Commended for Emerging Impact in OUDE’s 2014 Doctoral Research Impact Award Competition

Susila Davis
Title of thesis: “Are we there yet?” A study of Oxford University Press Pathways to School Improvement
Supervisor: Prof Pamela Sammons

This study, in its first year as of 2014, aims to explore the workings of and practitioner engagement with a selection of resources provided by the Oxford University Press (OUP) in the area of school improvement. In 2013, the OUP launched 'Pathways' (http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-school) an online platform made up of a ‘four-step system’ to school improvement comprising ‘audit’, ‘strategic planning’, ‘take action’ and ‘evaluate impact’ phases.

Pathways’ resources aim to support schools through specific tasks, for example, the implementation of the new primary National Curriculum. The intentions of the research are to study individual school improvement practice via a series of multi-method case studies and; to study the evolution of the Pathways themselves (using a “design-based research” (DBR) framework). DBR focuses on bridging the realms of academia and external, more practical contexts. Characteristics of ‘good DBR’ include the development of real-world learning environments linked with theory (in this case, the links between practitioner use of Pathways, OUP's cycles of redesign and the school improvement research evidence base); research that leads to sharable theories which communicate implications to practitioners and the documentation of how designs function in authentic settings.

Impact activities have so far consisted of collaboration, publication and dissemination activities with a variety of organisations. These include authoring material with the OUP and Pathways steering group members (comprising amongst others, Pathways editors and practitioners from schools and Ofsted), conducting pilot studies with schools as well as presenting at conferences and observing preliminary focus groups. Susila and Pam are part of a team of authors who produce publications and website content for Pathways accessible by English primary schools. The idea is for the platform to be built on a strong research evidence base from which to disseminate guides and tools to schools in need of support with school improvement tasks. Practitioner engagement with different facets of the platform is then studied and ‘fed back’ into the design cycle of the product, which facilitates continued questioning, exploring and evaluation of Pathways content. In parallel with the evolution of the platform, Susila is also studying schools and their engagement with Pathways, and how the platform functions in different settings and improvement ‘journeys’.

This research was commended in the 2014 OUDE Doctoral Impact Awards competition as having the potential to have significant impact. Evidence was noted even at this early stage of strong engagement with practitioners and preparation of texts. The study was also considered to enjoy a strong ‘multiplier effect’ acting as an adjunct to the work of Professor Sammons.