author: Joss Winn ([jwinn@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:jwinn@lincoln.ac.uk))

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Universities in the UK are increasingly adopting corporate governance structures, a consumerist model of teaching and learning, and have the most expensive tuition fees in the world (McGettigan, 2013; OECD, 2015). This article discusses collaborative research that aimed to develop and define a conceptual framework of knowledge production grounded in co-operative values and principles. The main findings are outlined relating to the key themes of our research: knowledge, democracy, bureaucracy, livelihood, and solidarity. We consider how these five 'catalytic principles' relate to three identified routes to co-operative higher education (conversion, dissolution, or creation) and argue that such work must be grounded in an adequate critique of labour and property, i.e. the capital relation. We identify both the possible opportunities that the latest higher education reform in the UK affords the co-operative movement as well as the issues that arise from a more marketised and financialised approach to the production of knowledge (HEFCE, 2015). Finally, we suggest ways that the co-operative movement might respond with democratic alternatives that go beyond the distinction of public and private education.

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## Introduction

Our research seeks to develop a framework for co-operative higher education (Cook, 2013; Winn, 2015) that is grounded in the social history of the co-operative movement, the practice of democratic governance and common ownership of social institutions, and the production of knowledge at the level of society. These objectives are derived from the premise that the existing organisation of public higher education is being overwhelmed by a free-market and corporate model to the detriment of the production of critical-practical public knowledge (Gunn, 1989). This is occurring when the market-based model of social development is being called into question following the Great Crash of 2008–9. The response to the crash in the UK was to intensify the process of neo-liberalism across all areas of public provision including higher education. In the UK, this is evidenced by the Browne Review (2010) and the Higher Education White Paper (BIS, 2016) and Higher Education and Research Act (2017; Neary, 2016), which have worked towards creating a market-based system of higher education. A key objective in these government reforms is to open the sector to 'alternative providers', which has been interpreted as providing a space for market-based provision, accentuating the principle of the policy. Our point is that this new policy framework opens up a 'crack' (Holloway, 2010) for a real alternative, neither private nor public, that undermines the policy and resists the logic of the capitalist state on which it is premised.

Our research into co-operative higher education began with an initiative called Student as Producer at the University of Lincoln (Neary and Winn, 2009; Neary and Saunders, 2016). Student as Producer recognises that both academics and students are involved as academic workers in the production of critical-practical knowledge. Student as Producer became the organising principle for all teaching and learning across all subject areas at the University of Lincoln. Student as Producer is not simply an innovative approach to teaching and learning, but is principally a pedagogical project that aims to reconstitute higher education so that academic workers, including students, own and control the means of production of the institutions in which they are working. In this way, Student as Producer is very close to the ideas, values and politics of the co-operative movement. Co-operatives are organisations

that are constituted on a set of values and principles that support the creation of member-owned, democratically run organisations (ICA, 1995). Given the political context that we are working in, namely a move to constitute the student as consumer in an increasingly marketised system based on financial imperatives rather than academic values, we sought to develop the ideas and practices of Student as Producer in the form of a co-operative university.

The current research project, funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF),<sup>1</sup> adapts and extends an established model of economic and social development, the co-operative enterprise, to higher education, based on an already existing co-operative for higher education, the Social Science Centre, Lincoln (SSC). The SSC (Social Science Centre, 2013) was conceived in response to the UK Coalition government's changes to higher education funding which involved an increase in annual student fees up to £9,000 and defunding of teaching in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. It emerged during a time when students were occupying their universities in protest against these changes and the model of public higher education in the UK was undergoing rapid marketisation and financialisation that was undemocratic and imposing a pedagogy of debt (McGettigan, 2013; Williams, 2006). The SSC has been in existence since 2011, based on a co-operative constitutional model in the form of a democratic member-run organisation that is the common property of its members. In this article, we define and discuss a framework for co-operative higher education that has been developed out of a participatory action research project undertaken during 2015–16 (Neary and Winn, 2017). The research brought together scholars, students and expert members of the co-operative movement to design a theoretically informed and practically grounded framework for co-operative higher education that activists, educators and the co-operative movement could take forward into implementation. We begin by reviewing some of the key literature on co-operative higher education. We then discuss our theoretical framework, which is informed by the categories of

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<sup>1</sup> A report on the research design and summary of the data collected has been published elsewhere (Neary and Winn, 2017). In this article, we discuss the resulting framework for co-operative higher education.

critical political economy and around which everything rotates. Following this, we discuss the overall context and structure of the framework for co-operative higher education, which incorporates these categories, highlighting the importance of what we refer to as the 'vortex' as a way of interpreting and using the framework. We then go on to discuss each of the components of the framework, briefly indicating how we conceive them theoretically and practically in relation to one another. We conclude by arguing for the relevance and necessity of the framework within the current UK higher education policy context and point to further research we have been undertaking to test the framework within existing co-operatives and the higher education regulatory environment. Finally, we note that a significant feature of our framework is that it is set against the accepted liberal philosophy of higher education and asserts a materialist grounding for the production of knowledge.

### **Introducing Co-operative Higher Education**

Co-operation is a key feature of the social relations of capitalism, such that Marx dedicated a whole chapter to the discussion of co-operation among individuals 'brought about by the capital that employs them' (Marx, 1996: 336):

When numerous labourers work together side by side, whether in one and the same process, or in different but connected processes, they are said to co-operate, or to work in co-operation... Co-operation ever constitutes the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production. (Marx, 1996: 330)

However, *co-operatives*, as Marx also recognised (Hudis, 2013; Jossa, 2014), are a distinct organisational form that was consolidated in the mid-nineteenth century and should be understood as a practical *response* to the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital that Marx elucidated (Winn, 2015). Therefore, in contrast and opposition to capitalist enterprise, co-operatives have developed as a distinct organisational form in which members attempt to address issues of ownership and control over the means of production through a radical form of democracy among those involved. Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. They are constituted through the principles

of voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, co-operation among co-operatives, and concern for community (MacPherson, 2007). In many cases the assets of the co-operative are held under 'common ownership', a social form of property that goes beyond the distinction between private and public ownership (Neary and Winn, 2015).

