Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic: University rankings or co-operatives as a strategy for developing an equitable and resilient post-secondary education sector?

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Abstract

University leaders, governments, industries and donors use university rankings to assess the success or failure of higher education institutions; however, these rankings tell us nothing about how universities are challenging or amplifying oppression in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article first examines the implications of the incompatible aims of universities: performing well based on rankings while espousing commitments to equity and anti-oppressive practices. Second, this article proposes *co-operatives* as a strategy for developing a more equitable and resilient post-secondary education sector. The assumption underpinning this proposal is that without structural changes to higher education, COVID-19 will amplify an already inequitable distribution of resources and lessen the ability of universities to play a responsible role in expanding public debate and increasing understanding of critical issues facing the planet. Co-operatives could be an effective way for the sector to engage with the need to radically alter how we interact with each other and the natural world, both now and beyond the pandemic.

Keywords university rankings · co-operatives · co-ops · COVID-19 · marketisation · education and equity

Résumé

Répondre à la pandémie de COVID-19 : classements d'universités ou coopératives comme stratégie de développement d'un secteur d'enseignement postsecondaire équitable et résilient ? – Les dirigeants d'université, les gouvernements, les industries et les bailleurs de fonds se servent des classements universitaires pour évaluer la réussite ou l'échec de ces établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Toutefois, ces classements ne nous révèlent pas comment les universités s'opposent à l'oppression qu'entraîne la pandémie de COVID-19 ou si elle l'amplifie. Cet article se penche

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d'abord sur les conséquences de l'incompatibilité des objectifs des universités : obtenir de bons résultats aux classements tout en s'engageant en matière d'équité et en adoptant des pratiques contre l'oppression. Il propose ensuite des *coopératives* comme stratégie de développement d'un secteur d'enseignement postsecondaire plus équitable et résilient. Cette proposition part de l'hypothèse selon laquelle sans changements structurels de l'enseignement supérieur, la COVID-19 aggraverait la répartition déjà inéquitable des ressources et réduirait la capacité des universités à jouer un rôle responsable dans l'élargissement du débat public et dans l'amélioration de la compréhension des questions cruciales auxquelles la planète se trouve confrontée. Les coopératives seraient un moyen efficace pour que le secteur s'attaque à la nécessité de modifier radicalement les rapports que nous entretenons entre nous et avec la nature, non seulement maintenant, mais aussi après la pandémie.

Introduction

A first step in considering *co-operatives*¹ as a strategy for developing an equitable and resilient post-secondary education sector is to encourage conversations about how to measure educational excellence beyond the corporate metrics embedded in university rankings. Universities educate the vast majority of decision-makers in the workforce, whether they are employed in academia, government, health, education, arts, business or another field. Increasingly, university leaders, governments, industries and donors are using university rankings to assess the success or failure of higher education institutions (Esposito and Stark 2019; Hazelkorn 2017; Yudkevich et al. 2016). However, these rankings tell us nothing about how universities are challenging or amplifying structures, policies and practices that are pivotal to global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of writing,² many university campuses around the world are empty. Those marginalised by categories of who and what counts at a university are often already invisible (Mayo 2020). Excluded from many discussions about protecting jobs and well-being are lower-paid support staff, students and contingent faculty (non-permanent academics) who may lack high-speed internet or decent living conditions.

The circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have generated a new political economy and a new “geopolitics of knowledge” dissemination.³ As a result, governments are calling for, and universities are committing to, interdisciplinarity

¹ The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) defines a *co-operative* as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise” (ICA n.d.).

² This article was drafted in September 2020, six months after the World Health Organization upgraded the spread of COVID-19 to pandemic status (WHO 2020), prompting lengthy closures of educational institutions worldwide.

³ The *geopolitics of knowledge* refers to dominance of Western epistemology as part of the expansion of Western imperialism. What was determined to be legitimate knowledge was organised around capitalism and represented as universal (see Mignolo 2002).

and community-engaged research to provide holistic policy options that encompass medical, social and economic responses to the pandemic (Lo and Hsieh 2020). However, what is missing in these calls is acknowledgment that rankings and other measures of success used by policymakers to judge academics and students severely limit the ability of these groups to respond. Academics are competing for their jobs and, for many, the security they enjoyed through tenure (permanent positions) has vanished (Galvin and Spiker 2019). Richard Hall (2018) describes the alienation felt by many academics who chose their profession based on the values of academia but who instead now find themselves pushed to succeed based on corporate metrics of success. Shlomo Mizrahi shows that new forms of corporate governance in universities create conformity among academics in which they “align their views, interests and behavior with the dominant approach of managerialism and competition” (Mizrahi 2020, p. 5).

