Researcher:
Susila Davis – DPhil in Education

Business:
Oxford University Press

The project idea

Susila was eager to find a partner organisation to collaborate with for her DPhil study of school improvement processes at the Department of Education. A few months before, she had met her potential supervisor, Prof. Pamela Sammons, while working in London as a data analyst for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. During the project on high performing schools in which they were both involved, Susila and Prof. Sammons started to talk about research at Oxford and Susila began to find the idea of a DPhil supervised by Prof. Sammons quite appealing. Like many other DPhil applicants and students, however, Susila knew she would have had to self-fund her DPhil program in case her application had been successful. Therefore, she started looking for potential funding options.

When she was accepted onto the doctoral programme, her now supervisor Prof. Sammons suggested that they explore different business partners to collaborate with for her DPhil project, which might have been a good match for the work Susila had in mind, as well as a source of funds. One such organisation was the educational publisher, Oxford University Press (OUP). OUP were at the time embarking on a new stream of work involving online technologies for school improvement, and were investigating ways to link their work with evidence-based approaches in the field of educational research. The goals of this stream of work were closely aligned with what Susila was hoping to analyse, although in a different setting. Therefore, she accepted to start negotiating with OUP to elaborate a project that could be of interest to both.

After an application process and talks with a senior publisher at OUP, Susila was offered a studentship covering her DPhil fees and enabling her to study the perceptions and understanding of professional development of primary school practitioners. As Susila's plans for her study coincided with OUP's design of Pathways, an online resource for school improvement, the timing lent itself well for a mutually beneficial collaboration. OUP had the opportunity to investigate the use of Pathways through the theoretical lenses of specific models of school improvement and effectiveness, and to refine its design and functionalities accordingly before the official launch of the platform. Meanwhile, Susila had a sample of primary schools to draw from for her ▶

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pioneering research, funds to support her DPhil work and a unique opportunity for knowledge exchange with teachers, practitioners and designers.

The agreement between OUP and Susila involved two types of collaboration – one specifically tied to the DPhil study and another focused on a series of additional research-related deliverables. As a DPhil candidate, Susila could easily involve in her project schools and teaching practitioners that had already expressed interest to OUP in locating resources for school improvement and teachers' professional development. In exchange, her doctoral dissertation would have contributed to OUP's Pathways design process and would have provided participating schools the opportunity to have a say in it. At that time, Schools were experiencing significant reform due to the launch of the new National Curriculum and of a new system of national assessments, and were also facing cuts to their annual budget. As such, teachers and leaders were looking for resources to inform their teaching and learning.

As Susila began putting together the literature review portion of her study, it became apparent that not only could she highlight salient findings in the field for academic purposes, but also for a more practice-oriented audience. Susila and OUP agreed to have an additional research-related contract, asking Susila to create original content for the Pathways platform, targeting teaching practitioners, by writing digested summaries of the existing evidence and research available that she was collecting for her DPhil project. This was a good incentive for Susila to work on her literature review, considering the much broader potential readership available compared to an average academic dissertation. Moreover, it helped her to understand how to translate academic knowledge into something more accessible and practical for a non-academic audience – in her case, the schools that would have adopted the Pathways platform in the pilot project.

As part of this research-related agreement, Susila also agreed to do an analysis of other platforms performing a similar function to Pathways in order to help OUP map what was already available in the market, and she reviewed the content that OUP put on the platform to ensure it would be clear and comprehensive for users. Both tasks gave her access to relevant information for her DPhil work and enhanced her analytical, review and critical thinking skills, which are fundamental in an academic career. From their side, OUP benefited from the partnership because they had a qualified, sustained collaborator at an affordable rate and, most importantly, the

opportunity to have continuous feedback on their Pathways platform from multiple users/schools, instead of discovering issues at the end of the design and launch phases.