A review of English-language literature reveals a small number of articles and conference items that specifically discuss co-operativism and higher education.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, the idea of a 'co-operative university' has existed for many decades (Woodin, 2017) and in recent years gained traction when it was discussed at the Co-operative Congress in 2011 in light of the government's changes to the UK HE sector. There is, of course, a great deal of existing research into various forms of co-operatives, co-operative governance, co-operative history and education (Woodin, 2015). There is also a large amount of literature that specifically discusses the theory and practice of 'co-operative learning' (Wilkins, 2011), but its authors usually use the term 'co-operative' without reference to the social and historical movement that has developed since the mid-19th century.

In 2011, there was a special issue of the *Journal for Co-operative Studies* (44: 3), which focused on co-operative education, and a growing number of articles have been written about co-operative education in the state school system (Davidge, 2016; Woodin, 2015; Woodin, 2012; Facer et al., 2012). This reflects the growth of co-operative schooling in the UK since 2011, where over 650 state schools have constitutionally adopted co-operative values and principles (Woodin, 2012; Facer et al., 2012; Wilson, 2013). It is out of this intense activity that the UK Co-operative College sponsored a report on 'Realising the Co-operative University' (Cook, 2013). The report discusses how and why universities in the UK might become co-operatives, what might appeal about it to academics and students, and the extent to which

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<sup>2</sup> A bibliography is currently maintained by one of the authors. Available at: <http://lncn.eu/coophe> (Last accessed 28 May 2017).

co-operative values and principles are already aligned with what we might think of as academic values and principles.

Cook's report is mainly focused on the conversion of existing universities to co-operative universities i.e. universities whose Governors, Senior Management Team and Academic Board decide to formally constitute the institution according to co-operative values, principles and legislation. In summary, he regards the co-operative university as 'an institution *in potentia*':

My investigation shows that in many ways the Higher Education sector already is co-operative. Many of the preferences, assumptions and behaviours preferred in universities are co-operative ones. Despite this the possibility of a co-operative university has not been considered by the sector. I suggest that this can change, and must change: the challenges universities face are too great, and the opportunities co-operative working offers are too pregnant with potential, to do otherwise. (Cook, 2013: 59)

Cook's report is important for helping us understand the range of practical considerations and further research questions when pursuing the idea of a co-operative university. It builds on preliminary work that was undertaken by Juby (2011), Ridley-Duff (2011) and others during and after the UK Co-operative Congress in 2011 and reinvigorated discussion around the idea of co-operative higher education in a practical way.

In a similar manner, Boden, Ciancanelli and Wright's work specifically focuses on the ownership and governance of a 'trust university'. They seek a 'programme for reform' and propose 'the creation and implementation of a Trust University model' (Boden et al., 2012: 22–3), inspired by the John Lewis Partnership Trust (Boden et al., 2011). In their work, they discuss the problems of university governance at the state and institutional levels, and identify two 'hazards' facing the higher education sector in the UK: the private appropriation of public resources and the manipulation of university degree programmes to serve the interests of business. The origins of these hazards, they argue, 'lie in the governance failings of ownership, control,

accountability and regulation' (Boden et al., 2012: 17). The adoption of a Trust model for universities would respond to these failings and resultant hazards by provoking 'imaginative responses to the challenge of securing universities and their knowledge products as social rather than private assets' (Boden et al., 2012: 17). At the heart of the Trust University is 'a model in which all university staff and employees, as beneficial owners, hold the organisation in trust on behalf of society as a whole' (Boden et al., 2012: 20). The property of the university would be held in a non-revocable trust and all employees (academic and non-academic) as well as students, would be designated as beneficiaries.

Furthermore, they argue for an 'accountable social compact' between the university and its 'surrounding society' so as to underscore the common ownership of the university (Boden et al., 2012: 21). They recognise that such a compact is problematic in practice: Who is meant by 'society'? How will that dialogue be maintained? How are 'stakeholders' accountable to each other? They propose that the university would be regulated, first by trust law, and second by creating professional standards bodies, such as a national Council of Scholars, in the same way that the General Medical Council in the UK, regulates the practice of doctors. Such an arrangement 'would place scholars rather than managers at the heart of higher education policy' (Boden et al., 2012: 22).

Boden, Ciancanelli and Wright's work is important in that it identifies a number of key issues relating to what they regard as problems of neo-liberal reform: managerialism, privatisation and associated abuses of power. They point to the trust model 'both as a legal form and as an aspect of social relationships' (Boden et al., 2012: 17), which could potentially combat these problems. While they argue that all employees and students (and presumably some members of the local community) should become governors of the trust, they say little about how democracy would work in the Trust University, referring instead to the 'complex and sophisticated system of partner-democracy' found in the John Lewis Partnership. However, they do not discuss the effect that this form of democracy would have on the respective roles and relationships between academics and students, nor do they question how the subsequent pedagogical relationship would connect to the meaning and



purpose of the university as an institutional form for higher education. In summary, none of the current literature on member-owned, democratic alternatives for higher education offers a coherent framework that seeks to integrate the history of co-operation as a social, political and economic movement, the defining values and principles of co-operative organisations, and a compatible theory of knowledge production. In this article we address this by proposing a framework that combines the theoretical and practical insights of Student as Producer and the co-operative movement.

## **Key Theoretical Concepts**

### ***The Capital Relation***

The relationship between labour and capital was a pressing concern for early co-operators, who sought to overturn that relationship, 'making capital into a hired servant of theirs rather than their continuing as hired servants of capital' (Yeo, 1988: 2). This basic reversal in the capital relation remains a key feature of co-operative theory and practice (Egan, 1990; Jossa, 2014; Vanek, 1977). Co-operatives do not presume to abolish the capital relation, but to turn it on its head, reconfiguring society as a 'co-operative commonwealth' (Yeo, 1988: 88). We have argued that co-operatives can be understood as 'both positively prefigurative and as negative, immanent critical practice' (Winn, 2015: 46). In order to develop this dialectical form of critical praxis, grounded as it must be in theoretical categories adequate to capitalist society, we begin by outlining three key categories, essential to understanding the capitalist social world and, therefore, the context within which the idea and purpose of higher education exists. The categories form part of the overall framework for co-operative higher education which we discuss later in this article.

