

THE FUTURE IS CO-OPERATIVE

# DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGY FOR CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**NEWCASTLE**  
AUSTRALIA

**A research report by:**

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## About this report

### Developing a pedagogy for co-operative education in Australia

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## About the authors



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**Ann Apps** is Lecturer in the Newcastle Law School, University of Newcastle, Australia. She has previously practised as a solicitor in regional New South Wales and has experience in property, commercial law, and civil litigation. Ann has published in the areas of tort, co-operative law and the law relating to mutuals and is currently undertaking her PhD, researching the impact of regulation on co-operatives in Australia. This research will test the hypothesis in the International Co-operative Alliance's (ICA) "Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade" that a regulatory infrastructure that "fails to recognise the distinctiveness of the co-operative approach to business" is a significant barrier to co-operative survival and growth in Australia. Ann is currently an independent expert representing the ICA Asia-Pacific on the ICA's Cooperative Law Committee.



**Elizabeth Makin** worked as a Research Assistant on the project. Lyb is a lawyer with a background working in corporate governance, aboriginal land rights and sustainable community development. She has a Masters in Environmental Law & Policy (UNSW) and has researched the role of co-ops in creating a more equitable food system. She has worked extensively for the BCCM to produce co-operative education tools and resources as well as authored reports and manuals to support the co-operative movement.

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## 1. Executive Summary

In 2016, University of Newcastle's Faculty of Business and Law launched Australia's first postgraduate program in co-operative management and organisation. The program responded to the findings of the Senate Economic Reference Committee's Report on its Inquiry into Co-operative, Mutual and Member Owned Business in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) that co-operatives were a neglected topic in University curricula and its recommendation that business and law programs should include topics on co-operatives and co-operative law. The Graduate Certificate in Co-operative Management and Organisation (GCCMO) and an MBA specialisation in Co-operatives and Social Enterprise Management (MBA Coop) offered three specialised co-operative courses, developed in collaboration with the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals (BCCM). Unfortunately both programs were disestablished in 2021, due to a combination of low enrolment numbers and the economic impacts of the COVID19 pandemic.

Our courses were designed using an action-learning pedagogy emphasising "learning by doing and self-reflection around learning and learning processes." The focus of the curricula was on the development of skills and knowledge to assist with the formation and governance of co-operative enterprise.

The first part of this report summarises the achievements and impacts of four years of co-operative education. Around 150 postgraduate students having completed one or more of the specialised co-operative courses, with high student satisfaction ratings. Even though the two programs have been disestablished, it has put Australia and the University of Newcastle's co-operative education and research on the Asia Pacific map. It has also led to substantial research grants exploring co-operative solutions for housing, renewables energy and agriculture.

The second part of the report analyses student's reflections on course design, content, and pedagogy. The reflections were submitted by students who were enrolled in one or two courses in the Graduate Certificate in Co-operatives Management and Organisation in 2018 and who were participating in the federally funded Farming Together initiative. The students whose data is used in this report, provided consent to participate in this research project which was approved by the University's ethics committee. In 2020 the researchers extended the research project to invite participants to attend focus groups to provide up to date reflections of the value and usefulness of their studies on co-operatives two years earlier.

The findings indicate that there were three main areas that students felt were important outcomes of co-operative education:

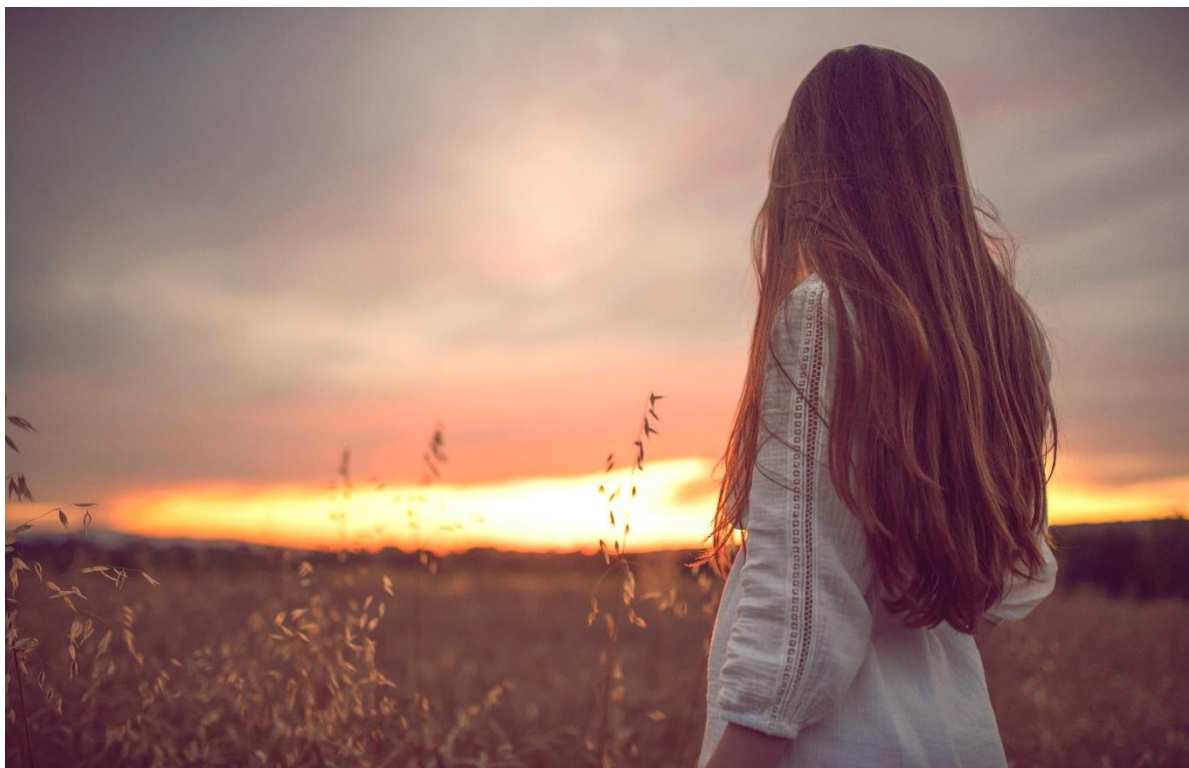
- professional development and leadership skills,
- operationalising the co-operative principles; and
- understanding the connection between membership and governance.

Students identified that the two co-operative courses undertaken at University of Newcastle had:

- Provided resources and tools for individual learning
- Developed group-based and peer to peer learning to support leadership skills
- Taken place over longer time to promote deep learning, reflection and networking
- Practiced participative decision-making and formalised board meetings
- Forced students to experiment with communication technology

Based on these findings' we have recommended that the following elements are integral to the design of a sound co-operative pedagogy that strengthens student's co-operative management and governance skills:

- ✓ Encourage the mapping of co-operator skills and experience
- ✓ Explore different types of participative governance processes
- ✓ Develop governance skills and processes to improve diversity
- ✓ Develop technology options to enhance connectivity within and among co-operatives
- ✓ Set aside enough time and reflections for co-operative knowledge, competence and skills to develop



## 2. Co-operative Education at the University of Newcastle

In late 2016 the University of Newcastle's Faculty of Business and Law launched Australia's first postgraduate program in co-operative management and organisation. The Graduate Certificate in Co-operative Management and Organisation (GCCMO) and MBA with a specialisation in Co-operatives and Social Enterprise Management (MBA Coop) were both offered for four years until end of 2020. The GCCMO was developed in close collaboration with the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals (BCCM) who helped the Faculty to set up an industry advisory board to review and advise on the new program. Unfortunately, both programs were disestablished in 2021, partly due to low enrolment numbers but also due to the implementation of a University wide reduction in programs in response to the economic impacts of the COVID19 pandemic.