In this article, I explore the possibility of co-operatives as one approach to building relationships within and across higher education institutions. Co-operatives can act as a *prefigurative practice* in which members research, theorise and practise creating a different world. Cassie Earl (2018) defines this as occurring when people practise *prefigurative politics* and learn by doing as they strive for a better society – or, as Myles Horton and Paulo Freire might say: “we make the road by walking” (Horton and Freire 1990, p. 63).

In this article, I do not argue that universities can suddenly become co-operatives or even that they should. However, debate over co-operatives as an option for governance can generate interest and initiate conversations about what it means to offer a good and worthwhile education, especially as the world faces COVID-19 and a climate crisis largely brought on by current models of competition and growth at any cost (Stiglitz 2010). Thinking about the possibilities of a co-operative university or co-operatives within a university, such as student housing, could help expand beyond the model of winners and losers.

It is unclear why, despite the success of co-operatives, content related to them was largely dropped from economics curricula after World War II (Kalmi 2007; Shaw 2014). Given the success of co-operatives, why do students not learn about them as possible business models they might want to be part of founding or working in? Of the many potential answers to this question, I will now explore the powerful role played by university rankings based on corporate metrics.

University rankings

Rankings reinforce transnational global networks of power, with top-ranked universities playing an enduring role in the socialisation of American media, business, political and academic leadership, and international economic and foreign policy (Morton 2019). Despite overwhelming evidence that the education industry – in particular, rankings – has intensified inequity, governments around the world provide more funding for universities with the most significant prospects for moving up in rankings (Haskett et al. 2020; Jacobs et al. 2015; Trawver and Hedwig 2020). Some

countries even fast-track immigrants who have graduated from top-ranked universities (Kulu-Glasgow et al. 2018).

To help limit or circumvent the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, some universities have formed alliances with other elite higher education institutions – such as through Universitas 21, the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), the League of European Research Universities (LERU) and the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) (Zha 2009). However, the institutions that serve the majority of students have not been invited to the table.

Historically, research conducted in top-ranked higher education institutions has sometimes assumed that the lives of racialised and Indigenous people, and disabled people⁴ were worth so little, and their pain was so irrelevant, that it was acceptable to perform painful research tests on them, even sometimes resulting in death (Kelly and Rice 2020; MacDonald et al. 2014; Scharff et al. 2010). These ideas may still linger. For example, mass research trials which are not permissible in some countries are being carried out on a large scale in others – such as in India, which “has become [a] popular destination for clinical trials due to lax regulations and rampant poverty” (Landau 2020). We need to acknowledge the part that higher education scientists and scholars play in such endeavours, as well as the ethical issues involved, not just promote narratives of social mobility and empowerment. In that sense, the pandemic has placed higher education institutions – particularly research-intensive ones – in an unprecedented situation, resulting in the creation of new geopolitics of knowledge and global interests.

Rankings and the higher education field of power

The 2007–2008 global financial crisis (GFC) led to bailouts for many big banks, but fewer resources for already stretched educational institutions, which resulted in the growing influence of rankings and marketisation forces in higher education (Stack 2016). That said, the current situation is unprecedented because it involves much more than economics. The pandemic is reconfiguring the entire field of higher education. For example, many face-to-face classes are now online, and while some institutions have adjusted easily, others without the same resources have struggled or failed completely. In addition, many students lack the personal resources (such as internet capacity) to participate in online classes. Hence, we need to understand the impact of the pandemic on higher education as a field of power. Importantly, rankings do not measure the ability of universities to respond to crises in ways that serve their particular communities.

