

Report on the June 2nd Workshop:

Developing a Higher Education Strategy for the Co-operative Sector

PARTNERS AND RESOURCES



The Canadian Association for Studies in Cooperation (CASC) is a multi-disciplinary network of researchers whose work examines co-operatives. Many, if not most of its members are also involved in co-operative education. CASC, working with Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada (CMC), initiated the process of developing a National Higher Education Strategy for the co-operative sector with a resolution that was passed at the 2015 AGM of the CMC. As part of the process of developing an actual strategy, CASC, along with the CMC, ON-Coop and the Cooperators Centre for Business and Sustainability (Wilfrid Laurier University) organized a workshop on June 2nd. This workshop, which was held at Ryerson University as part of the annual CASC conference, primarily drew actors from Southern Ontario.

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together leaders from the co-operative sector, the higher education sector, and the CASC membership to reflect upon what strategic planning might look like for three potential aspects of a higher education strategy: curriculum, experiential education, and innovation. The following is what came out of each of these sessions.

CURRICULUM

Of all 98 universities across Canada, there are only 16 institutions that offer *some* teaching content related to co-operatives and 10 institutions that offer full programs that are *specifically* co-op oriented. (University of Saskatchewan offers 2 separate programs.) Of these 11 programs, eight of these are MBAs or result in management-oriented certificates, one is rooted in Community Economic Development, and two are interdisciplinary. They are all graduate programs or graduate-level certificates. Undergraduate content is offered, but it is limited, and not well show-cased. Although notable programming *is* available across the country, it is clear that ideas about co-operatives are rarely exposed in the higher education institutions that currently exist in Canada.

A Needs Assessment of Co-op Specific Training and Education was completed from within the co-operative sector to see if the current offerings met the perceived needs of the sector (Duguid and Guillotte, 2017). This assessment identified that there is no silver bullet for co-op specific education. There is also no one program, institution, or course(s) that serves all. For those audiences looking for co-op-specific training, they are savvy consumers of education, who know what they are looking for and want training to be current, relevant, and accessible. They want to be inspired by the co-operative values, best practices and gain practical knowledge and skills. They are looking to co-op specific education to be a change agent that supports action, update and change.

For many, the relevance of co-operative education and training still needs to be demonstrated. Participants show interest and think co-operative education and training could help their career and their co-operative, but do not necessarily feel they need co-op *specific* education and training to solve situations in their workplace. Often, for those already in the sector, the university as a venue is not the premier place for co-op specific education and training, even virtually. Participants want in-house/co-op sector education or training by seasoned, knowledgeable content experts with co-op experience and adult education facilitation skills.

How do we move forward?

In the workshop, it was identified that there are basically two types of content that higher education curriculum would intend to provide: 1) Introducing the concept to entry-level undergraduates to provide initial awareness and base understanding; 2) A more detailed examination of co-op-related study for determined enthusiasts.

In terms of the entry-level area, content at this level is almost non-existent at the moment. It has been determined that a central area for shared-access to lesson plans, case studies, book lists, presentations, videos, etc. will be needed to grow these offerings more successfully and rapidly across the country. A good place for this may be the University of Saskatchewan's Centre for the Study of Co-operatives website, which already has open access to formatted PDFs. Cultivate.coop is another option, but needs more funding to keep going.

While the co-operative education focus is more recently from a business lens, it has been noted that this programming must also be integrated across all disciplines. There must be a balance between offering practical teaching tools and remaining true to the underlying ethical and value-oriented integrity of the co-op model. Even in business, the hook should always be values first. Moving towards more focused courses, it was noted that the name of the course has been very important in drawing students or scaring them off. It must appear to be something accessible and work students in to the concept.

As for the second group looking for deeper material, there has been positive feedback from graduates of the current graduate-level programs. The most successful programming is at Saint Mary's University, University of Saskatchewan, and the University of Sherbrooke. Successes were particularly highlighted in curricula that included a strong mentorship program and practical links to the sector. These programs, however, do not reach across the sector to include all teachings needs, as found in the Needs Assessment.

A big gap that must be tended to is training for those already in the sector looking for short bursts of education. This could come in the form of in-house training or short-term virtual exercises that may or may not feed into a larger program or certificate. People are not necessarily motivated by a degree or certificate, but often do want to know they are on some sort of learning path or journey that may have milestones. More non-traditional avenues for teaching and learning must be explored that capture all learning styles and suite those with full-time work and families.

INNOVATION

Post-secondary incubators play an important role in catalyzing the commercialization of inventions and social innovations, and in training the next generation of entrepreneurs and change makers.

While there are examples of community-based co-operative incubators (ex. [Green Worker Co-Operatives](#) in NY, [Cooperate Now](#) in BC) and graduate certificates in co-operative management

(ex. [York University](#), [St Mary's University](#)), the co-operative movement has yet to make significant inroads into post-secondary incubators. There remains an opportunity to empower student entrepreneurs to create co-operative businesses.