### 2.1 The co-op education program at the University of Newcastle (2012 – 2020)

In 2015, the Dean of Newcastle Business School, Professor Morris Altman set up an internal working group of interested academics to develop two new postgraduate degrees in Co-operative Management and Organisation – at Master and Graduate Certificate level. The new programs were a response to the absence of information about the co-operative business model in tertiary business and law curriculum as noted by the Senate Economic Reference Committee Report on its Inquiry into Co-operative, Mutual and Member Owned Business in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). On 3 September 2015, the University's Program and Course Approval Committee (PCAC) approved both the

Graduate Certificate in Co-operatives Management and Organisation (GCCMO), and the Master of Co-operatives Management and Organisation (MCMO). The

two programs were launched in August 2016 commencing in Trimester 3 2016. In January 2017, a decision was made to rest the Master program due to low student enrolments. The GCCMO was continued. From 2017 the GCCMO degree included three specialised co-operative management courses; GSBS 6411 Introduction to Co-operative Organisation and Management, LEGL 6005 Cooperative Law and Governance and GSBS 6412 Social Enterprises and Co-operative Innovation. These three courses were also the core stream for MBA students who wished to obtain a specialisation in Co-operatives and Social Enterprises Management (MBA Co-ops). The co-op courses were also offered as freestanding electives for MBA students.

Dr. Sidsel Grimstad was appointed as program convener in late 2016, to establish, manage and support the design of degree. The development of curriculum was a joint effort by three academics who were given specific responsibility a single course.

The GCCMO courses were each offered once per trimester and delivered online:

- Trimester 1, GSBS 6411 Introduction to Co-operative Management and Organisation (curriculum design and course co-ordination by Dr. Sidsel Grimstad, Newcastle Business School).
- Trimester 2, LEGL6005 Co-operative Law and Governance (curriculum design and course co-ordination by Ann Apps, Newcastle Law School).
- Trimester 3, GSBS 6412 Social Enterprise and Co-operative Innovation (Curriculum design and course coordination by Dr. Joanne McNeill (Yunus Centre Griffith University) in 2017 and curriculum development and course coordination by Dr. Jarra Hicks 2018-2019 and Dr Matt Allen in 2020).

To ensure that the program was meeting industry needs, BCCM supported and assisted with the establishment of an Industry Advisory Board, including CEOs and other representatives from the Co-operative and Mutual sector:

- Melina Morrison and Anthony Taylor - BCCM(Sydney)
- James Brown, Common Equity NSW (Sydney)
- Rob Goudswaard – Credit Union Australia (Brisbane)
- Craig McMahon - Teachers Mutual Bank (Sydney)
- (late) Tony Cade – HunterNet (Newcastle)
- Scott Morgan - Greater Bank (Newcastle)
- Stephen Mason, ex Co-op Bookshop (now Duke of Edinburgh) (Melbourne)
- Sam Byrne – Coop NSW (now Coop Federation) (Sydney)
- Robert Gauta - Newcastle Commercial Fishermen’s Co-operative/Co-op NSW (Newcastle)
- Tom Nockolds/Jarra Hicks Community Power Agency (Sydney)
- Jo Battersby - SILC Disability Housing Coops (later Steve Anthony -Supported Independent Living Co-operative (SILC)) (Melbourne)

The industry advisory board met three times in 2017, twice in 2018 and only once in 2019. It was instrumental in providing direction regarding the structure and content of the program at the outset. While meetings were well attended in 2017, numbers dwindled in 2018 and 2019. One major reason was that the meetings were held in Newcastle, and several representatives were based in Sydney.

In hindsight, we may have benefitted from including more representatives from the local co-operative and mutual sectors.

#### **a) Admission processes, marketing, and promotion of the GCCMO and MBA Coop Specialisation**

In Trimester 1, 2017, Credit Union Australia (CUA) helped us to recruit 11 students from their organisation and affiliated credit unions. These students were sponsored by Credit Union Australia to help us start-up of the degree. However, at the time, the University enrolment and admission processes did not well accommodate “non-traditional” enrolments from industry which required recognition of prior learning (RPL) and work experience. Some potential enrolments were lost, due to student frustration with the process. This negative student experience later led to substantial revision and improvements in the ‘non-award’ admissions process for the whole University.

A recurring problem for this unique new program was the lack of an effective promotion and marketing strategy. The University’s central marketing unit’s regular and general promotion campaigns were positioned to compete with similar programs at other universities. This approach was not useful when campaigning for a program that was unique and had no counterpart program at other Universities. The program convenor and teaching team relied on their own networks and social media channels, and the BCCM also provided important support through using their extensive network to promote the program.

Considerable effort, including personal invitations to around 300 co-ops, and promotions through BCCMs newsletters, and news articles in not-for-profit media channels were undertaken.



The teaching team also sought to promote awareness of the co-operative model by organising community forums, participating in local festivals and other locally organised conferences, symposiums and events. They also delivered research on co-operative education at University of Newcastle at international co-operative research conferences in Europe and Asia. The teaching team provided significant time and personal resources well beyond their academic workloads in their efforts to promote the program. The BCCM also provided considerable pro bono resources and assistance.

The neglect of co-operatives by mainstream academia, combined with limited awareness and knowledge of the sector by the general public, and a reluctance by co-operative businesses to fund their executives to complete a tertiary study program contributed to the difficulty of maintaining student enrolments at a level where the program was considered to be financially viable for the University.

#### **b) Achieving sustainable student numbers**

The Master program (MCCMO) was rested in January 2017 not only because of low enrolments but also because of advice from the Industry Advisory Group that a Master level program was not likely to appeal to the CME sector.

In 2017 the GCCMO commenced in Trimester 1 with 11 students (9 from CUA). We acknowledge especially the support of CUA CEO Robert Goudswaard whose support allowed us to keep the program alive in its first year. Although it should be noted that most of the CUA sponsored students did not complete the program.

In 2017/8 the Federally funded “Farming Together” program commenced. It was a pilot program, designed to create co-operative and collaborative business models

in the Australian agricultural sector. The Farming Together program identified a need for tertiary courses for its students and approached the University of Newcastle to provide funded places for two GCCMO courses. 44 students from 28 different co-operatives from remote and rural Australia received bursaries to enrol as non-award students in two of our courses. The bulk enrolment process ensured a relatively smooth admission experience.