### **Labour**

Within this framework, the category of labour should be understood as the 'pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns' (Marx, 1996: 51). Marx's discovery shows how the role, character and measure of labour is central to capitalism's social world. Marx's discovery was not simply that labour is useful and can be exchanged like any other commodity, but that its character is 'expressed' or

'contained' in the form of other commodities, which themselves have a corresponding use value and exchange value. What is expressed is that labour in capitalism takes on the form of being both concrete, physiological labour and at the same time abstract, social, homogenous labour. We are paid for our concrete, useful labour but the price of our labour is determined socially by its abstract, homogenous form. This is a relation of domination and exploitation that co-operatives attempt to resist (Jossa, 2014). It is the social, abstract character of labour that is the source of social wealth (i.e. value) and points to a commensurable way of measuring the value of commodities and, therefore, the wealth of capitalist societies. So often, the central category of labour is overlooked, under-theorised, or avoided (Winn, 2015b). In this framework it is a fundamental category.

### Property

The division of labour was recognised by Marx and Engels as contributing towards the alienation of labour from its product and producing the institution of private property: 'The various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of ownership' (Marx and Engels, 1975: 32). Many co-operatives aim to overcome the division of labour through the rotation and sharing of elected roles. Where the subjectivity of individuals is determined not by the division of labour (the 'academic', the 'cleaner', the 'student', etc.) but rather by their free association as 'members' of a co-operative, the objective form of property held and produced by those social individuals is necessarily altered. A 'common' form of property is an alternative to the paradigms of private and public property. 'Common ownership' is not private property shared among a designated group of people, but rather the antithesis of 'the right of free alienability' which distinguishes capitalist private property. Common property is characterised by 'non-distribution upon dissolution' (Axworthy and Perry, 1989: 660), ensuring that this form of property is particularly durable. This means it gives property a peculiar social life of its own. Co-operatives should be understood as a transitional form of association that socialise property and go one stage further than shareholder companies by socialising the ownership of capital among the association of members, rather than a small class of capitalists.

Yet Marx is clear that it is only because of the capitalist mode of production that co-operatives could develop and they, too, should be seen as a transitional form that will 'sprout' something new (Marx, 1991: 571). We must be absolutely clear then, that changes in the historical form of labour (e.g. serf labour, wage labour) have corresponding changes in the form of property. Today, wage labour and private property is the organising principle of the capitalist social world and how labour and property are organised is determined by the historical form of social wealth: value.

### Value

Value, as a category of political economy, refers to a historically specific and temporally determined form of social wealth. It is not simply an economic category and we do not use it as a moral category either. As John Holloway describes, '[v]alue is what holds society together under capitalism. It is a force that nobody controls' (Holloway, 2010: 65). It is a social category that points to a form of life determined by a specific type of exchange relation. 'Value', Peter Hudis similarly asserts, 'is a commodity's quantitatively determined exchangeability' (Hudis, 2012: 7). A commodity is anything, material or immaterial, that has a use-value and an exchange-value. A commodity (e.g. knowledge or bread) is exchanged for another commodity: usually the 'universal commodity' we call 'money'. What this means is that value is not a qualitative category, but rather a quantitative one determined by the productivity of 'living labour' (social individuals) and 'dead labour' (science and technology in the form of machines). What is important to recognise here, is that the *more productive* labour becomes, the *less value* a single commodity contains, requiring more of the commodity to be produced to achieve the same mass of 'surplus value' (i.e. profit). The 'logic' of value produces a 'treadmill effect' that we are all bound to, even the capitalist. Moishe Postone and Barbara Brick put it this way: 'The value-form of wealth is constituted by and, hence, necessitates, the expenditure of human labor time regardless of the degree to which productivity is developed' (Postone and Brick, 1982: 636). Value is a historical dynamic that now automatically determines human life and its overcoming is our greatest challenge if we wish to stop the rampant destruction

of the natural and social world that we are all caught up in. 'Value is the enemy', Holloway suggests, 'but it is an invisible enemy, the invisible hand that holds capitalism together and tears the world apart' (Holloway, 2010: 70). We need a new form of social wealth and to advance towards this requires that we develop new co-operative forms of labour and property.

### ***The False Dichotomy: Public and Private***

The relationship between the University and the State has been complex from the outset and remains unresolved (Neary, 2012c). A recent example of this can be seen in England where the State has redirected public funding away from universities to private individual student loans yet increased the regulatory burden on institutions, thereby reducing the autonomy of universities (Neary, 2016). Our starting point is not that higher education should be provided by the State as a form of public good, against the rampant privatisation of essential services unrestricted by market forces. Rather, the concept of private and public are not antithetical, but are complementary forms of regulation in a marketised society based on the productive process of value creation (Clarke, 1991). The presentation of the power of Money and the power of the State as providing fundamentally oppositional political and economic outcomes is a false dichotomy. It is important to note that Money and the State are not functionalist and instrumental devices which can be repurposed depending on whose interests they serve; rather Money and the State are the institutional forms in which the contradictions at the core the core of the value relation are played out in public (Clarke, 1988).

The history of co-operativism provides a labour based social movement that does not expect the capitalist state to deliver socialism through the politics of redistribution. Rather, the co-operative movement has always been based on ownership and democratic control of the means of production at the level of the individual enterprise, linked to the movement as a whole as a transition to revolutionary forms of association (Yeo, 1988). These new forms of association would be based on new forms of social wealth, grounded in the needs and capacities of their members.