Pierre Bourdieu (1990) explains that the “rules of the game” normalise policies and practices that are arbitrary. Eventually, these practices can become seen as common sense and therefore beyond debate. One such “rule” is the belief in *meritocracy* (a merit-based system), which obscures networks of power. These power-based networks continue to conflate economic, social and cultural capital with contributions

⁴ I have made a choice to use identity-first language rather than person-first language (“people with disabilities”) (see Callahan 2018).

to a better world. For example, requiring academics to publish in journals listed by the Web of Science (WoS) and in journals with a high “impact factor”⁵ is key to universities moving up in rankings. The WoS publishes articles mainly in English, thereby problematically punishing academics who work in other languages. In addition, journal impact factors depend on the popularity of journal articles. As Mark Neff explains, the issue with popularity as a proxy for rigorous work is that it conflates scientific merit with citation frequency in a subset of journals curated for other purposes. For scientific disciplines globally to orient themselves in this way is to make a substantial – yet unexamined – commitment to allowing science priorities to be steered by commercial products that were not designed for that purpose (Neff 2020, p. 38).

In my analysis of the websites of top-ranked universities⁶ around the world, I discovered a clear lack of systematic reporting, which would allow audiences to compare and contrast stated commitments to equity with decisions around resource allocation. It was particularly difficult to find the business terms for agreements universities have entered into with industry, or what these terms and conditions mean for where and to what end funds are allocated. This is important because where universities receive money from matters to their ability to carry out commitments to equity, access and transparency. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), along with many other American universities, has received money from the Koch brothers,⁷ with the condition attached that Koch Industries can influence the hiring of academics who hold particular ideological positions on matters such as fighting climate change policies (Levinthal 2015). The narratives of top-ranked universities also do not include information on their interconnected networks of power, which are central to understanding their will and capacity to respond to the pandemic and other global crises.

Incompatible goals: equity and rankings

Concurrent with the narratives of being world-class, the stated commitments of many universities to diversity and equity have only intensified since COVID-19 and events such as the murder of George Floyd.⁸ In Canada, Frances Henry et al. (2017) demonstrate that little progress has been made in hiring racialised and Indigenous academics, and even less in terms of university leaders, full professors and research

⁵ A journal’s “impact factor” measures the frequency with which its articles have been cited in a particular year. This calculated factor influences the journal’s academic importance or rank.

⁶ Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and social network analysis, I analysed the websites of top-ranked institutions in Canada, the USA, South Africa, the UK, India and China (see Stack 2016, 2019, 2021).

⁷ The Koch brothers own Koch Industries, the second-largest privately owned company in the United States.

⁸ George Floyd was a 46-year-old Black American man who died during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25 May 2020.

chairs.⁹ Shamus Khan (2016) points out that elite education institutions are beginning to look different. Student bodies are no longer all white; however, top-ranked institutions continue to be among the most white and upper class.

In the past, top-ranked universities have been built on racism, colonialism and ableism.¹⁰ For example, institutions such as Harvard University in the United States (US), were built by enslaved people and received much of their early wealth from slavery (Wilder 2013). Intersecting with racism is the perpetuation of ableism. According to the World Health Organization (WHO and World Bank 2011), 15 per cent of the global population has a disability, yet they are grossly underrepresented as students and even more so amongst the professoriate. As Jay Dolmage demonstrates:

Disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education. Or, let me put it differently: higher education has needed to create a series of versions of “lower education” to justify its work and to ground its exceptionalism, and the physical gates and steps trace a long history of exclusion (Dolmage 2017, p. 3).

Dolmage argues that elite universities are unlikely to move beyond an understanding of disability that focuses on cure, given their entrepreneurial research focus. Several scholars have pointed to the contradictions in claiming to welcome people with disabilities while maintaining arbitrary performance metrics and spatial and temporal arrangements that exclude them (Brown and Leigh 2018; Pearson and Boskovich 2019; Stapleton 2015; Titchkosky 2010; Waterfield et al. 2018).

Fiona Campbell explains that “We all live and breathe ableist logic” (Campbell 2012, p. 212). From childhood, we are ranked from top to bottom and from slow to gifted as students, from normal to abnormal in development, and so forth. Those who have a disability, illness or are neurodivergent are rarely seen as adequate for academia or as the future professionals educated in universities. Dis/ability studies and critical race theory (DisCrit) provide a framework for understanding how the metrics used to determine excellence are built from long-standing structures grounded in ableist and racist norms of the body and mind (Taylor and Shallish 2019). DisCrit provides a framework for considering how race and dis/ability are constructed and what this means for who is seen as “fit” to attend top-ranked universities (Annamma et al. 2016).

The structures and metrics of success for today’s top-ranked universities are built upon capitalism and segregation. These institutions are ill-equipped to deal with the precarity of life. A different approach is needed that is grounded in the reality that the current model, in which all humans and other species are seen as “capital”¹¹ to

⁹ Canadian Research Chairs are provided substantial funding by the Government of Canada and used by universities to retain and recruit researchers.

