Economic and Social Research Council

LSE PhD Academy

Best Practice Guidelines for Collaborative Research with Businesses

Identifying Partners

Identifying the right business partner for a collaborative research project is crucial to the success of the project. When approaching potential partners, you will need to consider several issues and ask several questions.

1. Does the business partner have a genuine interest in the proposed outcomes of the research project? How is this interest demonstrated?
2. Is the business partner genuinely committed to the research project? How is this commitment demonstrated?
3. Does the business partner have enough organisational stability to support commitment throughout the life of the project and ensure its continuity?
4. Does the business partner have a realistic understanding of how the research project will be beneficial to them? How is this realistic understanding demonstrated?
5. Does the business partner understand that the researcher must safeguard the integrity and impartiality of the research? How is this understanding demonstrated?
6. Where is the business partner located? Could its location affect the terms of the collaboration (e.g. access to data)?
7. Does the business partner have any prior experience of collaborating with academic researchers? What is the evidence for this (e.g. research papers, briefings, etc.)? What were the outcomes of the collaboration for previous researchers?

As the number and complexity of the questions listed above suggest, initiating and establishing a successful collaboration with a business partner can take time. But this initial investment will pay off in the long term as it will ensure that the collaboration is built on solid grounds (e.g. reciprocal understanding and trust, shared commitment and mutual benefit).

The collaborations of past LSE students were initiated in a number of ways, e.g. by their supervisor, by the students themselves, by the business partner. While pre-existing contacts may offer fruitful starting points, a strong alignment of business and research interests should ultimately be given priority over convenience.

For advice on how to approach potential business partners, see here. To find out more about past collaboration projects, see here.

Defining the Terms of the Relationship: the Collaboration Agreement

Early on in your relationship with a business partner, you should start working on a draft collaboration agreement, which you should discuss (and eventually co-sign) with an appropriate representative of the business partner. The collaboration agreement should cover:

1. Definition of roles and responsibilities.
2. Expectations regarding access to data and resources, timeline, and outputs.
3. Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) to ensure that both the interests of the business (e.g. preventing the loss of competitive advantage) and of the researcher (e.g. ensuring the publication of the research data and findings) are protected. The collaboration agreement should explicitly address the potential confidentiality concerns of the business partner without putting the researcher at risk of waiving their right of producing publishable research.
4. Compensation of the researcher (if applicable).
5. The distribution of proceeds from commercially valuable research (if applicable).

For further guidance, see the PhD Academy's research-to-business legal resources toolkit and the LSE IPR Policy.

A Special Note on Non-Disclosure Agreements

In some cases, you may be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) prior to starting the collaboration. Before signing such an agreement, you should get advice (see below), since an NDA may be incompatible with your activities as an independent researcher, for example by undermining your ownership of research findings and your ability to publish them. Researchers who are funded by the ESRC should be particularly careful since the ESRC requires all funded research to be made open access and public.

As an alternative to an NDA, you could discuss the possibility of guaranteeing the anonymity of the business partner, by not referencing their name, their clients, vendors, 3rd parties, etc.

Note that even if you sign an NDA, you should also draw up a collaboration agreement (NDAs do not usually cover IPRs).

For further guidance and resources, see PhD Academy's research-to-business legal resources toolkit.

Funding and Researcher Compensation

If your research adds value to the partner organisation, your research efforts should be compensated by the business partner. Such compensation will be contingent on the design and scope of the research project and can take different forms. It is a common approach for the partner organisation to compensate the researcher "in kind" in the form of access to data, institutional resources, networks etc. Depending on the collaboration agreement, the partner organisation may also provide financial compensation in the form of a contribution to PhD funding. The ESRC is funding collaborative research with businesses as part of its Collaborative CASE Studentships Scheme. These studentships are awarded on the basis of a research project that is jointly designed by an academic supervisor and a business partner prior to the recruitment of a PhD candidate who will carry out the research project. The funding of the collaborative project is shared by the academic institution, the ESRC and the business partner.

Alternatively, you may have the opportunity to work part-time as an employee for the organisation which you are collaborating with for research purposes. This pathway has been successfully adopted by some PhD researchers across the LSE (see collaboration stories) to realise their collaborative research projects. Studying one's own organisation, however, comes with particular challenges and time constraints (see below) which you will need to anticipate and address.

Managing the Project

Supervision and access

For a smooth running of the project, it is crucial that you identify a partner within the organisation who has the authority to provide access to relevant resources and contacts. To maintain continuity throughout the project, you should discuss what alternative arrangements would be put in place in case of a change of personnel.

Depending on the specific circumstances and scope of the collaboration, the partner within the business organisation might be able to provide joint supervision/mentorship for the project alongside your academic supervisors/mentors. Arrangements about this should be specified in the collaboration agreement.

Work Plan

You should aim to create a work plan at the outset of the collaboration. This can help setting up a clear management structure for the project. The work plan should outline key activities, significant milestones, expected outputs, a reporting structure and a timetable; the work plan, which should be incorporated in the collaboration agreement, will enable all parties to keep track of progress.

The work plan may change over the course of the project's duration and may evolve gradually in response to the partner organisation's institutional dynamics. Consequently, you should aim for a flexible rather than rigid approach to the implementation of your work plan. As the project advances, you should plan to report on your progress and on your preliminary findings to organisational staff within the partner organisation. This can yield valuable input and feedback and provide opportunities for you to test out new ideas.

Especially for longer-term PhD projects, it is highly advisable to anticipate potential volatility and think about a Plan B to fall back upon in case the collaboration runs into obstacles or does not work out as planned.

Balance between Academic and Business Demands

For your collaboration to be successful, you need to establish a good balance between academic and business demands. The possibility of conflicting demands (in terms of time, priorities, outputs, etc.) should be anticipated and addressed as early as possible to avoid putting a strain on the project.

While you need to be sensitive to the time constraints and priorities of your business partner, you should expect your partner organisation to provide you with an enabling environment which facilitates progress on your research project. If you are conducting research while simultaneously working as an employee for the business partner, it is advisable that you agree a clearly demarcated "research time" per week for you to work on your project. Inhabiting parallel roles as employee and researcher within a partner organisation can generate ambiguities and ethical dilemmas for the researcher. For this reason, business partner and researcher must be mindful about their respective roles and responsibilities as specified by the collaboration agreement and should be committed to the integrity and impartiality of the research project.

Finishing the Project and Managing Collaboration Outcomes

You should devise plans for disseminating your research outcomes as widely as possible, to academic and non-academic audiences. To ensure long-term fruitful exchanges between the business partner and the LSE academic community, you should consider ways in which you can facilitate the continuation of the collaboration you have initiated beyond the duration of your research project.