



Researcher:
**John Doe – DPhil in
Economics**

Business:
**International
Cooperative**

*(The case study was anonymised
to respect existing agreements
and working relationships)*

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The project idea

In the second year of his DPhil, John (fictional name) was approached, together with a colleague, by the consulting branch of a top UK university to create a report for an international cooperative working in the dairy industry. In a moment of great uncertainty following the UK decision to leave the European Union, the company wanted to have a sound and rigorous report, certified by an accredited research institution, quantifying the economic losses that its industry was likely to face. The goal was to present the report to the UK Members of Parliament, to lobby for decisions taking into account the risks run by the industry because of “Brexit”.

This opportunity came to John because he was affiliated with a research centre of the UK University to which the project was commissioned. He was not looking into collaborating with businesses but his affiliation made his profile easy to find for the consulting branch of the institution. Their request to hire him and his colleague for the production of a report was quite unexpected, since John was fully focused on advancing his DPhil and his research was neither on the dairy industry nor on “Brexit”. However, it made him realise that his quantitative skills and the technical and theoretical knowledge of international trade deriving from his doctoral research could have been helpful also when analysing different problems and settings. Intrigued by the opportunity to produce a relevant output for a business, to apply his skills for a consulting project and to earn some extra money, John decided to accept the proposal and two months later he began the work.

John worked on the report together with his colleague for ten days, looking at the different channels through which “Brexit” would have affected the dairy industry (i.e. labour market, consumer demand, and trade costs). They first identified the potential changes in each market (e.g. consumers losing purchasing power because of “Brexit”-induced inflation or shipping of products between the UK and the European Union becoming more costly because of the presence of a border). Once identified the markets and related business areas of relevance that would have been affected, John and his colleague produced quantitative estimates of the losses and benefits that the industry could have incurred (e.g. how decreased immigration following “Brexit” might increase wage costs). At the end of the two weeks, John and his colleague had

the opportunity to present their work at the UK headquarters of the company, in front of different industry stakeholders, but John decided not to attend because of other commitments he had in that period.

Producing a report for a business was not as big of a change as could have been expected. Given the nature of the collaboration, the contact with the company was minimal and mostly limited to requests of data and specifications whenever needed. However, John did experience the difference of having to work for a business rather than as an academic. They had a very tight and very close deadline to produce a complete report, since it had to be submitted in just a couple of weeks in order to be available before the parliamentary summer recess. Such a deadline is very unusual in academia and, as such, John and his colleague had to learn how to speed up calculations and models creation and they had to accept to give up some rigour in the interest of delivering the report on time.

While working on the report did not affect his DPhil or his career choices, John enjoyed the opportunity of putting his skills at the service of a different cause and of testing what it would feel like to work as a consultant. He would not necessarily repeat the experience unless it was compatible with his research work and progression. However, given that it happened at a favourable time, he is really glad he gave it a try and would absolutely encourage any researcher with a similar proposal for a collaboration in their hands to consider accepting it.

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Key benefits & challenges

Given how short and hands-off the collaboration was, the main benefit for John deriving from producing the industry report was earning some extra money, which is never a bad thing when living on DPhil scholarships or research grants. Besides of that, John appreciated very much the opportunity to experience something new and believes that, shall he change his career plans, it would be useful to have a consulting experience on his curriculum. Working on the report also made him aware of the challenges of dealing with business departments with overlapping responsibilities and boundaries and where managers have a lot on their plate. This awareness has made him more conscious about ▶

the fact that a research project might not have the same importance and priority for everyone involved and that dealing with politics and organisational dynamics is part of any collaboration outside of academia.

Even research-wise, working on the report unexpectedly proved to be beneficial. John studies international trade but his area of interest is not related to or affected by in any way by “Brexit”. Having this commission was an opportunity to stay updated on what was going on in international trade because of “Brexit” and to learn how to apply his research and quantitative modelling skills to a different research

question. Additionally, thanks to the report, John could start to experience what it looks like to collaborate with another researcher to produce a joint output, without having to embark on a much more significant commitment such as co-authoring an academic paper.

Finally, John benefited from getting better at “back of the envelope” calculations and at producing good quality outputs under pressure, because of the time constraints he had to face in this project. He feels now better equipped to make difficult decisions where there is a clear trade-off between rigour and timely delivery

Advice for other researchers

John believes that getting involved in a similar project is likely to be beneficial for any researcher. However, personal circumstances might make it more or less worth it. For researchers who are 100% committed to an academic career, collaborating with a business might be useful but only if the commitment is low or for a very short period of time. Meanwhile, for those still unsure about what to do next, a project like this is surely something to consider, even if the required commitment might be significant and/or protracted.

Based on his experience, the main advice that John would like to give to other researchers is to make sure, when accepting a consulting project or collaboration opportunity, that the other party knows well what it wants and explains it in sufficient detail before the work starts. Working on the report with minimal information made him realise that it is difficult to do something for somebody if they don't know what they want.

At the same time, researchers should not be obliged to accept any opportunity that comes their way. He explained:

“There are times when it can be helpful to have something else to do beyond your research work but there are also times when it might be distracting and counterproductive and it is important to understand when research-related commitments do not allow to get involved in other projects”. At any point in time, John tries never to have more than three different active projects on his plate, or he feels he cannot devote them the necessary attention. When he accepted this project, he had a relatively less busy time and that is what convinced him to embark on it. However, as things changed, he was also ready to take a step back and prioritise his academic work. For example, he decided not to join his colleague in presenting the report to the company because in the week when the presentation was due he was working on challenging and key parts of his DPhil project and he realised that taking a break from them might have damaged his progress. Especially in the last phases of a DPhil or postdoctoral appointment it might be better to stay focused on the academic work.