¹⁰ Ableism refers to the systemic discrimination of disabled people.

¹¹ The extraction of human “capital” from formal educational institutions for the purpose of harnessing graduates to jobs involving further increase of surplus production is, in effect, *counterproductive*. As Luiz Marques argues, “the cumulative drive [of capitalism] has begun to threaten societies’ existential security by ‘producing’ a type of nature that is more hostile, merciless, and uncaring about mankind than the one that once threatened us” (Marques 2020, p. 363).

extract, is leading us towards global collapse. In the next section, I will explore co-operatives as a potential strategy for developing a more equitable and resilient post-secondary education sector.

Co-operatives

A central principle of co-operatives is providing education and training to members to facilitate democratic governance, responsible financial management and the capacity for resolving conflict and addressing inequity. Co-operatives can provide a space for members to theorise and practise ways of living, learning, working and being together that are based on interdependence and acceptance of human vulnerability.

During 2012, which the United Nations (UN) declared the International Year of Cooperatives, there was a resurgence of interest in these groups. By 2020, according to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), 1.2 billion people on the planet were part of a co-operative and 10 per cent of the world's workforce was employed through co-operatives (ICA n.d.). A UN-commissioned study concluded:

Combined the global co-operative economy is two times larger than France's economy and places right behind Germany's economy as the 5th largest economic unit if it were a united country (Grace 2014, pp. 1–2).

Co-operatives, as Tom Woodin explains, are not “utopias”. Like the rest of society, co-operatives exist within structured oppression that does not magically disappear, but “they do potentially facilitate debate and popular deliberation” (Woodin 2019, p. 1097). Public policy is key to co-operative development, but it is also often its downfall. In much of Africa, for example, co-operatives flourished until World Bank structural adjustment programmes pushed governments to favour privatisation (Benson and Ross 2019) and large Global North providers. However, without public policy support, co-operatives are challenging to start and sustain. Obtaining finance is difficult in many jurisdictions because the banking sector commonly frames co-operatives as a risk, despite statistics that show they are often financially stronger and more sustainable than conventional businesses (Karaphillis et al. 2017).

As Malcolm Noble and Cilia Ross (2019) demonstrate, co-operative education has a long history, and pedagogic approaches developed in adult co-operative education are now mainstream. Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014) documents accounts of African Americans who created co-operatives from the 1780s on. She notes that all the co-operatives she examined started with “study circles” or other education aimed at students learning to be “co-operators”. Brett Fairbairn (2005) also reminds us that First Nations peoples around the world have had advanced co-operative approaches to social, economic and cultural relationships for millennia.

Co-operatives frequently arise when conventional businesses shut down and usually grow in times of economic stress. The Rochdale co-operative movement, for example, began in the United Kingdom (UK) during the Industrial Revolution. It offered an alternative to the dire consequences of extreme poverty and the dislocation of workers and the unemployed. The Great Depression, which occurred mostly

during the 1930s, similarly saw the rise of many co-operatives. More recently, the 2007–2008 GFC led to the emergence of new co-operatives and notions of “communing” (Harvey 2019), in which housing became one node of a broader ecology that included energy, education, food and transport (Joubert and Hodkinson 2018).

Conversations on co-operatives in the post-secondary education sector

Writing this article, I recalled conversations in classrooms, faculty meetings and social media from the past few years that normalised inequity while using the language of inclusion and equity. In this section, I take salient elements of these conversations and consider how they might have gone differently if the plethora of research pointing to the economic robustness and educational potential of co-operatives was considered as a legitimate strategy for building resilience throughout the post-secondary education sector.

Element 1: universities are too complicated for a co-operative structure to work

Education co-operatives can take different forms. There are examples of co-operative schools and universities, as well as groups that offer services such as housing, childcare or food within corporatised university structures. Some are small and mainly based on voluntary labour. Others state that they are anti-capitalist; however, many attempt to work within a capitalist system through various means, including partnerships. Co-operatives require democratic governance, but, most crucially, they also need a radically different political economy and approach to education, training, finance and investments.

