

Expanded abstract

The cooperative as an alternative for collective entrepreneurship. Its presence and promotion in Andalusian public universities

Objectives

The present work analyses the presence of cooperativism in the academic and entrepreneurial reality of the public universities of Andalusia (Spain), one of the regions with the highest number of entrepreneurs and university students and where cooperativism has been most encouraged by political institutions.

Methodology

Implementing inductive and qualitative methodologies (Corbin y Strauss, 1990; Gioia et al., 2013), the academic offerings of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees of nine public universities in this region have been studied, and in-depth interviews have been conducted with responsible individuals and technical personnel from the entrepreneurship and employability services of these universities.

In the first case, an approach to the academic reality of these universities has been carried out through the exhaustive analysis of the programs and study plans of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the academic years 2018/19 and 2019/20. Specifically, subjects related to entrepreneurship in general and cooperativism, in particular, have been sought in these study plans, which we have called Cooperative Academic Footprint (CAF).

In the second case, the methodology used with responsible individuals and technical personnel from the entrepreneurship services of these universities has been a qualitative type based on in-depth interviews (Maxwell, 2008; Yin, 2015; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). This methodology allows for a better understanding of the processes of change, fostering a type of analysis with sufficient depth and precision but providing the necessary flexibility in the collection of information (Martínez et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1992) were conducted and recorded in audible format and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Based on the interviews, a content analysis was performed (Rodríguez, Gil & García, 1996), with coding used to reorganize the data into categories that allowed for internal comparison (Maxwell, 1996) and the discovery of similarities and differences between the interviewees' discourses. With the information obtained, we proceeded to analyse it using the comparative method of contrast and comparison (Azkarate-Iturbe et al., 2020) until reaching theoretical saturation (Trinidad et al., 2006), as shown in the results and conclusions.

This way, a process of obtaining information directly from the employability and entrepreneurship services of the universities studied in this work has been carried out, making a special mention of the advisory programs and training activities offered, and always from the perspective of the presence of cooperativism in such actions.

Results

The results show a scarce and improvable presence of cooperativism in the study plans of the analysed degrees. They also point out that entrepreneurship services management lacks a clear understanding of cooperative principles and is not oriented toward collective initiatives or cooperativism. This circumstance results in a previous lack of knowledge by potential university entrepreneurs, not only of the cooperative management model but also of the values and principles that differentiate it.

Our analysis also indicates that within the university environment, two main agents condition the promotion and impulse of cooperative entrepreneurship: the cooperative sector itself and the universities. They are the main ones responsible for ensuring that students receive adequate and correct training and information about the cooperative movement and, therefore, the opportunity to undertake this business typology. Additionally, the primacy of individual entrepreneurship among university students is revealed, demonstrating the need to promote collective entrepreneurship.

Finally, the results reflect the lack of support from external investors and advisors, a recurrent circumstance in the cooperative field (Seguí-Mas et al., 2013). Potential investors tend to opt for projects led by self-employed individuals or other legal figures such as limited liability companies.

Research limitations

The present study has some limitations. Firstly, it is pertinent to highlight that although there is a common ground, the specifics of cooperative societies may vary depending on different national and, especially, regional legislations. While we have attempted to be rigorous in presenting the scope and steps taken for the article's realization, it is necessary to remember that this is a regional study framed within the context of Andalusian public universities, so the results may not be extrapolated to other geographic regions.

In addition, the insights provided in the qualitative analysis may have a potential bias due to the sample size and experiential view of the entrepreneurship services personnel. Lastly, the study is a non-longitudinal analysis, so the evolution of the factors considered in each university may vary over time.

Practical implications

Based on the results, there is a need to develop a comprehensive plan based on the interaction between university entrepreneurship services, university faculties, and institutions that promote and encourage cooperatives in our society. Both the cooperative movement and public

authorities could demonstrate their commitment to the social economy through concrete actions, such as information campaigns about the true nature and characteristics of these companies aimed at the general population. In addition, cooperatives and their associations should promote collaboration with universities and disseminate information to society.

Universities should ensure that entrepreneurship service personnel have the necessary training to advise potential entrepreneurs in this area and provide information on all the options to support their projects. They could also implement new lines of research through joint work between university faculty and cooperative representatives to promote a greater number of internships in these companies, final degree projects, or other synergistic activities that would help disseminate cooperative characteristics and values in the university environment.

On the other hand, it could be fruitful to promote a deeper understanding of cooperatives, not only among university students but also among those in secondary education, since cooperatives are built on a set of irrevocable principles and values. Assuming them without prior knowledge and practice is complex.

Originality/value

The contribution of this article to the literature is twofold. On the one hand, it evaluates the call for public legislation to increase the formal presence of cooperativism in the university academic field, analysing its actual implementation in the curricula. On the other h, it shows the qualified vision of the entrepreneurship services associated with public universities. The article delves into a question that has been lacking empirical evidence until now, although it has been suggested by the results of previous studies (e.g., Lejarriaga et al., 2013 or Melián et al., 2017). The study of the role of entrepreneurship promotion actions as well as the advising and support for entrepreneurs by the entrepreneurship services of the universities, needed to be tackled. The conclusions aim to provide an image of the role played by university education in cooperativism and lay the foundations upon which to build an action plan to promote this model among entrepreneurs.