While the Farming Together cohort secured good numbers for two of the courses in 2018, the numbers remained low for the third course, with only three of the Farming Together students choosing to complete the GCCMO. To achieve sustainable student enrolments in the following year (2019) a concerted effort including the development of a marketing strategy was implemented. This resulted in more than 20 students enrolling in first trimester 2019, however less than half of these students were enrolled in the GCCMO. In both 2019 and 2020 student numbers remained well below 30 students.

In 2020 the University was faced with substantial financial constraints due to COVID-19 and implemented a University wide course-optimisation strategy resulting in a 25% reduction in courses in each Faculty. The GCCMO student numbers were below the level needed to sustain the program. And it was disestablished.

#### **2.2 Student completions, profiles, and success rates**

When the GCCMO was disestablished at the end of 2020, only 10 students had completed the full program and 2 students completed the MBA with a specialisation on Co-operatives and Social Enterprises Management.

Although program completions are low, the total number of students that have taken one or more courses as electives is substantial. All in all, 92 students have taken the GSBS 6411, 68 students have taken LEGL 6005 and 35 students have taken GSBS 6412.

Detailed data also reveals that there has been substantial interest from students in other programs to choose one or more of the co-op courses as electives. Enrolments have come from students undertaking postgraduate studies in MBA, Human Resource Management, Business Psychology, Environmental Law, LLB and JD. In 2018 there was also a large cohort of non-award students (46) admitted through the Farming Together Program.

The profile of students undertaking co-op courses reveal that most students (between 80 – 100%) had already undertaken tertiary studies. A small percentage had no previous experience of studying at tertiary level and were admitted based on RPL and documented 7 years of industry experience at executive level.

A substantial percentage of students were the 'first in family' to undertake tertiary level education (varying from 33 to 75% depending on course). This is not unusual for the student cohort at the University of Newcastle, and particularly for the students at the Faculty of Business, which has one of the highest 'first in family' ratios in Australia.

Gender balance was upheld in the co-op courses, with the percentage of female students varying from 20 to 64%. Interestingly, the majority of students from other Master degrees (MBA in particular) were women, which suggests that co-operatives as a 'for-purpose' business model attracted more interest from female MBA enrollees.

Students who were not externally funded had a high success rate ranging between 80 to 95% of students finalising the course.

The two student cohorts recruited with bursaries either through CUA (Trimester 1 2017) or the Farming Together program (Trimester 1 and 2 2018) had lower overall success rate for these courses; ranging from 53% to 60%. In GSBS 6411 the success rate was 68%, with a substantial number of students not submitting assignments nor actively participating in the course. The number of non-participants was even larger in the more advanced LEGL 6005. It is important to note that many of the Farming Together students were also employed full time, either on their farm or agribusiness and many were also involved in additional voluntary work to start-up their own new co-operative.

During 2019 and 2020, when students were recruited through "normal" admission processes the success rates remained very high varying from 81 – 100%.

### **2.3 Student satisfaction with courses**

The University of Newcastle implements student evaluation of every course delivered. The Student evaluation of course (SEC) survey comprises around 10 questions of which the Student Satisfaction Rate (Rate out of 5) is the measure used in evaluating academic staff performance. Student Satisfaction rates for a course is compared with School Average for the Trimester to assess course performance in relation to School performance.

The Student Satisfaction rates for the three co-op courses between 2017 – 2020 show an average of 4.56 which is substantially higher than school average (approx. 4.0). These results were exceptionally positive, as they are not only reported from students with a special interest in co-operative topics, but also by MBA students who selected a co-op course as an elective.

The high satisfaction rate seems to be based on an appreciation of a 'hands on' approach to learning and the potential to realise better employment outcomes. Students testimonials indicate their appreciation of improved employment opportunities in the for-purpose business sector.

"Overall, my experience in the group assignment was overwhelmingly positive. Whilst there were frustrations with the start-up process for the co-operative, these frustrations were overcome and outweighed by the highly collaborative and cohesive group effort, created by the dedication and passion each member had for the purpose of YouCo... I feel the group performance overall was one of the best I have experienced thus far in my MBA."

"The MBA specialisation, Co-operative and Social Enterprise Management, has been a fantastic experience for me. The course material is brilliant, and the lecturers have really engaged with students. The learning tasks are a great blend of theory and practical application, using case studies and encouraging group collaboration just as it is required in real co-operatives. The course has also been brilliant for furthering my career. Studying the co-operative stream has definitely helped me to secure a new job working for a social enterprise that provides affordable housing and community services. I feel so privileged to have had the opportunity to study this stream and expand my network in the co-operative sector."

"In New Zealand, co-operatives represent a large proportion of our export-oriented commercial sector. And while I have prior experience in investor-owned firms I knew little about co-operatives. The course has helped me understand why it is that co-ops have proven resilient during this pandemic;

they've become an engine for rebuilding New Zealand's economy. The content of the course is very relevant to current developments in the sector. For instance, in financial and management accounting; we investigated ways of reporting on a co-op's operations and how co-ops can deliver on KPIs in the area of sustainable development goals. I look forward to gaining employment in co-op governance and management as soon as I have completed my co-op studies."

"I am confident that my opportunities for work will increase in this sector as a result of my Graduate Certificate Studies. I will seek to work as a consultant to facilitate tangible outcomes for purposeful co-operative initiatives to develop and increase equitable outcomes to those who are continuously marginalised. Empowerment in a system that works from the bottom up is the key to abrogating traditional systems that for centuries only reward a few at the top."

In November 2020, Dr Sidsel Grimstad and Ann Apps were awarded the Faculty Teaching Excellence award for developing an 'industry-led pedagogy' for the co-operative education program. The citation for the award was "For an industry led and innovative approach to curriculum and assessment design, using an action learning pedagogy, promoting industry goals and increasing graduate employment opportunities."

## 2.4 Impact of courses on student's work and lives

During the four years the program continued, the lecturers have received statements and testimonials from students about the impact of the program extending beyond knowledge about co-operatives, to assisting with co-op formation, management, and organisation.

For students in the Farming Together cohort in 2018 who were starting up co-operatives, the courses had immediate application:

“The program has helped me enormously with running the co-op, setting up protocols and board functions.” (Email from student, 21/04/2018).

“The course provided us with the foundation for setting up the Food Next Door Co-op for refugees in Mildura” (Student testimonial published online <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/highlights/student-highlights/deborah-bohenhuber> )

“{Our directors] did some studies with the University of Newcastle. I think that's really opened our eyes to the opportunity and the potential of what a co-op can be.” (Interview with former student, Stuart Crosthwaite, Co-operative Farming, “Episode 2 Part 1: Interview Don't Cry Over Spilt Milk: The Mountain Milk Co-operative.” Transcript <https://conversations.coopfarming.coop/episode/episode-2-interview> )

The industry led design of the program successfully met the requirements of the Farming Together Program as expressed in a letter from Lorraine Gordon, Director, Farming Together, in 2019.

“A standout feature of the Co-op Education Team during the FTP partnership was their willingness and capacity to tailor the course to

specifically meet the needs of the 43 Farming Together Project students. It has superbly demonstrated their capacity to engage beyond the university and work collaboratively with the higher education sector, the broader agricultural community and cooperative sector. This collaboration has helped facilitate a new wave of research and education, shaping the future of agricultural cooperatives in Australia.”