Co-operatives are run as non-profits and they decide how revenue will be utilised. In Canada, for example, the Waterloo Co-operative Residence Inc.¹² has 800 members, and the Neill-Wycik Co-operative College¹³ in Toronto has 750 members. Students also formed the Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive (CoFED),¹⁴ a coalition of food co-operatives in Canada and the US, to create alternatives to food controlled by multinationals such as Sodexo, Aramark and Bon Appétit (Marple 2018). Often, co-operatives have been developed to meet needs that formal leadership has refused to acknowledge. In the 1970s, for example, students and academics from the University of Calgary in Canada occupied a cafeteria protesting the lack of childcare; they also started a co-operative childcare centre that continues today (Langford 2011).

¹² For more information about the Waterloo Co-operative Residence Inc, visit <https://www.wcri.coop/> [accessed 15 February 2021].

¹³ For more information about the Neill-Wycik Co-operative College, visit <http://neill-wycik.coop/> [accessed 15 February 2021].

¹⁴ For more information about the Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive, visit <https://www.cofed.coop/> [accessed 15 February 2021].

One type of co-operative – for example, housing – can often lead to others, such as food and transport. The most well-known co-operative university is Mondragon University¹⁵ in Spain. It is part of the Mondragon Corporation, which states on its website that its network of co-operatives employs over 80,818 people in the areas of finance, industry, retail and knowledge (Mondragon n.d.). Each faculty at the university has its own co-operative, which elects members to be part of a larger co-operative congress (Cook 2013). The average salary differential at Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 companies is 1:129, versus 1:9 at Mondragon (Heales et al. 2017, p. 51). The co-operative acts as a “federated network” (sharing resources via a central framework) that keeps member numbers in each sub-co-operative at a level where deep engagement is possible, while having the purchasing power of a larger network. Profits are reinvested into the co-operative or are used for community services, rather than going to shareholders.

Noble and Ross (2019) point out that the desire for a co-operative higher education institution in the UK started over 150 years ago, resulting in the creation of the Co-operative College.¹⁶ Today, the college is leading the development of a Co-operative University, which will be democratically run by an elected group of staff and students who will all be members of the university with voting rights at the annual general meeting. The plan for the university is to encompass a co-operative pedagogy; however, a co-operative structure does not automatically ensure this happens.

A co-operative university is very specifically a degree-awarding body which is likely to deliver CHE [co-operative higher education], but it might also provide HE which is not co-operative: that is, that the organisational structure is co-operative, but the education provided is not co-operative in character (Noble and Ross 2019, p. 5).

For example, a university could make collective decisions around governance, membership and pay scales, but abide by external requirements for accreditation that are not based in principles of co-operative learning – such as *participatory* and *action research* approaches, solidarity, individual and collective reflection, and a commitment to collaboration (Noble and Ross 2019).

Neoliberal policies sometimes allow the opportunity for co-operatives to develop, but with strings attached. In the UK, for example, a 2017 Act of Parliament allowed “challenger institutions” to be established, which the Co-operative College used to initiate the development of a co-operative university (Noble and Ross 2019). Similar policies aimed at privatisation in K–12 schooling also provided a space for the development of co-operative K–12 schools. However, these UK co-operative schools are semi-autonomous: their budget comes from the Department for Education and there are accountability metrics. They are required to meet government standards, as are “hybrids” – institutions with a co-operative structure but operating within a

¹⁵ For more information about Mondragon University, visit <https://www.mondragon.edu/en/home> [accessed 15 February 2021].

¹⁶ For more information about the Co-operative College, visit <https://www.co-op.ac.uk/> [accessed 15 February 2021].

competitive government system for funding and demands for standardised assessments (Wilkins 2019). As Joun Schostak reminds us, co-operative schools can still adopt “disciplinarian, surveillance-driven and managerialist practices”, and “each reading of what co-operativism is to mean in practice is both educational and political” (Schostak 2019, p. 1111).

Co-operatives need universities willing to provide space in places that are easily accessible to members. Policy at the university level requires changes to governance, and acknowledgement that learning is occurring in a co-operative. The Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan provides a model for interdisciplinary scholarship with a

common focus on something that is “real” (that is, not just an abstract concept, a theme, or a method, but something with a social and physical presence) and that is “out there” (in other words, is a concern of people external to the university, and has an identifiable constituency in the community) (Fairbairn and Fulton 2000, p. 5).

