

Institution: Liverpool John Moores University
Unit of Assessment: UOA30 History
Title of case study: Enhancing Business and Democratic Performance within the British Co-operative Group
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The research addresses the need of the British Co-operative Group and its members across the UK for a stronger understanding of the development of the business model of co-operation in Britain, the importance of democracy in the governance and direction of the organisation and in adapting the model to future challenges. The project's findings are being used in the education of elected member officials who form the democratic bodies which govern the Co-operative Group, and employees who work for the organisation. Learning has focussed on the heritage of the co-operative movement and the development of the Co-operative Group's business model. It enhances the effectiveness of member democracy by increasing knowledge of the organization's development and democratic traditions.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The research comprises the first business history of the Co-operative Group and the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) for over fifty years, explaining the growth of the movement until the 1950s, its decline up to the 1990s, and then its renaissance in the first decades of the 21st century. The Co-operative Group has, since the late 1990s, been engaged in a process of business renewal and redefinition of its democratic practices and structures. This process has involved an on-going debate among the Group and the wider movement's membership, as well as its managers and employees. As the Group approached the UN Year of co-operatives in 2012, and its 150th anniversary in 2013, this debate has become more important. As such, the research explores recent important developments in the co-operative movement which have not been previously addressed. To facilitate it, full and unprecedented access was allowed to the records of the CWS and Co-operative Group, and the extensive collections of co-operative records held in the National Co-operative Archive at the Co-operative College in Manchester. It also involved interviewing a number of senior figures within the Co-operative movement, including several former Chief Executive Officers. Major international conferences on the history of co-operation were held in July 2009 and July 2012 at the Head Office of the Co-operative Group in Manchester to help facilitate access to the breadth of research being undertaken globally on co-operatives and particularly on co-operative business models. This has helped the team to draw important international comparisons between the development of the British business model and those of other countries. Archival research and interviews were undertaken by all three partners on the project.</p> <p>The research was initiated and jointly led by Dr Anthony Webster, (Reader, left LJMU September 2013), Professor John Wilson, Director at the Business School at the University of Newcastle. Ms Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, Research Assistant employed by the Co-operative College. The project was funded (£135,000 from 2009 to 2013) by the Co-operative Group to help raise public and internal awareness and knowledge of the development of the co-operative business model, and to commemorate both the 150th anniversary of the formation of CWS, and the United Nations Year of Co-operatives in 2012. Research on the project began in early 2009, and the major output from the research, a book was published in October 2013.</p> <p>The main insights of the research focus upon how the democratic and federal nature of the co-operative movement helped it and the CWS to become national business leaders in retailing and a major player up till the middle of the twentieth century, but then proved to be a major factor which precipitated a long period of decline. It goes on to examine the strategies which were adopted from the 1990s which have enabled the Co-operative Group and the movement generally to reverse its decline and re-establish itself as a major commercial and social player.</p>

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3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1) A. Webster, L. Shaw, A. Brown, J.K. Walton and D. Stewart (eds) (2011). *The Hidden Alternative: Co-operative Values, Past, Present and Future* (Manchester; Manchester University and United Nations University Press).

This book can be supplied by LJMU on request.

2) K. Friberg, R. Vorberg-Rugh, A. Webster and J. Wilson (2012). "The Politics of Commercial Dynamics: Co-operative Adaptations to Postwar consumerism in the United Kingdom and Sweden, 1950-2010" in P. Battilani and H. Schröter (eds), *The Co-operative Business Movement, 1950 to the Present* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press) pp243-262.

The book was subject to Cambridge University Press' rigorous peer review processes and can be supplied by LJMU on request.

3) A. Webster (2012). "Building the Wholesale: The Development of the English CWS and British Co-operative Business 1863-1890" in *Business History* 54:6, 883-904. DOI: 10.1080/00076791.2012.706902.

The research contribution is also apparent in the jointly authored Introduction to this special issue in which A. Webster and J.K. Walton were joint editors (p825-832).

Business History is the leading journal in the UK for the discipline, and all articles published are subject to the most rigorous peer review process.

4) J. Wilson, A. Webster and R. Vorberg-Rugh (2013). *Building Co-operation: A Business History of The Co-operative Group 1863 -2013* (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2013).

This book was subject to Oxford University Press' rigorous peer review processes and can be supplied by LJMU on request.

5) J. Wilson, A. Webster and R. Vorberg-Rugh (2013) "The Co-operative Movement in Britain: From Crisis to 'Renaissance', 1950-2010." *Enterprise and Society: The International Journal of Business History* DOI: 10.1093/es/khs076

Enterprise & Society is a leading global journal for the discipline, and all articles published are subject to the most rigorous peer review process.