The group assignment that included the development of a community service co-operative; resulted in students doing research and expanding their ideas through their local community networks.

“Our council wants to pursue our group project idea of establishing a co-operative aged-care centre in the closed down hospital site” (Western Australia 2018) “My group projects have explored community services and affordable housing solutions using the co-operative model. We were even connected with a cohousing association to collaborate with them on developing a co-operative model concept for their community.”

Other students observed that their co-operative education helped them to instigate new networks in their search for improved co-operative solutions.

“I especially enjoyed the variety of teaching methods in each course. We had students in our classes from a wide range of academic and work experiences. Despite this, the lecturers drew students together through online classes. The online group sessions helped students to network and learn from each other; across 3 states in 2 countries.”

“Through the lens of a Fijian born Australian citizen who worked in the executive space for registered clubs NSW (Non-Distributing Co-operative) for nearly 30 years and has now left that behind, my journey is now focussed on gaining new knowledge. In developing Pacific Island nations, co-operative models were introduced through colonisation to share benefits through equality. However, the sector suffers the same disparity, discrimination and exclusion from economic ecosystems currently endured by the co-operative movement on a global scale. The question is therefore how can developing nations succeed on the local level?”

This positive student feedback and the impact that the courses had on co-op formation and governance, inspired academics to develop a research project to understand and define our pedagogy and teaching approach as well as document the larger impact tertiary education in co-operatives governance and management potentially can have. The following is the result of this research project.

## **2.5 Extended impact of University of Newcastle’s involvement in co-op education and research in Australia and the Asia Pacific region**

Even though the program has been disestablished, the university’s Dr Sidsel Grimstad and Ann App’s have both continued to play an active role in co-operative education and research in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Their outreach continues to impact on the future of co-operative knowledge in Australia and they have worked hard to develop strong links and networks

between Australia and the ICA Asia-Pacific research communities.

### **a. Co-operative education**

While the above discussed specialised co-operative courses have been disestablished; both Ann and Sidsel have been able to integrate co-operative business models and solutions into other courses at the UoN and also at events in the greater community.

Ann has integrated two modules on co-operatives solutions in the course LAWS 6108 Corporate Power and Corporate Accountability: Pathways to Socially Responsible Business.

Sidsel has provided guest lectures on Co-operative business Models for the Global MBA GMBA 6014 Business and Climate Change. She has also provided guest lecture on Housing Co-operatives for 150 Bachelor of Architecture students in the course: ARBE 3221 Planning for Community. She has also contributed with Corporate Training Units for Executive Education organised by the UoN Global Office.

Ann and Sidsel co-presented three presentations on co-operative solutions at the recent New Economy Network Conference (20-22<sup>nd</sup> November).

On 21<sup>st</sup> December Sidsel provided a lecture to the Burwood Bowling Club Citizen group on Multi-Stakeholder Co-ops, as they are seeking to develop the club as a community commons.

## **b. Co-operative research**

Sidsel and Ann have continued to work closely with the BCCM and were awarded an industry research grant through the federally funded Co-operative Farming Project. The research grant has allowed them to report on barriers and opportunities for agricultural co-operatives in Australia, using qualitative data collected from students who were also participants in the earlier Farming Together project and were directly involved in the establishment or expansion of agricultural co-operatives.

Sidsel is also part of a cross-institutional research team securing an ARC-Linkage grant of \$594,000 on co-operative housing in 2021-2023. This is the largest ARC Linkage grant the Faculty of Business and Law at the University of Newcastle has received. The ARC-Linkage project has established an international expert advisory group of housing co-operative researchers. The research project has led to international interest and attention. In September 2020 the research team prepared a comprehensive submission to the NSW Housing Strategy, putting forward a case for the need to support co-operative housing to add to the diversity of affordable housing models.

Sidsel's networks and knowledge in both co-operative and community-owned renewable energy sectors, led to the UoN being invited to play a role in the dissemination of knowledge in Enova's Community Battery Project. A project funded by NSW government and ARENA. Sidsel is also supervising a PhD student who is using the project as a case study for his PhD research.

In 2019, Sidsel was awarded an Early Career PhD scholarship for 2020-2023. The competitive scholarship was awarded to an indigenous student. The student will be supervised by Sidsel and will undertake a study of Aboriginal Co-operatives and their

role in supporting Aboriginal self-determination. The student will be co-supervised by the Director of the Wollotuka Institute Professor Kath Butler.

In 2019, Ann was invited to join the ICA's Law Committee as an independent expert for the Asia Pacific and has been involved in the committee's work preparing for the ICA's Congress in Sth Korea in 2021. Ann is also a member of a network of co-operative lawyers, Ius Cooperativum and is on the editorial board of International Journal of Cooperative Law.

## **c. Involvement and research in the Asia Pacific Region.**

In 2019, the Faculty of Business and Law, hosted the 14<sup>th</sup> International Co-operative Alliance Asia Pacific Co-operative Research Conference (<https://www.newcastle.edu.au/faculty/business-law/conferences/14th-ica-asia-pacific-research-conference>). This as the first time the conference was held in Australia, and Sidsel and Ann together with Professor Morris Altman formed the conference organising committee. It attracted more than 100 co-operative researchers from the Asia Pacific Region. The conference was a great success mainly due to the organisation of an Early Career Co-operative Research Workshop, and active involvement of industry representatives on industry focussed panels. The conference was important for building and strengthening research networks and contacts in the Asia Pacific.

Since the conference both Sidsel and Ann have been invited to join scientific committees for conferences, co-operative research teams and journals.

Most recently they were involved as members of the scientific committee for the 15<sup>th</sup> ICA AP Co-operative Research Conference, which was held virtually but hosted by ULCC and based in Trivandrum, India on the 17-18<sup>th</sup> December.

Ann was invited to participate in a UNDESA event in Nadi Fiji in March 2020 and has continued to work with ICA-AP to engage with co-operative federations and registries in the Pacific Island nations to develop a regional framework for co-operative law and to work towards putting co-operatives on the agenda of the Pacific Island Forum.

In 2020, Sidsel was invited to join the editorial team for the Asia Pacific Co-operative Research Collective. The team launched their

first research book in May 2020 by Elsevier titled "Waking the Asian Pacific Co-operative Potential".

The editorial team is currently working on a second volume to be published in 2023 under the working title 'Exploring AP Co-operative Models and Resilience – Thriving between the State and the Market.' Sidsel has also participated in a number of online events organised by co-operative networks in the Asia Pacific, including ICA -AP on 'Co-operative Education under COVID19' Institute of Co-operative Education and Training in Malaysia on 'Co-operative Resilience', and for ICA's Coop Academy Lecture Series on 'Co-operatives as Intermediaries'.



### 3. Developing a pedagogy for co-operative education

Co-operative education has been an important objective of the co-operative movement since the Rochdale Pioneers included promotion of education as one of their founding principles in 1844, and accepted that it was essential to promote democratic governance and equality (International Cooperative Alliance, 2016).