While being a beneficial collaboration, the amount of work it required combined with some extra projects that Susila was undertaking to sustain her living expenses soon began to hamper the progress in her research. Therefore, in her second year, Susila was put forward for (in an open competition), and subsequently won, a prestigious ESRC scholarship that would cover all DPhil fees and living expenses. An unexpected advantage of winning this scholarship was to make her research project less OUP-dependent and this proved to be fundamental in enhancing the credibility of her work among other academics. From the beginning, OUP had been very open about the project and had adopted a "hands-off" approach to it, never affecting what Susila was doing, how she was doing it or what she could or could not report in her findings. Therefore, she had never perceived the partnership as affecting the quality of her research. However, occasionally, when she shared or presented her project in more academic settings, she would field questions about the complexities of collaborating with a business like OUP, and about how she managed to keep a separation between the multiple roles that she held in the project. While Susila had learnt to be clear about the boundaries of the different components of the project and the varying levels of reflexivity that she negotiated in each context, having an additional funder was a big relief and put her in an ideal place to make the most of her collaboration with OUP.

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Key benefits & challenges

There were several benefits that Susila gained thanks to partnering with a business throughout her DPhil. First of all, the quality of her analysis was enhanced by the frequent and systematic discussion of her findings with key stakeholders of the project. OUP assembled a steering group responsible for managing the Pathways platform design, which comprised publishers, designers and editors of OUP, the former HMI (school inspectors at Ofsted, the governmental office for setting standards in education), former headteachers, advisors, such as her supervisor, and other stakeholders. This steering group met regularly – once a term – throughout the project and Susila could present her intermediary findings at every meeting, to discuss them with the attending stakeholders. This helped her to understand and spot more nuances and details than she would have done on her own and to take into consideration multiple perspectives. Moreover, the presence of her supervisor at these meetings meant that Susila had the opportunity to compare her impressions and observations with those of her supervisor and to generate in this way additional data. Besides presenting at the meetings, Susila frequently shared her progress and findings with a senior publisher from OUP, who was in charge of the Pathways project. This helped her to see the practical application of her work and to learn how to share her findings in formats and ways that would be helpful for the work of OUP. Talking to the senior publisher was also a very effective way to get updates about what was going on in the education industry with regard to school improvement processes, a piece of information that was relevant to Susila's DPhil thesis and to its framing.

According to Susila, the opportunity to work as a team, with frequent discussions and exchanges of information, rather than as an individual researcher, had three additional advantages. Firstly, it helped her to maintain her motivation and her vision of how her work could be meaningful in "the bigger picture". She enjoyed the opportunity to talk about her research to people who were interested in it and who could adopt her suggestions in their own context, and she derived immense satisfaction in seeing how the Pathways platform changed thanks to her contribution. Secondly, she liked to be able to explore and discuss new ideas and receive timely feedback, while remaining free, thanks to OUP's "hands-off approach", to work on her topic in the way she wanted and to ignore the remarks that she thought were not helpful. Thirdly, the need to report what was going on in the project on a regular basis and her accountability to multiple stakeholders gave Susila the incentive to work hard and progress her project at fast pace, since she felt the pressure of frequently having something new to share. This kept her on track with DPhil milestones and deadlines.

From a research point of view, Susila benefited from collaborating with OUP because this facilitated her data collection, giving her easy access to several OUP-related archives, employees and partner schools. The data collected helped her to better understand the design process as well as the impact that the platform was having and was meant to have. This, in turn, made it possible for Susila to adopt a design-based approach, a methodology increasingly popular in the education field and one that Susila was hoping to use, which involves the study of something while it is being designed – giving the researcher an opportunity to influence its evolution.

In terms of skills gained, Susila learnt how to communicate her findings to different audiences, how to spot what in her research could matter "now" rather than a few years later and how to perform multiple roles in the same project, such as those of researcher, mediator and representative. She also became more flexible in dealing with different stakeholders and in putting herself in their shoes, understanding where they were coming from and what constraints they had in relation to the project.

An added opportunity came during the course of the whole the project, when Susila produced infographics for the schools that participated in the project to explain what she had observed. Susila produced numerous posters, which she then also used to communicate her findings to OUP. Thanks to these posters, she won several prizes at OxTALENT (Oxford University's annual awards for innovative use of digital technology) and got additional visibility for her project. In retrospect, Susila believes that having the opportunity to be creative was the most fun part of the project and that, overall, it was an enriching experience that helped her with the writing up and with making her research and findings less abstract. ▶

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While Susila enjoyed many benefits, she admitted that partnering with a business can also be challenging in many ways. For example, the accountability to multiple stakeholders, while bringing extra quality to her analysis and more feedback throughout the research process, also underscored some of the pressure that she felt during the DPhil – pressure that many students might experience, even when working on their own. She felt that she had to constantly keep coming up with good insights that would have been helpful for the design of the platform and she kept pushing herself to do and achieve more. After a while, she realized that she was the one creating all the pressure because OUP and other stakeholders had never raised any questions or asked for as many updates as she was providing, but she still found it difficult to take breaks, even when she needed them. Ultimately, what helped her to deal with the pressure was to understand that OUP had never worked with DPhil students before and therefore had no standards and expectations set in stone, which meant that she really was the one in control of her project.