## Framework for co-operative higher education

The methodology for the development of the framework was participatory action research organised around a series of five workshops which took place in the city of Lincoln, UK, over a period of one year.<sup>3</sup> They were themed sequentially as follows:

1. Pedagogy for co-operative higher education
2. Governance models
3. Legal and regulatory considerations
4. Business models
5. Global solidarity and federated co-ordination of co-operative higher education

The order of the workshops followed an outward trajectory from the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student to the transnational solidarity of the co-operative movement. We began with pedagogy, understood as the basic social relation between teachers and students, and considered to what extent these roles were appropriate to a democratic, member-owned organisation. Pedagogy as a social relation of labour in higher education is a key feature of our earlier work on Student as Producer (Neary and Winn, 2009). Having focused on the roles and relationship of teacher and student, the next workshop focused on governance and how the pedagogical relationship might logically expand beyond the classroom into the roles, responsibilities and forms of decision-making across the whole organisation. In the third workshop, we then reflected on external regulatory conditions of both co-operatives and higher education, considering to what extent they support or limit the governance and pedagogical arrangements previously discussed. Having considered this, the fourth workshop focused on how such co-operatives for higher education could be sustained and sustaining of their members: what would be the 'business' of a co-operative university and how would it contribute to the livelihood of all its members? The final workshop focused on the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> See Neary and Winn (2017) for a fuller discussion of the research design and findings.

co-operatives on a national and international scale, drawing lessons from the co-operative movement's principle of 'solidarity'.

The workshops were intended to provide a critical forum to discuss, deconstruct and discover a new paradigm for co-operative higher education. In addition to these workshops, we also conducted focus groups and interviews. Throughout our research, we made audio recordings and took notes. Summaries of each workshop were drafted shortly afterwards, shared with participants for comment and development and then published on a website for public scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> From our analysis of the collected data, we have attempted to abstract and synthesise a conceptual framework for co-operative higher education. Our method has been both deductive and inductive, applying existing concepts from our earlier related work (Neary and Winn, 2009, 2012; Neary, 2010, 2012, 2012b; Neary and Amsler, 2012; Winn, 2012, 2015, 2015b), as well as identifying new concepts that came out of the workshops, focus groups and interviews. The framework for co-operative higher education is therefore not only proposed as the *basis* of co-operative development but also the *result* of theory and practice identified throughout our research. We have grouped the concepts into six parts of the framework which, after some deliberation, we arranged into concentric circles to represent outwards movement and contracting tension between the centre and the outer circles (**Figure 1**).

The framework is held together by the fundamental relationship of labour and property, the most basic categories of political economy. This 'capital relation' is a source of dynamic energy and of destructive crises, of wealth and impoverishment, that historically has been partially contained by the distinction between private and public, a dichotomy that we find unhelpful and increasingly problematic. We emphasise the concept of the 'social' as the dissolution and overcoming of this 'false dichotomy'. Trying to move away from this dichotomy, we establish three primary categories that we refer to as a 'universal model'. The model is universal because each of the categories are deemed applicable to all forms of co-operative education,

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/blog/category/projects/co-operative-university-projects/> (Last accessed 22 June 2017).

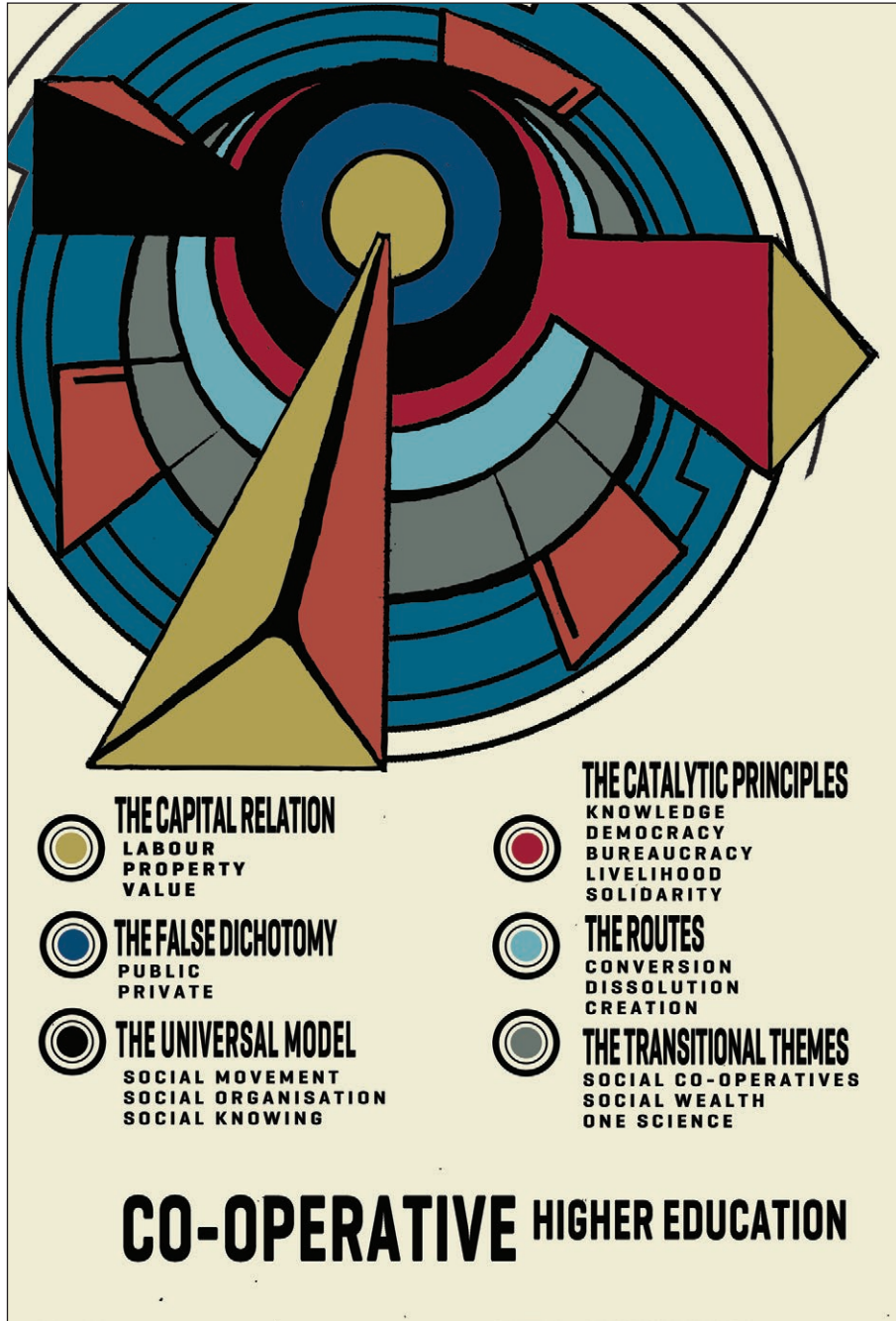


Figure 1: Framework for Co-operative Higher Education.