The issue is not that co-operatives are too complex or unsustainable – that has been repeatedly proven incorrect. Instead, creating co-operatives that theorise, practise and struggle with living and working co-operatively requires a shift in thinking, away from education aimed at developing students’ capacity to compete. Such efforts can be small, as with a group that starts up a housing co-op or café, or they can be massive, as in the case of Mondragon.

Element 2: to be the best requires competition

Meritocracy has been repeatedly proven to be a myth, albeit a powerful one that co-operatives can challenge. In a society based on competition, learning to trust others and to handle conflict that arises requires education. For example, how do co-operative members determine if everyone is “doing their share”? And what does this mean concerning other responsibilities and emotional labour, which are made invisible by current rankings? For instance, consider the academic with a disability who works to make an institution appear welcoming and who mentors students with disabilities – who is then told she is not “pulling her weight” because she is not publishing enough in top-ranked journals. Co-operatives require attention to relationships and challenges to structural oppression. Although co-operatives are structured in different ways, what is central is the participation or “sweat equity” of all members to maintain it. This demands open discussion of caregiving responsibilities and structural responses to levelling workloads.

A central principle of co-operatives is education for all members, which can provide a *transformative practice framework* (Amsler 2015) that does not disconnect the means and ends of education. DisCrit theory could also be engaged with as a framework to think through university co-operatives that challenge the standard concepts of what it means to be a productive student or academic, which usually excludes bodies and minds deemed to move abnormally through campus spaces.

The struggle with developing co-operatives in universities is not that there is no model to draw on. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, for example, wrote about the role of education in the development of co-operatives in the late 1800s. He also worked with a university in Atlanta in the US to examine co-operatives as a way to improve the economic and educational status of Black Americans oppressed by white supremacy (Gordon Nembhard 2014). Co-operatives often emerge from contexts that include racism, colonialism, patriarchy and ableism. As Fairbairn (2005) reminds us, co-operatives did not originate in Europe; many Indigenous cultures successfully operated organisations based on co-operative principles for hundreds of years. Canada, Saskatchewan and Quebec are often seen as early hubs of co-operatives; however, less discussed are the unceded Indigenous lands that co-operatives were often built upon and the implicit and explicit exclusion of Indigenous people. Lessons learned in these sectors are essential to building co-operatives that centre on anti-racist and anti-ableist practices.

Furthermore, activists with disabilities have been at the heart of the movement for co-operative care services and housing, which could be adapted to higher education contexts. This movement connects personal needs and desires to the pooling of collective resources that have allowed greater control over hiring personal care assistants and allocating time for care (Roulstone and Hwang 2015).

Element 3: who would pay and why would universities agree to be co-operatives?

I doubt that existing universities would agree to or have the legal means to transform themselves into co-operatives; however, the emerging Co-operative University in the UK (mentioned in Element 1 above) demonstrates that it is possible. Despite this, there is room for co-operatives *within* existing universities.

Who pays for co-operatives varies, but what is consistent are stated commitments to democracy, equality, equity and education. Co-operatives can be funded through a combination of members, outsiders (e.g. bank or government loans) and retained surplus. Some co-operatives finance themselves with a combination of government grants (e.g. for schools), membership fees, bank and credit union borrowing, stocks (shares) and bonds.

A Master's dissertation written during the Great Depression by James Miller (1936) describes a group of 12 boys from poor and working-class backgrounds who started a co-operative so they could continue their schooling at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas in the US. Approximately 5,000 college students lived in the co-operative during the Great Depression (Bailey 2018). While a high percentage of students were forced to leave their education, most of the co-operative members were able to continue. During this period of time, Miller (1936) notes that there were also several co-operative bookstores (e.g. at Harvard University) and cafeterias (e.g. at the University of California, Los Angeles). University of Toronto students in Canada founded a co-operative in 1936 that expanded and is still operational today. In 1955, a dean of education at Florida State University in the US – Mode L. Stone, who had himself lived in a co-operative – began one for high-achieving, low-income students. These students lived rent-free and were educated using the principles of

co-operative living. The expanded co-operative has since served over 9,000 students (Caton et al. 2018).

Co-operatives are founded in different ways. Armado Ibarra et al. (2018) found that those created through a developer organisation were often founded by white people with the aim of helping marginalised communities. However, this could lead to “racialised paternalism”, in which racialised workers were empowered through dignified and well-paid jobs, yet treated as not having the capacity to lead a co-operative. Many K–12 co-operative schools in the UK operate as charitable trusts. Some of these schools have opted out entirely of submission to local authority control, and others have done so partially.