Co-operative education is not only about disseminating knowledge about the co-operative business model, it plays a role in developing co-operators, underpins democratic governance, promotes citizenship, encourages social change and improves lives for co-operative members and the communities they serve (Woodin, 2019). It was recognised early on that it was important for co-operative education to be based on everyday experiences, blending scholarship, moral action and practical skills. Woodin (2019) points to the role that co-operative education, based on co-operative values and principles, can have in encouraging social and public innovation. The co-operative focus on lived experience, co-operative and practical solutions, democratic decision-making, and social and collective benefits, is a countermeasure to the strong focus on individualism that is found elsewhere in the education sector. He contends that:

“At the heart of co-operative education is the belief that education is a vital force underpinning the success of co-operative democratic ventures, the basis for its expansion. It connects to vocational learning, liberal education and education for social change.” (Woodin, 2019, p. 19).

Cook (2019) shows that the early 19<sup>th</sup> century development of US agricultural co-operative education was distinctly anti-elitist and focused on practising democratic values. However, due to current sophistication and

size of many agricultural co-operatives a different level of training and education is needed to maintain its value to farmer members. Cook (2019) suggests that as farmer members become more individualistic and demanding of their collectively owned assets; co-operative education needs to focus on interactive learning with a never-ending loop of organisational improvements. Education in so-operative leadership should be based on supporting individual and co-operative processes to reduce friction and improve individual and collective outcomes.

Education is one of the International Co-operative Alliance’s (ICAs) seven co-operative principles. In 1995, the ICA further developed the principle to extend beyond education for co-op members and managers, to include education to inform the general public about the nature and benefits of co-operation (International Cooperative Alliance, 2018). The positive outcomes of co-operative education include developing co-operators, building co-operative capacity, advancing co-operative policy and progressing global co-operation. There is further scope to develop the ideals of co-operative education to attract younger people who are more affected by the global issues including growing inequality, precarious work, environmental degradation and climate change.





Ross (2019), examined what younger students at the Co-operative College in Manchester UK, appreciated when undertaking co-operative education. Topics and pedagogies that were important to them included 1) practical application of the co-operative principles and values in co-operative governance and behaviour; 2) active learning and learning-by-doing with a clear and practical purpose; 3) developing networks and capacity for co-operators to seek further knowledge and collaboration opportunities when needed; and 4) having a non-competitive learning environment, and undertaking the structured development of participatory and value-based co-operative skills. While co-operative history, principles and policy were considered essential, these were considered knowledge that could easily be captured on the job and through self-study.

There are diverse types of co-operative education opportunities ranging from the formal (for example, university education courses and professional development programs) through to the informal (for example, webinars, MOOCs, online resources, policy and law reform work, conferences, and events).

In the formal educational context, tertiary studies provide an opportunity for students to both critically analyse and operationalise the co-operative identity, values, and principles for application in their professional lives as co-operative members, board members or employees. Similarly, analysis of co-operative law and governance in a university setting can both optimise co-operative structural design and identify needs and opportunities for reform in the wider regulatory environment. Put simply, formal co-operative education not only develops co-operators and builds co-operative capacity, but it also creates opportunities to advance progressive co-operative policy.

In the Australian context, the Senate Inquiry released in 2016 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) identified a substantial lack of knowledge about the co-operative model at all levels of Australian society, and the absence of information about the model in both secondary and tertiary curriculum.

When determining a pedagogy upon which to base content and delivery of our co-operative courses, we intuitively leaned towards developing an action- learning process. An action- learning framework combines individual learning of theoretical content with practical group-based, peer to peer learning – and culminates in individual and group reflections to critically analyse the overall learning process. Within this framework, critical reflection both as individuals and within groups, fosters an understanding of both an individual's active role in shaping group processes (rather than as a mere passive holder of knowledge) and, moving beyond atomistic approaches to learning, the role of the group and wider context in shaping the learner's experience (see, e.g. Thompson and Pascal, 2012, p.318).

Given this student-centred approach within an inherently collaborative learning environment, action learning is well-placed to achieve co-operative educational outcomes to both develop co-operators and to build overall collective capacity.

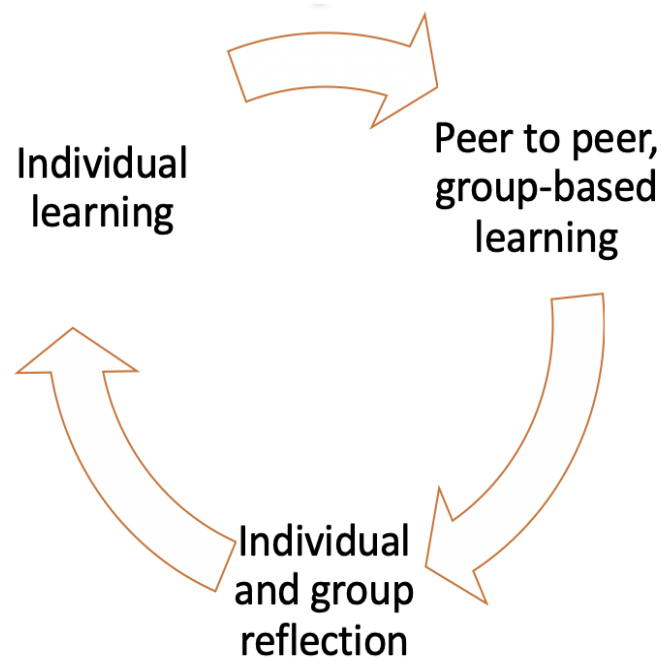


Figure 2. Basic action learning framework for co-operative education (from Thompson and Pascal, 2012)

Mezirow (1991) cited in (Sherwood & Horton-Deutsch, 2012) provides an overview of how critical reflection can lead to transformational learning. Three types of reflection; namely content, process and premise reflection seek to reveal underlying interests, strategies and assumptions, values or beliefs underlying the situation (Sherwood & Horton-Deutsch, 2012).

To demonstrate the value of the pedagogy developed in the GCCMO, this report analyses student reflections on their individual assignments, their group work and their role in group work. The report offers valuable insight into the application of an action learning framework in tertiary co-operative education.



## 4. Methodology and data

The University of Newcastle developed and delivered Australia's only Graduate Certificate in Co-operative Management and Organisation during the period from 2017 to 2020. The degree comprised three specialised courses in co-operative management and organisation, which were delivered online over three trimesters.

From 2016 to 2018 a large federally funded project; the Farm Co-operatives and Collaboration Project – or Farming Together (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, 2021) was implemented nationally to encourage farmer collaboration and promote formation and expansion of co-operatives in the agricultural sector. The program saw collaborative farming models as a way to reduce supply chain risk and improve bargaining power in an increasingly global and competitive market. The project involved a wide array of education and training opportunities, as well as tools and resources to support co-operative formation.

As part of this program, 45 scholarships were provided to farmers and agriculture business entrepreneurs who wanted to pursue two of the specialised co-operative courses offered at the University of Newcastle during 2018.

- GSBS6411 Introduction to Co-operative Organisation and Management delivered by Dr Sidsel Grimstad, and
- LEGL 6005 Co-operative Law and Governance delivered by Ms Ann Apps.