situating social knowledge in a social organisational setting that is rooted in a social movement. Next, we identify five 'catalytic principles', which closely relate to the five workshop themes but have been modified to better reflect the breadth of ideas that were discussed. Those principles are put into practice via one of three 'routes' to co-operative higher education, which we identified from the literature and have been used and discussed throughout our series of workshops. Finally, we propose three 'transitional themes' for any project that aims to establish co-operative higher education. They are intended to encompass the desires and hopes of the research participants by focusing on the co-operative production of 'one science', the coming together of the natural and social sciences; the building of solidarity through co-operative institutions; and the movement towards a new form of social wealth, beyond the 'determinate logic' (Postone, 1993: 285) of value. In effect, these three themes represent the long-term project of the co-operative university.

The framework is intended to complement existing research on co-operatives and higher education and we anticipate it being extended to include other more specific conceptual frameworks and empirical research (e.g. Neary and Winn, 2009 [Knowledge]; Bernstein, 2012; Novkovic and Miner, 2015 [Democracy]; DuGay, 2000 [Bureaucracy]; Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2015 [Livelihood]; Develtere, 1996; Curl, 2010; Hall and Winn, 2017 [Solidarity]). Needless to say, each of the internationally recognised co-operative values and principles (ICA, 1995) are either explicitly included in the framework or their mapping can easily be recognised.

We have chosen to illustrate the framework for co-operative higher education by adopting the aesthetic style and principles of Vorticism, the modernist art movement of the early 20th century that grew out of Cubism and in response to Futurism. Vorticism appeals to us, not least because of its use of abstraction, but because of the artists' attempts to incorporate a sense of movement into their painting and sculpture through the use of angular and contrapuntal lines. This desire for dynamism is not surprising given the period that Vorticism was directly responding to: the social turmoil of the industrial revolution, the fragility of bourgeois subjectivity, and the



destruction of the First World War. It must therefore be emphasised that a sense of colour and movement in our illustration is essential to what could otherwise be interpreted as a static framework, and the always immanent contradiction of the capital relation at the centre of the framework is a reminder of the ever-present crisis of capitalism.

The vortex has also been described with reference to the value-form theory through which our conceptual framework has been established (Dyer-Witheford, 2015). A vortex is the dynamic interaction of opposite forms of energy. In the natural world a tornado is a rapidly rotating column of air formed by the collision of weather systems made up of warm, moist air and cold, dry air. In the social world the vortex we are describing is the collision between two forms of capitalist energy: 'value in motion', the dialectical revolutions of use value and exchange value, in what Nick Dyer-Witheford calls the 'value vortex' (2015: 29). Both types of vortices are capable of enormous violent destruction and displacement, generating new forms of meteorological phenomena in the natural world and all manner of economic and political disruptions in the social world; as Marx and Engels phrased it in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'All that is solid melts into air' (1976: 487). While tornadoes appear to be beyond human control, the value vortex is capable of being reversed through another dynamic form of energy: class struggle (Dyer-Witheford, 2015: 28), subverting the law of capitalist value 'to destroy the vortex from within' (Dyer-Witheford, 2015: 29), as a new creative progressive social force. Our point is that it is out of this creative displacement that more stable social arrangements can be established.

We recognise that co-operatives have always been a response to and existed within the social maelstrom of capitalism, and are mindful that early co-operators saw their activities as a movement towards a post-capitalist form of common social wealth or a 'co-operative commonwealth' (Yeo, 1988: 88).

### ***The Universal Model*** **Social Movement**

'Social movement' refers to the collective social history of co-operators, uniting the efforts of present-day co-operatives with the efforts and aspirations of

past co-operators. It refers to the movement of movements in historical time and geographical space, reinventing co-operativism according to the needs of members.

The framework emphasises co-operative forms of higher education that are conscious of their connection to and engagement with the historical and logical development of the co-operative movement(s). These are co-operative forms of association where members are collectively aware of their place and role in history as well as society, and encourages individual critique concerning how co-operatives respond to local needs and capacities. We can identify this in the formation of Mondragon University, a unique co-operative university in the Basque region of Spain (Wright et al., 2011). It can also be seen in 'the new co-operativism' which 'ruptures from prevailing ways of organising economic life' (Vieta, 2010: 2; Curl, 2010). We recognise that 'co-operatives were developed and are situated within other social movements that shape their co-operative vision, praxis and organization' (Develtere, 1996: 22). Rather than focus simply on the organisational features of co-operation, we advocate the idea that co-operativism as distinct social movements with their own local social history has at all times overlapped with other social movements (women, worker, religious, nationalist, etc.), and 'do not hinge exclusively upon one single major social movement but receive impulses from different social movements at the same time or over time' (Develtere, 1996: 36). A recognition of this situates the co-operative university as both a living historical subject, and an object of research for all its members. We should remember that co-operative history is not just a history of institutions but first and foremost a social history of social individuals, and that the vitality of the organisation is dependent on the development and sustaining of this social movement (Fairburn, 2001; Diamantopoulos, 2012).

### **Social Organisation**

'Social organisation' refers to the formally constituted association among members of the co-operative. In the 19th century, worker co-ops represented a wholly new form of production, whereas the emerging joint-stock firms were the highest form of the incumbent capitalist production (Hudis, 2011: 179). The socialisation of property that the shareholder firm represents has done nothing to change the relation

between capital and labour, whereas worker co-ops turned the capital relation on its head. Yet worker co-ops, because of their single-member character, are still limited by the fact that they are subject to value production through the exchange relation: Workers are producers who require consumers. They do not produce goods and services to directly satisfy their own needs. 'In this sense', writes Hudis, 'they still remain within capitalism, even as they contain social relations that point to its possible transcendence' (Hudis, 2013: 180). Today, the 'social' or 'solidarity' or 'multi-stakeholder' model of co-operative organisation (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2014) represents the most advanced transitional form of social association between individuals. A social co-operative, at least in an ideal sense, is a form of association owned in common and democratically controlled by *both producer and consumer members*, establishing a *direct* satisfaction of needs between members, unmediated by the capital relation. It goes further than the single-member co-operative forms in constituting a dialectical response to shareholder capital and offers a more socially encompassing 'safe space' against the determinate logic of value (Egan, 1990).

