

Editorial

The 'new' Journal of Co-operative Studies

Regular readers of this Journal will immediately notice that this issue is markedly different in appearance to the Journal to which they have become accustomed over recent years. Following discussion at the 2003 conference of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, we have changed the format of the Journal. We have moved to an A4 format partly to conform to a general trend amongst academic journals. However, a more important consideration is that the new format allows us to respond to a view expressed by our readers that the Journal could be made more readable. We have taken the opportunity to increase typesize slightly and to move to a two columns per page format. This issue also reinstates the inclusion of a reviews section which we intend should again become a regular feature of the Journal.

Longer term developments

The changes in format should be seen as just the first phase of developing the Journal. Ensuring its long-term viability requires rather more than the relatively cosmetic changes being implemented from this issue. There is a need to re-examine the character of articles published. Changes of this sort are necessarily incremental and their effects will take over a year to be fully appreciated by readers. This is because some material submitted for publication in the Journal takes upwards of three months undergoing the peer review and revision process before it is ready to appear in print. Sometimes, if there is a backlog of material awaiting publication, it may then have to be held over to await an issue in which there is space for its inclusion. Thus, there will be a delay before the effects of any change in the guidelines for contributors can be fully seen in the contents of the Journal. It should therefore be noted here that the future role and character of the Journal has been the subject of discussion at recent meetings of the executive of the Society and revised guidelines will appear in a future issue.

Two major considerations have underpinned our discussions. First, the Society for Co-operative Studies has always tried to act

as a bridge between academics from a range of disciplines who have a research interest in co-operatives and the practitioners, the lay activists and managers who wish to reflect on their engagement with co-operative enterprises. It could, perhaps, be argued that the Journal has been open to criticism in the past because it has not been fully successful at providing this bridge. At times, its character could be described as schizophrenic in that it has tended to cater separately for its two readerships. As an academic journal, we have developed an international character, attracting refereed papers from academic contributors from all over the world. Most of these report the results of empirical studies on a wide variety of co-operative organisations. Whilst it is important that such research is reported, this section of the Journal is largely addressed to an academic audience. Most practitioners will find much of this material somewhat esoteric to be of great interest to them. Instead, they may well find more relevance in the non-refereed short articles. The danger is thus that, instead of acting as a bridge, ours becomes a journal in which academics talk to academics whilst practitioners separately talk to practitioners.

Another concern relates to the impact upon relatively specialist niche Journals such as ours of the increasingly selective research funding approach being adopted in the United Kingdom. The RAE, the research assessment process to which all UK universities are subjected, tends not to reward publication in such specialist journals. Institutions seeking recognition as centres of international excellence in the discipline based units of assessment, on which the exercise is based, will inevitably reward staff who publish in the leading discipline based journals. Contributions to journals such as ours tend to go unrecognised. This makes it increasingly difficult for us to convince leading UK academic researchers that they should target the papers reporting the results of their major research projects at the Journal of Co-operative Studies rather than at the '5' and '5*' RAE rated journals of their disciplines. This issue is, perhaps exceptional in that the two refereed articles report on major research projects on the UK co-operative movement. In both cases, we are indebted to

the contributors for providing articles which will of interest to both academic and practitioner audiences. In both cases, amongst the authors can be counted friends of the Society who have contributed to its aims through active membership and through their involvement with both the Journal and the Society's annual conferences. However, we need to adapt the Journal to the realities of the context in which we operate and to base our guidance to potential contributors on developing a distinctive character for the Journal which addresses the problems identified here.

A way forward

A distinguishing feature of this Journal is that its readership extends beyond the academic community to reach practitioners and active co-operators. It is the publication of a Society formed to act as a bridge between these groups. Rather than the schizophrenic character referred to above, our aim should be to publish papers which will be of interest to the entire readership and further this bridging function. There has been discussion within the Society of ways in which we could play a more active role in developing what could, in effect become a virtual co-operative research institute. Perhaps we should be more active in building up links with such bodies as the Co-operative College to develop a network of researchers who would join forces across institutional boundaries to attract funding for collaborative research activity. The input of the College and active practitioners should help to ground such research projects in live issues for the co-operative movement. Within such an approach, perhaps the Journal should give greater emphasis to articles both from academics and practitioners which are theoretical or reflective in character. The distinction between refereed and non-refereed articles would disappear as all such contributions would be subjected to scrutiny within an active and possibly re-constituted Editorial Advisory Board. Hopefully, such articles might help to stimulate proposals for new research projects. Whilst we would continue to publish suitable peer reviewed research based papers and research reports, we might anticipate that a desired outcome of many of the research projects referred to above might be publication in the leading journals within the subject disciplines of the academic

researchers concerned. This would help to raise their profile and that of co-operative studies as a field of research.

In this issue

This issue is a contrast to most previous issues in that the two refereed articles relate to research on co-operation within a region of the UK, the West Midlands, whilst our short article, a further contribution from Basil Loveridge, based on his personal experiences of co-operation in Africa, brings an international flavour.

Simmons and Birchall present a discussion based on the findings of their study of the motivation of members in consumer and housing co-operatives which was undertaken in conjunction with the Co-operative College as part of a larger project to identify ways of supporting active stakeholder involvement in social enterprises. The paper by Paul Jones reports on a credit union strengthening project in the same location. It argues the case for a radical financial and organisational restructuring if the movement is to maintain its relevance to the needs of its members and achieve sustained growth. In both papers, we see research which, at the same time as advancing our academic understanding of co-operation, is grounded in current practice and a desire to achieve positive practical outcomes. It is to be hoped that this integration of theory and practice will set the tone for the 'new' Journal of Co-operative Studies.

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