Across both courses, the 45 students represented 28 agricultural co-operatives from Western Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. All students were actively involved in either co-operative design and formation of new agricultural co-operatives or seeking to improve management and governance of existing agricultural co-operatives.

To support individual learning and theoretical content, while at the same time making the courses immediately useful and practical, assignments were in both courses focused on developing skills and knowledge in co-operative formation, management, organisation, and governance. While the individual assignments focused on analysing the student's own co-operative with regards to implementation of co-operative principles, barriers to formation, opportunities, and advantages of co-operative model.

The group-based assignments involved the design and pre-formation of fictitious community service co-operatives in a peer to peer learning environment, including being part of a series of mock board meetings where they practised formal meeting procedures, performed various governance roles and experimented with democratic decision-making processes. They also researched various co-operative business structures and developed business plans, constitutions and disclosure statements for their co-operatives. In so doing, they learned to consider the important connections between membership and governance, along with the practical application of the International Co-operative Alliance's co-operative principles– both of which underpin co-operative design.

Consequently, assessment tasks (discussed in further detail, below) required students to critically reflect on both:

- the course materials in the context of their own real-life co-operative experiences
- their experiences with group-based, peer to peer learning and its broader application to their development as co-operators.
- their individual and group roles and their implementation of governance processes

The assessment tasks were used as primary qualitative data (Creswell, 2003) to examine the institutional barriers and opportunities for agricultural co-operative formation in Australia based on student reflection on their experiences of co-operative formation and governance.

After obtaining Human Research Ethics approval, students who were willing to be part of the study provided written consent to permit researchers to analyse their assignments and reflections. In 2020, two years after completion of the two courses, several focus group interview sessions were conducted to strengthen and/or extend some of the primary research findings. These sessions explored a range of topics with the participants, including:

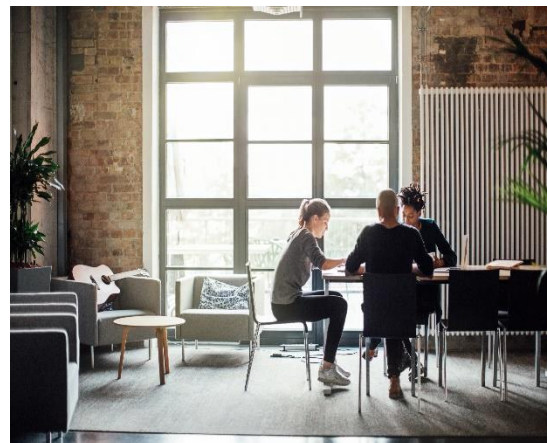
- the progress of individual co-operatives between 2018 and 2020,
- the challenges and opportunities faced by these co-operatives,
- the benefits of co-operative education at a tertiary level, and
- ongoing educational needs for the co-operative sector.

All qualitative data was initially analysed for student observations regarding their lived experience of the barriers to, and opportunities for co-operative formation in the Australian agricultural sector. These observations were then categorised as either

barriers or opportunities arising in the context of either regulatory, normative and cognitive institutions. Across this data set, a range of key patterns emerged, expressed through the assignments (Creswell, 2003). (Research findings are provided in a separate report to BCCM titled “Learning on the Go, Identifying barriers and opportunities for co-operative formation in the agricultural sector in Australia.”)

In a second step, individual and group reflections from both courses were analysed for key insights regarding the use of an action learning framework as a pedagogical tool for co-operative education. Again, across this data set a range of key points emerged.

Key themes emerging from the focus groups were analysed and integrated with the earlier research findings.



## 5. Findings around a pedagogy for co-operative education

### 5.1 Key learning objectives for co-operative education

A pedagogy for co-operative education is focused on applying theoretical knowledge in practice to enhance the learners' skillsets in the areas of co-operative formation, governance and management processes.

Importantly, this learning is anchored in a deep understanding of the unique characteristics of the co-operative structure - specifically, in the central place of membership - to achieve optimal member representation, voice and expertise in governance (Birchall 2017, p.38).

Our qualitative analysis of the data provided by students in their reflective tasks and subsequent focus group interviews (see below) reveals that this type of learning is sometimes counter-intuitive- for example, prevailing cultural norms favour hierarchical and often patriarchal decision-making processes which do not well accommodate member voice and inclusivity. As such, this pedagogical approach is useful and could be adapted for application in other educational settings (not strictly within universities) in the interest of embedding co-operative thinking.

At the core of this pedagogy for co-operative education are **three key learning objectives** or areas of focus:

1. **professional development and leadership skills;**
2. **operationalising the co-operative principles; and**
3. **understanding the connection between membership and governance.**

These objectives are explained briefly and then explored in more detail as key patterns that emerge from the data.

#### 5.1.1 Professional development and leadership skills

Professional development and leadership skills in co-operative education encompass a range of more generic soft skills which are universally applicable to corporate governance. These include experience in chairing meetings and providing administrative support, such as preparing agendas and minutes. But they also explore the co-operative difference when exploring how decisions can be made in the best interests of members. The BCCM's *CME Governance Principles* (2018) establish nine clear principles for strong co-operative governance, and are used to explore the similarities and difference between corporate and co-operative governance:

- Create, protect and return member value
- Lay solid foundations for management and oversight
- Structure the board to add member value
- Act ethically and responsibly
- Safeguard integrity in CME reporting
- Make timely and balanced disclosure
- Respect the rights of members and other stakeholders
- Recognise and manage risk
- Remunerate fairly and responsibly

When focussing on co-operative formation and development, professional development also incorporates skills in co-operative business planning and management including articulation of a clear member value proposition.

For co-operative learners, this objective requires the application of theoretical knowledge to the unique circumstances of their co-operative (fictitious or real) and taking into consideration their and co-operative colleagues' individual skill sets, experiences, and leadership styles.

### 5.1.2 Operationalising the co-operative principles

The second core learning objective is the capacity to understand and operationalise the co-operative principles – as they apply to their own co-operative (actual or simulated). The seven co-operative principles are:

- Voluntary and open membership
- Democratic member control
- Member economic participation
- Autonomy and independence
- Education, training, and information
- Co-operation among co-operatives
- Concern for community

The operationalisation of the co-operative principles applies to the initial design of a co-operative's governance structure at formation, and then to continuous improvement of this structure and business approach over the lifespan of the co-operative.

### 5.1.3 Understanding the connection between membership and governance

This learning objective is informed by the work of Professor Johnston Birchall (2017), who examined what are core qualities of strong co-operative governance and how it relates to co-operative longevity and success. Birchall (2017, p.38) identifies the importance of balancing member voice, representation and expertise in the design and implementation of a co-operative's governance structure.

An understanding of the connection between membership and governance, and how this informs strategic and operational decision-making within co-operatives, is a necessary

learning objective for co-operative education.

## 5.2. Student responses to action learning in co-operative education

The pedagogical approach explored in this report is guided by an action-learning framework characterised by the interlinked stages of individual learning; peer-to-peer, group-based learning; and individual and group reflection. Application of these stages is centred around key learning objectives (see above) and supported by a range of methods, processes, and tools for optimal learning.