The institutional form of co-operative higher education substantiates the political, moral and ethical values of the co-operative movement, set within an educational context. The institution is the objective form of co-operative association in its historical and social setting. The organisation also provides the material basis that enables co-operative knowledge production to occur within a commonly held 'safe space' that is constituted on the values and principles of the co-operative movement. In that sense, the organisation represents the height of what is collectively possible at any given time and prefigures what might emerge.

### **Social Knowing**

'Social knowing' is the production of knowledge at the level of society. Social knowing is grounded in the general practices and principles of co-operative learning (Neary, 2012c), recognising that much can be learned about how to be a co-operator-student/teacher, while at the same time acknowledging that co-operative practices are already endemic in radical social interactions (Solnit, 2010). Social knowing extends beyond what can be known by students and teachers, as if knowing was

a matter of acquiring knowledge, and even beyond the Freirian idea that teachers and students should be involved in a dialectical and dialogical relationship (Freire, 1996). Rather, social knowing is what emerges from the recognition that students and teachers are the *specific* expression of a *general* intellect (Hall and Winn, 2017) that appears as knowledge which is produced, in whatever form, e.g. curriculum, article, artwork or object, out of whatever kind of space, e.g. classroom, workshop, lecture theatre, studio, laboratory, during which time the identity of teacher and student is dissolved. This is not to assume, *contra* Ranciere (1991), an intellectual equivalence, but rather a non-equivalence, recognising that each participant in the intellectual activity is able to make a contribution to the production of knowledge at the level of society based on their abilities and needs. This form of knowing does not have a preordained outcome, only that it is necessary and required.

## **The Catalytic Principles**

### ***Knowledge***

Knowledge and its production constitutes the essence of the capitalist university. In capitalist society knowledge is constituted as a private thing to be produced and consumed as data and information. Knowledge and the science on which it is based has become an important factor in the production of capitalist value. This is what is meant by the knowledge society. The recent move to make knowledge produced by universities to be open and accessible as a public good, in no way undermines the principle of capitalist value production (Winn, 2012, 2015c). Knowledge production need not be restricted to the capitalist university but remade in new institutional forms that reflect the social and political project through which this knowledge is being constituted. These new institutional forms are not amenable to positivist methodologies but require a more critical practical reflexivity where concepts cannot be assumed, but must be interrogated in relation to the material world out of which they are derived (Gunn, 1989). This scientific method is no arbitrary gesture but is grounded in the movement of value in motion: the value vortex. Not then the 'knowledge society', but knowledge at the level of society, or what society knows about itself, or social knowledge (Neary, 2012).

Social knowing with regard to the purpose of this research means grounding ourselves in the historical movement of co-operatives, and the particular intellectual thought that emerged out of that movement with its focus on labour and capital: critical political economy. This is not a movement of adaptation but one that seeks to detonate the social relations of capitalist production, clearing the way for democratic ownership and control, in the meantime, before the establishment of a post-capitalist future (Hudis, 2012; Marx, 1989). This is not a model on which critical pedagogy is imposed, but the practice of building radical democracy, e.g. through consensual decision-making, where we all learn from and teach each other to create a new form of social institution based on non-alienated social relations.

### Democracy

Co-operatives are based on the practice of member ownership and democratic control. The fundamental issues are the exercise of power and how members can be accountable to each other and their co-operative organisation. We favour a model of consensus decision-making, rather than voting, as part of a learning process where members would come to understand through debate and dialogue the essence of the issue to be decided, so that effective decisions could be made. A variety of methods of reaching consensus already exist (Seeds for Change, 2013). More generally, all decisions should be based on the principle of subsidiarity or radical devolution so that decisions are made at the appropriate level rather than centralised. Subsidiarity and collegiality have historically been features of university life, despite their erosion by the imposition of corporate structures and managerialism (Cook, 2013; Bacon, 2014). What differs among co-operatives is that democracy extends to both the running of the organisation and responsibility for ownership of it as a form of commonly-held property. Of central concern is the issue of size and scale so that co-operatives do not have more members than could operate based on subsidiarity and radical devolution. For example, in Italy, there are several thousand social co-operatives, most of which have between 40–50 members (Thomas, 2004: 250). The largest faculty at the University of Mondragon, Spain, has around 230 members (each faculty is an autonomous co-operative) (Wright et al., 2011: 48). For effective

power-sharing, co-operatives often exist as part of a larger confederated network of co-operatives.

### **Bureaucracy**

Bureaucracy encompasses the legal, regulatory and administrative character of the co-operative university. The concept of bureaucracy is used here as a less legalistic approach to co-operative administration, one that tries to avoid being grounded in the law of private property and contract law (Pashukanis, 1989). Bureaucracy is usually regarded in negative terms, as a limit on innovation, where 'red-tape' stifles creativity. We take a different approach, grounded not in the logic of instrumental rationality, but rather to regard bureaucracy as the process by which we agree and put into practice our moral and ethical principles, derived from the co-operative movement and critical political economy. Following the work of Max Weber, bureaucracy is 'a site of substantive ethical domain' (Du Gay, 2000: 2) and 'a particular ethos ... not only an ensemble of purposes and ideals within a given code of conduct but also ways and means of conducting oneself ... the bureau must be assessed in its own right as a particular moral institution and the ethical attributes of the bureaucrat be viewed as the contingent and often fragile achievements of that socially organised sphere of moral existence' (Du Gay, 2000: 4). In this way, the bureaucratic environment contains its very own rationality and sense of purpose (Du Gay, 2000: 75). This is to counterpoise this version of bureaucracy against the amoral financial corporate world, where ethical and moral principles can only ever be a secondary consideration behind the requirement to make profits. There is a strong congruence between academic and co-operative values, including collegiality and peer production (Cook, 2013).