Workshop participants determined that:

1. Student entrepreneurs are interested in alternative models for creating positive social change.
2. Co-operative development within post-secondary incubators requires dedicated access to student-focused learning and support materials, and engaged mentors.
3. To be beneficial to both the post-secondary and co-operative sectors, integration must maintain the integrity of the co-operative movement as one of social justice.
4. Concerted effort will be required to ensure that co-operatives receive adequate attention within an ecosystem dominated by competing models and interests.

How do we move forward?

The workshop concluded with a discussion on the next steps required to advance co-operatives both within post-secondaries, and the start-up ecosystem more broadly.

Supports for post-secondary incubators:

- **Centralization of Student-Focused Resources:** Resources currently exist through a variety of portals (ex. [Co-op Zone](#), [Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan](#)). A central repository should be created to centralize co-operative resources suitable for an undergraduate student audience in the early stages of co-operative development.
- **Virtual Incubator:** As post-secondary incubators build internal demand for co-operative development, it could be beneficial to establish a virtual incubator which allows student entrepreneurs interested in co-operativism to access mentors, resources, and funding from a central source.
- **Establish Co-operative Start-up MOOC:** Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are a form of online education which post-secondaries employ to reach a wide audience through an online course. MOOCs attract interested persons beyond the student population, disseminate academic knowledge to practitioners, and lower training costs.
- **Build Targeted Interest:** The co-operative sector can target support services to the current interests of students by providing detailed case studies and related resources, expert mentors, relevant work experiences, and dedicated funding.
- **Keep it Fun:** Local food, theatre, brewery, and restaurant co-operative are public spaces that employ young people and make communities more interesting. Look to form partnerships between post-secondaries and co-operatives that speak to the interests of students.

Post-secondary incubators work closely with the wider start-up sector. The co-operative sector should seek to generate interest in co-operativism more broadly, including:

- **Builder Wider Entrepreneurship Ecosystem:** The start-up sector is diverse and attention should be paid to actors beyond post-secondaries. Examples include small business centres, non-profit community entrepreneurship incubators, and events such as Montreal’s “Start-Up Fest.”
- **Act as a Sector:** Partnerships should not replace activities established and led by the co-operative sector itself. Activities can include celebrations of co-operative businesses (ex. Co-opalooza near London) and start-up fairs (ex. business plan competitions or ‘hackathons’).
- **Deploy Targeted Co-operative Developers:** Past success has occurred through the efforts of experience co-operative developers who have supported communities in creating new co-operatives. It is important to ensure that partnerships with post-secondaries does not detract from proven efforts of co-operative development.

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Experiential learning includes both applied learning and also bringing an expert into the classroom. Applied learning includes many strategies, from in-class exercises, to a fully embedded employment program facilitated through the university. Current experiential education programs that have been identified have often been limited to co-op work placements, class visits by credit unions about financial literacy, and scholarships. One of the key issues is that while there is significant interest in experiential education amongst students and co-operatives, there is often a disconnect between the needs/wants of co-operatives and the skills of students.

How do we move forward?

We need to think through carefully how to build connections between universities and co-operatives as well as prepare students for placements. In short, to facilitate the achievement of goals of the experiential education programs, we must create programs that match the needs of the sector to those desired by the students. It has been suggested that setting expectations at the beginning of the course/program and ensuring that there is an understanding that it is a gradual and continued learning processes is key to success. Education must be “laddered” with a goal in mind, so students are prepared for placements and experiences and courses/programs must be marketed to specific skill sets or the development of them. Co-operatives need to actively participate in conceptualizing what skills are needed and participate in the early parts of the ladder to familiarize students with their organizations and issues.

The creation of experiential education programs may be achieved through networking amongst associate deans and supervisors, student associations, and co-ops in the community. Co-operatives should participate at every year level in a variety of ways – starting perhaps with in class speakers, site visits, and programs to bring awareness of co-operatives to students. In terms of developing experiential education courses, champions within the university should be located first. Co-ops could connect directly with sympathetic professors or associate deans, who could then speak to departments and other professors, who would then connect to students and student associations. Interested students could also be identified and act as ambassadors between the university and the co-operative sector. This could start with credit unions and student clubs through financial literacy programs. (Student associations tend to have large budgets and act as an inspired space for enthusiasm.)

In the end it was agreed that there needs to be a systematic, rather than individuated and episodic, approach to bringing co-operative experiential education to the classroom.

NEXT STEPS

- For CASC to investigate how to and who could be partners in an ongoing, collaborative platform to establish a cohesive space to share materials and ideas.
- For everyone to make connections with at least one person you met at the workshop to see how your higher learning institution and co-ops can better connect.
- For everyone to continue to share ideas with your colleagues and networks about the opportunities for co-ops and higher learning institutions to work together.
- For CASC to reflect on lessons learned from the workshop in Toronto, Ontario to see what can be accomplished in Regina, Saskatchewan in 2018.