Individual and group reflection reports by students focused on these first two stages. They analysed individual and shared contributions to the development of a fictitious co-operative. They also provided feedback into the education design loop around identifying opportunities for improving individual and group-based learning in future courses. Importantly, the process of critical reflection provides opportunities for students to absorb, synthesise and integrate their previous learning.

**Several key patterns emerge from this data** which can inform the further development of a pedagogy for co-operative education:

### 5.2.1 Providing resources and tools for individual learning

Several student reflections (both group and individual) commented on the role of both theoretical and practical tools in **strengthening their understanding of the co-operative principles and how these can be best operationalised** in the context of both designing co-operative governance structures, undertaking co-operative business planning and supporting member-focused governance.

This included a range of practical, online resources developed by Australian co-operative representative bodies including the BCCM (e.g. the Get Mutual Co-op Builder and *Business Planning for Co-ops* guide) and the former Co-ops NSW (*Co-operatives in Australia – A Manual*). It also included resources developed through the federally funded Farming Together program (*Farming Together Co-op Builder*) and from other co-operatives, available online, such as templates and case studies. As one group reflective report explained:

*“The financial forecast document [available in the Business Planning for Co-ops guide] allowed us to delve deep into the specific requirements that a co-operative need[s] to operate and see where we would be standing financially... using the decisions we made regarding the start-up capital and running expenses”.*

In effect, **these practical tools served to crystallise the connections between membership and governance** explored during the individual learning stage. This included the importance of linking member economic participation in the form of carefully considered minimum active membership and shareholding requirements with business planning, financial forecasting, and the articulation of a clear and attractive value proposition for members.

During the focus group sessions, **several participants reflected on this role of this learning in allowing them to subsequently articulate a strong member value proposition for the co-operative and thus attract new members to their co-ops**. For example, one participant shared that:

*“I had a very low level understanding of co-ops before we started [the university courses]... the essay that we did on co-operative identity and values and principles was a really good exploration*

*for me at the time ....where I was really able to use what I learned in a really meaningful way in our co-op. And I think it got people on board at the right time”.*

The application of these practical tools was strongly grounded in theoretical content that considered the unique characteristics of co-operatives in Australia and the importance of understanding the co-operative’s unique structural design. These tools provided **a solid foundation for students to operationalise to co-operative principles** in subsequent group-work requiring the collective design of a fictitious co-operative in accordance with both these principles and the law.

As one student observed in their reflection report, it is easier for the company model with its single focus on profit, a co-op has to work hard to ensure that all are clear about the co-operative identity and its relevance to the business goals.

Two years on, focus group participants confirmed **the continuing relevance and utility of these resources in supporting the design and implementation of co-operative strategy and operations – particularly where more than one person from each co-operative was in the same course**. For example, one participant shared that:

*“It was good that [colleague’s name] and I did it together... I mean, that was excellent. Because... we still prompt each other every now and then: didn’t we learn something about that? Should we go back and have a look at that?”*

This shared learning prompted a re-think of how new board members were inducted to the co-operative, and the types of board members recruited by the co-operative. In both cases, a focus on co-operative identity, values and principles was a central element of this new approach.

In another example, knowledge of co-operative law and the role of the co-op's rules enabled refinement of the co-operative's governance structure.

The focus group suggested that the development of detailed resources to support strong co-operative governance that covered topics such as meeting procedure, minute-taking, maintaining the co-operative's minute book and specific legal requirements in relation to these topics.

The findings suggest that there is ***an ongoing collaborative role*** for educational institutions/programs and representative bodies/established co-operatives in developing complementary pedagogies and open-access resources (respectively) that support shared co-operative learning objectives.

#### 5.2.2 Develop group-based and peer to peer learning to support leadership skills

The data set overwhelmingly confirmed ***the value of group-based, peer to peer learning in supporting professional development and leadership skills***. In particular, it highlighted both the advantages and opportunities of diversity.

An initial group-based exercise required students to conduct an audit of their skills and experience (relevant to co-operative governance) and to discuss these with their peers to map their collective skillset. Many students reflected on the practical value of this exercise in allowing for the optimal rotation of shared governance roles for peer-to-peer learning. Some students also identified this tool's value in highlighting ***diversity in a co-operative's membership and governance structure*** and importantly in understanding how this diversity is a co-operative's "superpower" – as one student described.

Despite the pressures and challenges of balancing work, family life and study, the

skills audit/mapping exercise was consistently mentioned as being practically useful. This was the case even amongst those group members who were already working together on the formation of an agricultural co-operative and is a great example of ***a direct transfer of learning to real-life scenarios***.

In many groups, students with previous governance experience first demonstrated their leadership style and approach as either chairperson or secretary for a meeting, thus enabling less experienced students to learn from their peers before practising these skills themselves. Several students reflected on how this practise of ***peer-to-peer learning through role rotation built their confidence to take on co-operative governance roles in future*** – one student stated that "my week as chairperson was a delightful surprise" because they had "learnt, due to two of our members being skilled at meeting procedure, how to keep people moving when the discussion faded out". Similarly, another student reflected that rotating roles helped them to appreciate how much work was involved in carrying out key board roles of chairperson and secretary.

In some reflections, this understanding fostered a deeper sense of mutual respect and thus capacity for effective collective decision-making. These findings reveal the ***potential for enhanced member engagement and participation in co-operative governance***, when supported by skills mapping and role playing in a group-based, peer to peer learning environment.

In the focus group interviews, several participants attested to ***the value of group-work exercises in the development of networks with fellow students*** that have subsequently been useful to the co-operative.



Focus group participants also emphasised **the importance of learning that is grounded in real-life scenarios and experiences** – particularly for those students who are time-poor and needing to optimise the outcomes of their education. As one participant shared in a discussion of one of the assignments:

*“Because it was a practical task, and we could actually get our teeth into it and we believed in it, it was very valuable.”*

5.2.3 Co-operative education programs should take place over a longer time to promote deep learning, reflection, and networking

An important theme that emerged from the focus group data was that *participants were generally in favour of collaborative learning programs (whether online or face-to-face) that take place over longer time frames such as six week or several months – although not necessarily in a tertiary learning environment.* Overwhelmingly, focus group participants agreed that when undertaking short courses (e.g. over two to three days) it was difficult to retain and absorb the learning. One focus group participant shared that:

*“... if you’re anything like me, I can do three days of intensive and then I can walk away and I can think, you know, a week later... what was that all about?... It just doesn’t work for me. I like to reflect”.*

5.2.4 Practical tasks involving participative decision-making and formalised board meetings

The structured groupwork exercise provided an opportunity for students to practise different participative decision-making processes such as ‘talking in rounds’, in an educational context. Student reflections indicated that these were valuable learning tools with direct application to their real-life co-operative scenarios, particularly where there had been concerns around the efficacy of participative decision-making.