### **Livelihood**

The co-operative movement tends to focus on matters of democratic organisation, collective ownership, and benefits to members. These are key issues but there is more to co-operation. The concept of livelihood encompasses the life of the organisation, its members and their environment. It recognises the need for business planning, financial sustainability, social auditing, care of the natural environment, and much

more. Yet it also recognises that what is at stake is the creation of a new form of social wealth, based on transforming the social relations of production. Co-operatives are already considering ways in which value, in the form of money, can be mutualised and socialised to support their livelihood. Examples include Community and Fair Shares, Loan Stock, and Solidarity Funds (Gotham, 2011). Value, in the form of labour time, is also being 'banked' and exchanged within some communities (Seyfang, 2004). The concept of 'social value' (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2015), grounded in a social accounting of the public impact and consequences of co-operative activity, is an emerging way of getting beyond the measure of capitalist value. Livelihood responds to the questions about 'the idea of the university' and 'what are universities for?' in a practical way, pointing to a role for higher education that is not instrumental to the economy and employment (i.e. labour) but works towards the discovery *in practice* of a new form of social wealth and different purposes for humanity and nature.

### **Solidarity**

Solidarity is the general political principle of co-operation, not only within a particular co-operative enterprise but across the whole transnational co-operative movement. In this framework, solidarity should extend to support other movements, beyond higher education, involved with matters of public and social concern, such as the labour movement, the environmental movement, and civil rights movement. To some extent, such solidarity already exists and a role for higher education co-operatives should be identified to support their interests and activities through research and education. This transnational solidarity should not compromise commitment to people and places at a local level. Methods should be found to connect the local to the transnational in ways that are appropriate to the context. We should be aware of the crucial importance of cultural difference and the need to learn from a variety of local and national approaches in the global north and south.

### ***The Routes***

Taken as a whole, efforts around co-operative higher education can be understood in terms of three routes: Conversion, dissolution, and creation. By this we mean the wholesale *conversion* of existing universities to co-operatives; or the gradual

and possibly subversive *dissolution* of university processes into co-operatively governed equivalents; or the *creation* of new institutional forms of co-operative higher education. The framework does not discriminate between the three routes of conversion, dissolution and creation and regards as a vital contribution to the growth of co-operative higher education. The success of each should not be measured against the apparent success of existing mainstream universities, but rather on the members' own terms and the type of higher education they need and desire.

### **Conversion**

This route focuses on how to convert an existing university into a co-operative, either through a planned 'executive' decision or out of necessity, as in a worker takeover of a failing institution. In the UK, this route would probably seek to maintain any remaining public sources of funding and the 'university' title.

### **Dissolution**

This route focuses on how to create a co-operative university from the 'inside out', through the gradual increase of co-operative practices, such as co-operatively run research groups and departments; programmes of study in aspects of co-operation, social history, political economy, etc.; the conversion of student halls into housing co-ops; generating energy for sustainability co-ops, changes to procurement practices that favour co-operatives, and so on. Through this route, the university might eventually become a 'co-op of co-ops'.

### **Creation**

This route focuses on how to create a new co-operative form of higher education. It is the least compromising of each of the routes and unashamedly utopian, too (Neary and Winn, 2016). This route draws direct inspiration from the varieties of actually existing worker and social solidarity co-ops around the world. The creation route requires us to rethink not only the organisational and constitutional form of higher education but also its institutional spaces and pedagogic practices. It seeks to develop a co-operative higher education which recognises and builds on a long tradition of working class, self-managed, alternative, open and radical education (Rose, 2001).



### ***The Transitional Themes***

This part of the framework offers three themes or long-term projects for co-operative higher education.

#### **Social Co-operatives**

Since the 1970s, a new form of co-operative model of governance has been developed called the 'social', 'solidarity' or 'multi-stakeholder' co-operative. Our research concurs with Cook (2013), that the 'social co-operative' is the most appropriate, modern organisational form for the co-operative university. Historically, it constitutes an advance on the traditional corporate form in terms of the socialisation of capital (beyond public and private) and promotes and protects the collegial forms of governance that are still evident in higher education, despite their gradual dismantling in the UK since the 1980s (Shattock, 2006). This can be viewed negatively, in terms of institutional and academic autonomy, but also recognises a broader set of stakeholders and interests in higher education; one that can be characterised not simply as a shift from public to private higher education, but rather to a more socially embedded form of organisation that serves a variety of interests and within each institution might be considered in terms of the catalytic principle of 'solidarity'.

In the past four decades, and particularly since the 1990s, there has been growing recognition of the social co-operative organisational form, both in law and through increasing adoption worldwide. In 2011, the 'World Standards of Social Co-operatives' was ratified after a two-year global consultation process.<sup>5</sup> There are essentially five defining characteristics, at the heart of which is the multi-stakeholder membership structure. Social co-operatives are therefore distinct from the traditional 'worker' or 'consumer' co-operative forms, which recognise just one membership type; they are constitutionally democratic forms of enterprise comprising two or more types of membership. Typically, membership will comprise of workers, consumers, volunteers, and supporters from the community. This type of co-operative was first

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: [http://www.cicopa.coop/IMG/pdf/world\\_standards\\_of\\_social\\_cooperatives\\_en-2.pdf](http://www.cicopa.coop/IMG/pdf/world_standards_of_social_cooperatives_en-2.pdf) (Last accessed 22 June 2017).

established in Italy in the 1970s and soon thereafter in other countries. The multiple forms of membership reflect the combined interests of the organisation within its social context and not surprisingly, social co-operatives typically pursue social objectives through the provision of social services, such as healthcare and education. For example, since 2011 over 650 schools in the UK have become multi-stakeholder co-operatives (Woodin, 2015). This particular model of democratic ownership and governance is an increasingly popular form of co-operative organisation and there are successful examples of different sizes and services provided, demonstrating its flexibility as a modern organisational form. It is vital that experiments with organisational forms seek to overcome not only the relation between capital and labour, but also the exchange relation between producers and consumers. As we have already suggested, in theory the social co-operative constitutes and enables a *direct* satisfaction of needs between members whereby use-values, such as labour and knowledge, form part of a shared co-operative commonwealth, i.e. a new form of social wealth.