The collaborative project was funded by the Co-operative Group, who provided £135,000 to the PI (J. Wilson) over three years from January 2010 to January 2013.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The launch of the project was a direct result of two major developments in British and global economic affairs. Firstly, the spectacular and unexpected revival of the fortunes of the British Co-operative Group after 2000, after half a century of decline. Secondly a pan-European revival of interest in mutuals and co-operatives in the wake of the global crisis of 2008, which resulted in states being compelled to withdraw from the provision of a vast range of services, precisely at a time when confidence in the ability of investor led commercial organisations to fill the gap had been shaken to its roots. The result was a European-wide interest in the revival of 'Third Sector/Civil Society' solutions to existing problems, as exemplified in the 'Social Innovation' agenda prioritised in European Research Funding plans in 'Horizon 2020'. In Britain, this was famously encapsulated in the Coalition Government's commitment to 'Big Society' and the promotion of new mutuals to meet the challenge of a contracting state. The creation of 500 Co-operative Trust Schools in the last few years, as an alternative to academies and LEA control, is an example of this revival in action. These developments have lent the project – the first major investigation into the development of Britain's leading co-operative business since the 1940s – additional importance in terms of informing future strategies within the Group and other initiatives seeking the revival of co-operation as an alternative to traditional forms of business organisation and delivery.

As the research project has revealed new information and insights, these have been shared with

approximately 350 members, senior managers and employees through a planned programme of events specifically designed to enable members and employees to incorporate this knowledge into their work and activities. In most cases, the influence of the research findings presented was assessed by questionnaire. Between October 2011 and June 2013, ten speaking events were held across the UK and delivered by Dr Webster at: Beamish (NE England); London (twice); Manchester (AGM of the Co-operative Group with representatives from all regions in the UK); the Isle of Man; Belfast; Newport (Wales); Taunton; Bath; and Cardiff (Co-operative Congress 2013).

Two hundred and twenty-six responses have been gathered from events, and the responses show:

- a) That 222 members (98%) feel that they learned more about the history of the co-operative movement than they knew before – at least to some extent
- b) That 208 members (92%) feel that what they learned will help them at least to some extent in their work as co-operators
- c) That 191 members (85%) believe that the session made a difference to them as a co-operator

In addition, there were five educational events involving the delivery of a module entitled 'Celebrating our Co-operative Heritage'; the content of the module was based on the findings of the Business History project including the significance of its business model, the challenges it has faced, the strategies it has followed; the module was designed by the project team.

The learning outcomes of the module are provided below:

1. To appreciate the significance of the Rochdale business model and founding principles
2. To understand how the Co-operative Group has evolved to where it is today
3. Through review of the recent history of the Group from the early 1980s, to understand the difficulties/challenges faced and the actions taken in the twenty-first century to get our business back on track
4. Through review the role of co-operatives, including the Co-operative Group, to understand the role they have in campaigning for change

The inaugural delivery of module took place at the Co-operative Winter School, Liverpool on 1 February 2012, other events took place in Manchester, Leeds, Bristol and South Lanarkshire between February and August 2012. The first three of the events were delivered by the research team and the remainder were delivered by the Co-operative's own trainers using the materials developed by the research group. The Co-operative Group elected members and employees who attended these events were assessed on work which involved plans to disseminate what they learned from the module to the wider membership; and successful attendees received an accredited "Certificate in Co-operation". Seventy-two elected members and employees attended these events, and 92% agreed that their performance as elected members or employees would be improved by taking the module.

These results indicate that members and employees feel that the research has enhanced their understanding of the movement and that this helps them to communicate the principles and practice of co-operation more effectively to fellow members and/or employees. The elected members and employees who attended the educational events are tasked with deepening the understanding of co-operative principles and history within the wider membership as part of their roles, and as such there is a 'cascade' effect which facilitates even wider reach to the membership than is captured in the figures above.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. The Chief Executive & Principal of The Co-operative College can corroborate that the research findings have informed the learning resources of the Co-operative College.
2. The Head of Membership of The Co-operative Group can verify that the member events took place throughout the UK and the content of these was informed by the research

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findings of the Business History Project.

3. The Member & Director Learning Manager of The Co-operative Group can corroborate that the research findings are a key part of the Certificate in Co-operation module 'Celebrating our Co-operative Heritage' delivered to co-operative members and managers.
4. The Regional Secretary of the Co-operative Group South & West Region has provided a statement to confirm the influence of Dr Webster's talk on the Co-operative Group Business History Project on members (in terms of feedback).