*“I was made aware of the responsibility of each member to be willing to ask questions and clarify process and decisions made, not to necessarily accept the status quo or ‘go along’ with the majority, which may sometimes be the easier pathway”.*

Regarding the issue of diversity, many students also reflected upon the use of consensus as a tool to strengthen **the value of gender and cultural diversity on co-operative boards.**

One powerful individual reflection considered the value of practising participative decision-making tools in **opening up opportunities for their voice to be heard as both a female-identifying and also being an immigrant and not born in Australia** in an otherwise male-dominated rural Australian context. The student’s experience in gaining confidence in a decision-making setting highlighted patriarchal and other cultural pressures that may limit female participation in co-operative governance. This finding illustrates the importance of these types of practical educational opportunities for boosting confidence and diversity in co-operative governance. Educational opportunities that re-shape cognitive biases, such as those around gender, may also contribute to diversity in co-operative leadership.

Overall, this data reveals **the important role that group-based, peer to peer learning can play in supporting professional development and leadership skills.** This finding is strengthened by observations made during the focus group interview sessions that professional development and leadership skills can strengthen a co-operative’s resolve to upskill leaders from within its membership (rather than rely upon the input of independent directors, useful as this may be in some cases).

This in turn can promote a stronger focus on a co-operative's vision, core values and purpose. Upskilling of members also provides a useful platform for succession planning for boards.

#### 5.2.5 Experiment with communication technology in an educational setting.

Another key finding from the data **was the importance of learning about communication technologies in an educational context**. In several reflective reports, students lamented the challenges of poor internet connection (particularly experienced by those in certain regional locations) and online meeting software provided by the university. One student emphasised the need for training in use of software as a mandatory component of individual learning, prior to the start of group work. Some reflective reports also emphasised the continued importance of face-to-face meetings in supporting rapport-building communication between groups members. For example:

*"Whilst video and phone conferencing has improved dramatically and become available to everyone, sometimes it is just better to meet face to face... [when doing group work face to face] I found the level of clarity and efficiency in the process was higher"*

It is possible, however, that some of these perceptions have shifted post-pandemic. During the focus group interview sessions, and in light of increased experiences of working from home and using online meeting software during lockdowns, **several participants agreed that familiarity with online learning is likely to be much higher than in it was in 2018**.

Several student reflections identified the potential benefits of increased technology use in co-operative governance including encouraging participation from members who might be geographically remote, and the ease in which it can be used to add depth to discussions on key issues

For example, one student shared that:

*"I think things are going online and I think we're going to start to be more comfortable – speaking as someone who's probably spent 30 hours on Zoom this week, probably more than – I think we're going to... start to feel that online delivery is more real and that you are actually there as a person when you're on Zoom. So, I think it's a good method"*.

Whether in a face-to-face or online learning environment, all participants agreed on the **critical importance of facilitating collaborative spaces for learning using small groups**.

*"...I can definitely echo that doing practical assignments in groups is a really good thing to do and brings the online learning situation alive"*.

One student even suggested that technology might be beneficial in supporting effecting chairing of meeting and participative decision-making processes:

*"...if the meeting was held in a forum that allowed the chair to mute and unmute participants, the meeting could be run more efficiently. It would also allow the chair to have much greater control over the meeting in terms of staying on agenda and giving individuals an opportunity to express their views uninterrupted"*.

The students' reflections demonstrate **that an increased use of communication technologies by Australian agricultural co-operatives is inevitable**. Consequently there is a need **to increase technological learning opportunities in educational settings**.

Technology allows co-operation among co-operatives- particularly those in regional areas - to overcome some of the challenges posed by distance to gain skills and expertise from their wider co-operative networks

## 6. Recommendations for a pedagogy for co-operative education in Australia

The key patterns discussed above have emerged through processes of individual and group reflection, which is itself an integral part of the action-learning framework. As Hickson (2011) has observed, the development of critical reflective skills (as opposed to more descriptive skills) is vital to the reflexivity of practitioners in all walks of life and is an important and ongoing feature in the design and delivery of co-operative education. Further research may help to encourage the development of new tools and methodologies to optimise the application of action-learning frameworks in other contexts relating to co-operative education in Australia.

Key insights have emerged from this specific data set, and the following recommendations build upon what has been discussed in this report and support action learning as a suitable pedagogy for co-operative education in Australia:

### ***Recommendation 1 – Encourage the mapping of co-operator skills and experience***

The mapping of collective skills and experiences appropriate to the co-operative context, enable opportunities for group-based, peer to peer learning. The mapping process supports role-modelling and reflection on various leadership styles and approaches, which is vital to supporting professional development and leadership skills among co-operators.

For guidance, the skills and competencies to be mapped might include certain types of knowledge/experience along with a range of soft skills relevant to co-operative governance:

- Co-operative identity, values and principles
- Co-operative law/general legal background
- Co-operative accounting/general accounting background
- Social impact auditing and financial reporting
- Financial literacy
- Risk management
- Strategic and business planning
- Member engagement and communications (this may itself include mapping of member groups to increase member representation and voice)
- Participative decision-making processes and conflict resolution/transformation skills
- Human resources & management
- Marketing and communications
- General project management
- Technological / technical skills specific to the co-operative context
- Industry experience specific to the co-operative context
- Previous leadership / governance experience, including meeting protocols
- Working with external advisors/consultants to manage technical information being provided to the co-operative
- Specific training / lived experience in promoting and supporting diversity

### ***Recommendation 2 - Explore different types of participative governance processes***

Co-operative governance, particularly in multi-stakeholder co-operatives and representative boards, may require more than a 'majority rules' approach to decision-making. An understanding of relevant theory alongside practical experimentation with participative decision-making processes, using group-based and peer to peer learning can support professional development and leadership skills among co-operators.

### ***Recommendation 3 - Develop governance skills and processes to improve diversity***

Member diversity is a topic that requires ongoing consideration. Skill mapping and experimenting with participative governance processes in an educational setting are two ways that students can be encouraged to recognise and explore the benefits and challenges associated with all types of diversity in co-operative management and governance.

The challenges of achieving diversity highlight the need to target opportunities to participate in co-operative education programs to groups traditionally excluded from leadership roles (for example women, people with disabilities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds) to increase their confidence and experience – and improve their chances of participating in co-operative leadership. Given the limited financial resources of smaller co-operatives, opportunities for co-operative education also requires supplementation through grant programs, scholarships or bursaries supported by the broader co-operative sector.

### ***Recommendation 4 - Develop technology options to enhance connectivity within and among co-operatives***

Technology is likely to change the way that organisations run their board and general meetings. There are greater opportunities for democratic participation by members of agricultural co-operatives that have traditionally been stymied by distance. Technology will also support improved access to external skills/expertise, including knowledge-sharing and co-operation among co-operatives.

Co-operative education can support skill development in using technology but also encourage innovation in system designs and processes to optimise the co-operative advantage in Australian agriculture.

### ***Recommendation 5 – Set aside enough time and reflections for co-operative knowledge, competence, and skills to develop***

There is greater access to short courses and executive training. But this research highlights the importance of tertiary degree programs. Deep learning about critical theories, skill building and reflective practice take more than a few days to enrich the student, particularly in relation to the co-operative model in Australia, as there is very little awareness and understanding of the model. Much of the deeper learning comes from completing assessment tasks that are formative rather than summative. Longer periods of study also allow participants enough time to develop new networks and engage in peer learning. The transformative value of co-op education courses of longer than 6 weeks duration needs to be taken into account.

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