### **Social Wealth**

'Social wealth' goes beyond the concept of 'social value' (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2015). Social value is an accounting device to record where co-operative enterprises are adding value to social and public situations. Social wealth is a more profound and ambitious concept, seeking to transform the nature of capitalist wealth to a new principle of material or social wealth based not on profit making but on directly connecting the needs and capacities of social individuals. When profit making wealth is related to the law of the market, scarcity drives value. When social wealth is based on connecting the needs and capacities of society the principle of abundance drives value. Social wealth does not have to be created anew, it already exists within profit making economies but is contained and restricted by the law of the Market and the State. 'The state of abundance is not a Utopian vision', as Kay and Mott write, 'but the real possibility of conditions already in existence' (Kay and Mott, 1982: 1). In a state of abundance the Market and the State would cease to exist. The law of capitalist value is not derived from market exchange or state oppression but is founded within

the processes of capitalist production where labour is the main source of value. In order for social wealth to be unlocked there needs to be a transformation of the capitalist law of labour in a way that accommodates the direct connection of needs and capacities. This means finding ways to take control of the value produced by our own labour. Since the foundation of the co-operative movement 'their object was the emancipation of labour from capitalist exploitation' (Holyoake qtd in Yeo [1988: 63]). This control of value and the means of production can be regarded as a period of transition towards the ultimate abolition of capitalist work, to a condition where work is not simply a means to an end, but rather an end in itself alongside other life enhancing activities (Marx, 1989; Hudis, 2013).

### One Science

'One science' is the dissolution of interdisciplinarity and the unity of the natural and social sciences. Going beyond interdisciplinarity, there should be an attempt to develop a curriculum and research projects which seek to challenge the fundamental distinctions between the sciences, arts and humanities, and to focus on what we have in common, as students and teachers, in terms of our scholarly methodologies and methods. Marx argued in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that 'natural science has invaded and transformed human life all the more practically through the medium of industry; and has prepared human emancipation, although its immediate effect had to be the furthering of the dehumanisation of man' (Marx, 1975b: 304). Even during the time in which he is writing Marx argues that the stage is set for natural science to 'become the basis of *human* science... and to assume *one* basis for life and a different basis for *science* is as a matter of course a lie... Natural science will in time incorporate into itself the science of man, just as the science of man will incorporate into itself natural science: there will be *one* science' (Marx, 1975b: 304, emphasis in original). This is much more than a call for interdisciplinarity, but is a powerful critique of the subject discipline obsessed capitalist university, of academic identity and the existing division of labour (Neary and Winn, 2016b). The concept of one science provides the basis for a new revolutionary science and the foundation for a higher education. In other words, education at the level of society.

### **Conclusion: The idea of the university and the value-vortex**

The development of this framework for co-operative higher education has been undertaken during a period of continual restructuring of public services and the higher education sector in the UK. During this period, we have been involved, with others, in forming a response that is not simply an act of principled opposition to the concept of students as consumers and the market-based principle of value-for-money. Our concerns have been guided by the more foundational themes of social co-operatives, which reconfigure labour and property; a new form of social wealth, based on the principle of abundance; and reconstituting the curriculum in a way that reflects the critical-practical nature of these concepts which we refer to as 'one science'. The key issue that all of our work points to is the way that value is produced in capitalist society. This is a problem to which there is no resolution in terms of the social relations of production on which capitalism is founded. Our research points to the need for a transformation in the social relations of production.

Productivity is not only our concern, but is the key driver for government policy and the real basis for recent reforms. This is evidenced with remarkable clarity at the beginning of the UK government's Higher Education Green Paper:

Increasing productivity is one of the country's main economic challenges, and universities have a vital role to play. As outlined in the Government's Productivity Plan, *Fixing the Foundations: Creating a More Prosperous Nation*, increasing productivity will be the main driver of economic growth in years to come, and improving skills are an essential component of this. (BIS, 2015: 10)

While the focus of debate in the UK has been on the practical implications of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), our concern is to address the problem of productivity and, therefore, the production of value. What we have done in this article is to develop a different framework for debate and action, building on the foundations of the co-operative movement and

collective action. We have identified three routes by which universities might be reconstituted as co-operatives. We have framed the debate around a set of catalytic principles (knowledge, democracy, bureaucracy, livelihood and solidarity) that provide momentum for three transitional themes. These themes are the outcome of our research and are by no means fully resolved, but a way to focus the conversation and point in the direction of future work. This will involve testing the catalytic principles through a closer engagement with co-operative enterprises and using them inside higher education institutions as an alternative to the metrics of performance (Neary, Valenzuela Fuentes and Winn, 2017); and by looking at how innovations in the 'new co-operativism' can be applied to the higher education context.

We hope it is clear that our approach takes the philosophical idea on which the modern European university is based and brings it down to earth, grounded in the material reality of the value-form (value-vortex). The modern European university, first manifest as the University of Berlin in 1810, was an attempt to reconcile the apparently contradictory pressures of modern higher education: science for the sake of science with the university as the spiritual and moral training of the nation state (Lyotard, 2005). For the German idealist philosophers who established the University of Berlin (Humboldt, Schelling, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hegel), this conundrum was to be resolved by establishing the university as a social encyclopedia, within which knowledge was to be valued not in terms of its truthfulness but in terms of what society knows about itself as a universal whole, or knowledge at the level of society (Lyotard, 2005; Neary, 2012c). This idealistic project was undermined when the process of nation building turned against itself to become a process of nation destroying through two massively destructive global wars in the first half of the twentieth century; advances in the natural sciences based not on metaphysics but on positivism and profits; and in the social sciences and humanities where the emergence of poststructuralist thought fundamentally challenged the notion of knowledge itself and with it the foundations on which the modern European university is built (Lyotard, 2005; Neary, 2012c, 2016b). The value-form (vortex) approach recognises that the contradictory logics on which the modern European university is constructed are not resolvable in the form of a speculative ideal.

The value-form (vortex) approach grounds the modern European university as a function of material social process of capitalist value production. An alternative model for higher education, therefore, must seek to transform those social relations of production, through another form another form of social wealth (Postone, 1993), based not on competition but on co-operation. At the core of this proposition lies the status of knowledge and science, and the nature of the university itself.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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