Top-ranked universities are unlikely to lead the charge to transform themselves into a co-operative or even to have co-operatives within a corporatised structure, but in terms of finances, thinking about co-operatives as part of building a resilient post-secondary sector could interest policymakers and students wishing to keep the cost of education manageable. Since the economic recession of 2007–2008, several universities have been forced to close or merge to survive (Barats 2020; Pausits 2020; Sulkowski et al. 2020). Furthermore, in countries with the highest number of top-ranked universities, many students are graduating with massive debt that often takes a toll on their health (Jones 2019). Student vulnerability and well-being are a generalised issue, including in Global North top-ranked higher education systems. For instance, the cost of housing on many campuses has gone up because of the focus on amenities to attract students who can pay (Lewis-McCoy 2015). Meanwhile, the number of homeless or housing-insecure students in the US is rising (Smith and Knechtel 2020; Trawver and Hedwig 2020).

In 2008, only a handful of college presidents received over USD 1 million in salary, but in 2015 this number had grown to 58 (Yeung et al. 2019). University sporting coaches have also received significant increases in pay that continued through and beyond the 2007–2008 recession (Thomas and Van Horn 2016). Arguably, particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing to allocate resources in this way is not responsible or sustainable. Instead, thinking about housing, food and health services across the post-secondary sector could result in the development of co-operatives that students and staff from many institutions could access. At the same time, this could provide opportunities for members to learn, work and live in participatory spaces. Such a system could give the post-secondary sector ways to connect beyond the social-class-based “silos” that rankings perpetuate.

Conclusion

My desire to write this article came after teaching university classes on work and learning pre-COVID-19. In my classes, we read several articles that pointed to various ways in which the current state of affairs, of which education is a part, is not working terribly well for the majority of humans and other species on the planet. We also discussed how it is important not to be nostalgic about a golden era of universities that never existed for the vast majority of the world’s population – including

people living in poverty, Indigenous and racialised people, disabled people and sexual and gender minorities. Students talked about the responsibility of higher education to not only highlight the plethora of research demonstrating humans have largely failed as stewards of the planet, but also to use universities as places to try out more productive ways for humans to live with each other and the natural world. We wondered how this could be done.

During one of the classes, I mentioned co-operatives and a documentary I am working on concerning the housing co-op I grew up in. None of the 20 graduate students knew what a co-operative was. Most thought I was talking about co-operative-study programmes at universities, so they were confused that I grew up in such a context. The students wanted to learn more, and the common refrain was “Why didn’t I know about this before?” and “Why, given the housing and food crisis, do we rarely talk about co-ops?”. The students’ curiosity inspired my latent realisation of how growing up in a co-operative impacts my understanding and commitments around pedagogy and governance.

Co-operative universities could align with values of equity and inclusion in ways that institutions based on rankings and other forms of competition cannot; however, co-operatives are not utopias. Co-operative schools in the UK still receive government funding and must abide by government standards, including exams that rank students and other forms of competition. A co-operative university would still need to obtain funding within the capitalist system in which it exists. Mondragon University has been critiqued for narrowing research and learning to what is considered useful knowledge for work (Winn 2015). Other research has pointed to workers not feeling the company belongs to them (Kasmir 2016).

More common, but still relatively rare in much of the world, are co-operative student housing and food services within corporatised universities. Despite the limitations, I argue that co-operatives provide space for urgently needed prefigurative practices that involve tension, conflict and theorising around what it means to make democratic decisions, and how to ensure equitable resource allocation and respectful relationships with other humans and the natural environment – which occur in an unequal world.

Higher education impacts both those who attend and those who are affected by the decisions of graduates, including politicians, healthcare workers and educators. The discussion of what a good education is and could be requires active and ongoing participation beyond those who have been well served by the current framework for defining excellence in education and research. Co-operatives provide at least a place to imagine structures and practices that have already been highly successful in multiple sectors around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought uncertainty – the unknown has superseded the known – with mounting complications as it continues. This article builds on the long-standing work of activists and academics who have laid the groundwork for an ongoing conversation about the possibility of expanding co-operatives in the post-secondary education sector. In such living labs, we could practise and theorise education that engages with the need to radically alter how we interact with each other and the natural world to survive both COVID-19 and the climate crisis, which will be with us long after the pandemic ends.

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