Susila also spent a significant amount of time trying to understand what might be useful and timely for OUP.

When she was working with them, impact or knowledge exchange was less of a recognised "outcome" expected in a doctoral research project and so she had little guidance on the ways in which research could be beneficial for a business. The fact that she was engaging with a business was already considered impact, so it was difficult for her to define what impact could mean for her research and, most importantly, for OUP. Her contribution to OUP was ultimately demonstrated through "learning by doing" but this always left the feeling that something different or more could have been done.

Finally, a challenge presented itself when Susila had to summarize her thesis for OUP, in order to highlight only what was relevant for them and potential areas for improvement of the platform bases on what she had discovered. The challenge was to write the summary in a way that would be clear for them and easily actionable. While Susila was still dealing with this issue, she felt that simply engaging with this task had already helped her to clarify for herself, and in presentations to academic audiences, what she had done and what she had observed.

Advice for other researchers

There are many insights that Susila developed thanks to her partnership with OUP. First of all, she believes that to make the most of a partnership with a business, it is pivotal to adopt a mutually productive approach. While there is no need to agree on everything with the business partner, it is important to share as much as possible and to be as open as you can be. Instead of assuming things must be done in a certain way, it is helpful to be flexible and to resist the temptation to close up when the other side does not seem to be responsive. Whether parties plan it or not, in any knowledge exchange project there will be mutual influence. Therefore, it is better to embrace this in order to reap all the potential learning benefits and create the opportunity for future research projects and REF-relevant impact.

Looking back, Susila wished she had worked more from the OUP offices and interacted more with their team. Most of the work she did for them was done remotely, even if she was attending meetings regularly, and she came to realize that this was a missed opportunity. Sitting in OUP's office might

have added an extra dimension to the collaboration and might have helped Susila to internalize their way of working. At the same time, though, having a very close relationship with the business partner might put at risk the integrity of the research and bias the data collection. With this in mind, another piece of advice would be to create a clear separation between research and knowledge exchange, especially in the write-up phase. Some academics may question the findings coming out of collaborations and it is important to critically reflect on this from the very beginning, take appropriate measures and get ready to answer potential questions.

When setting up a partnership, it is also key to agree on outcomes that are more engagement-focused before the start of the project and to establish some milestones that will ensure that these outcomes will be realized, otherwise purely academic ones might take undue priority and damage the relationship with the business. Finding a good balance between academic work and collaborative work might be facilitated by a significant involvement of the academic supervisor in the project. In Susila's experience, a meaningful and frequent ▶

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dialogue with her supervisor throughout the project was fundamental in making sense of what she was observing from a theoretical point of view. This enabled her to have time to focus on the practical relevance of her work. Additionally, Susila's advice would be to make sure that the partnership does not involve a judgment or analysis of the quality and effectiveness of the product of the collaboration. In her project, the fact that she was analysing the way the platform was used rather than its impact or value, given that she had contributed to shape its content, made it possible to maintain a detached point of view as well as the credibility of her observations.

Finally, Susila mentioned some skills that are helpful when deciding to collaborate with a business. Humility and openness to collaboration are probably the key ones. No party or person has all the answers or a full understanding of what is going on so it is important to listen to the partner and to keep sharing ideas, reflecting on both positive and negative feedback. Additionally, a researcher needs to ensure that they are bringing some value to the business partner. This value could take the form of knowledge or of research expertise. In her case, she contributed her knowledge of the literature on school improvement and a systematic approach to data collection and analysis that was beneficial to the development of the platform. Articulating these advantages was fundamental in her obtaining the support of OUP and in establishing a healthy and balanced partnership.