

# Co-operative Staff Education Training— Guide Lines for the Future

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The Co-operative Congress 1967 received a Report of a Working Party on Staff Education and Training\*—and asked that, in 1968, it should have before it an account of what had been done and what was proposed to put the recommendations into effect. The Society for Co-operative Studies has a direct concern with the area of interest of the Working Party, and a summary will be useful though this will have difficulty in accommodating fairly the range and variety of the recommendations.

The Report is first a record of the system and service built up already by the Education Department and the College in staff education and training. This, of course, the Working Party found imperfect and incomplete but still unsurpassed in its scope, depth and quality of provision by any other section of the retail trade.

Next, it identifies significant changes in needs and conditions which staff education and training has to meet in the present and future, and finds these in the general economic and social pattern, in the organisation of retail distribution and in the Movement itself. In essence, the Movement now exists within a setting of economic and social changes which are eroding the attitudes, and practices, on which societies in the past have depended. More particularly, in the midst of these changes, the Movement faces competition of a new scale and urgency; from widely, and often nationally based, organisations in distribution drawing great financial resources from the banks, insurance houses, investment trusts, etc. and therefore able to employ the latest techniques of organisation, marketing, advertising, etc. In response to this challenge, the Movement is adapting itself along three lines: new constitution and organisation for the wholesale societies; fewer and larger retail societies; and a new relation between the wholesale and retail societies.

Then—and most crucially—the Working Party had the task of indicating the response which staff education and training ought to make to these new conditions. I shall try to set out some of the main elements in this response.

*The Working Party took the implicit view of staff education and training that it belonged to a factor of production*

It is one of the things required for making a commodity or carrying out a service: and the cost of the commodity or service will be the prices of all the factors of production, including the price of the education and training of labour. That, of course, raises questions and efforts of measurement which the Working Party did not have time to pursue. How much money, for example,

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should be invested in staff education and training—by comparison with investment in other factors of production? What is the productivity of investment in staff education and training if this can be realistically assessed? More particularly, what forms of staff education and training give the best productivity for the money invested?

The Working Party did not pursue these questions, though it would have acknowledged their relevance. It proceeded on the assumption that education and training was not something to be afforded after the processes of production had been completed and had made a profit: it is part of that process of production—and from that view of it were derived some of the main guide lines which the Report sets down.

*First the guide lines—only large societies have the certainty of resources adequate for investment in labour training—as for investment in other factors of production*

We accept as part of the case for the integration of societies that only such reorganisation can provide the capital to invest in new sites and new buildings, etc. By the same token only such societies can provide labour training with the staff and facilities it needs. In effect:

- (a) It is the responsibility of the local society to have a continuous policy of recruitment, training and education, assessment and promotion. Central agencies like the Education Department of the Union and the College can serve and supplement that local responsibility—but cannot replace it.
- (b) That local task can be carried out locally only if we have “fewer and larger societies”.

*Secondly, the guide line—that the training of labour as a factor of production can refine and develop that labour, but it cannot change its character or potential*

In effect, it is more important to recruit the right people than to train them in the right way. We have long recognised the situation in which much of the ability which used to emerge from our schools at the minimum school-leaving age is now going on to the upper reaches of the school system and of the universities. Our recruitment policies have not moved to keep pace fully with these changes and a consequence of the social improvement we helped to achieve has been the impoverishment of the human quality entering our service. To help in the response that needs to be made, the Department and College have instituted two schemes—Training for Branch Management, and the senior Management Development Scheme, particularly for recruitment from Universities and colleges of full-time study, both of which the Working Party reports in some detail. The Report urges that these two schemes be developed and the financial arrangements accepted by the Movement. It adds that the effort of recruitment needs to be completed by a scheme for an intermediate grade: the recruitment of school leavers with “A” levels or a substantial number of “O” levels. Information is being collected of projects already in this area—and Scunthorpe and Nottingham Societies have indicated their willingness to join with the Department and College in further experiment.

*The third guide line—that as far as possible, the Movement should use the facilities provided wholly or partly as a public charge by other bodies and reserve its own resources for investment in distinctive education and training which the Movement needs, and no other agencies will offer.*

Already of course we draw very substantially on the provisions, for example, of local education authorities; on the technical colleges for the provisions of courses for our employees, or at the Co-operative College on awards by local authorities to students.

The Working Party seeks further development and here are some examples:

- (a) That the Department and College share fully in the explorations that are now taking place about the establishment of "common" courses in distributive salesmanship and management which might accommodate many or all sections of the retail trade.
- (b) That there should be more concentration by the Department and College on training, as distinguished from education, i.e. on short intensive courses dealing with specialised aspects of work on all levels of Co-operative service.
- (c) That these training provisions should give more attention to the needs of practising officials. In effect, if the resources for investment in this factor of production are limited, as they are, and if a choice has to be made, then there should be some concentration on the higher reaches of responsibility. So, for example, the Department and College are considering at present seminars in marketing for chief officials and departmental managers: to be provided at regional centres throughout the country: to consist of two days devoted to case studies, management games, etc., to be followed by an interval in which the participants try out the techniques that have been dealt with, and then to be completed by one day for a report-back session.
- (d) That our investment in staff education and training should, to the fullest possible extent, be replenished from any sources available to it—and, in particular, from the Distributive Industries Training Board which is to be set up in 1968. Accordingly the Working Party urges readiness to seek approval for all courses for Co-operative staff for the grant aid which the Board can be expected to make available.

*Fourthly, the guide line—that investment in labour training should involve those who are professionally responsible for all the factors of production*

(a) *Locally*

The Report of course urges that the Committee responsible in the local society for staff education and training should be the Board of Directors: and that the task should be professionally carried out by full-time officers responsible to the chief officials within the management structures of the societies.

b) *Nationally*

The recommendations of the Working Party on national organisation have these aspects:

- (i) That the Education Executive should retain its general responsibility for the whole area of Co-operative education—for staff, for members and for youth. This acknowledges the claims of Co-operative democracy.
- (ii) That under the Executive, however, there should be a specialist national committee with a positive responsibility for planning, estimating and submitting to the Executive the programme for staff education and training.

The sub-committees should include these elements:

- representatives from the officials' associations;
- co-option of individuals from inside and outside the Movement.

- (iii) That the specialist committee should have strong representation from the wholesale societies. It was regarded as essential by the Working Party that the economic unity that is being increasingly shown between the wholesale and retail societies should be reflected in unity in directing and exercising staff education and training.

These proposals will, of course, be subject to much debate: they are an effort by the Working Party to reconcile democratic responsibility and professional involvement in this area of Co-operative development.

*Fifthly, the guide line generally but fairly drawn—that, if the Movement wishes adaptations of this kind, then it must accept the financial consequences, particularly in retaining and recruiting staff of the number and quality needed.*

And this is accompanied by precise indication of some of the changes needed.

For the Society the Report has a warm commendation and a relevance at many different points. This is logical as well as welcome. A general theme throughout the Report is that the Co-operative Movement should become more and more outward-looking, seeking interest and scrutiny for its achievements and problems from individuals and institutions outside itself, and the Society can encourage and help to reward that attitude.