

Academic Partnerships in the UK – an IHE project

Working Paper on definitions and early data

This interim release sets out a typology of partnerships for use by providers and policy makers, as well as exploring the data set of respondents to our surveys.

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A. About Independent Higher Education

Independent Higher Education (IHE) is the UK's representative body for independent providers of higher education, professional training, and pathways.

IHE is the formal representative body for independent providers of higher education, professional training and pathways in the UK. We ensure that the voice of independent providers is heard and the interests of their students are protected when government, regulators and others make decisions which affect their lives and their learning.

Our representative role is underpinned by a mission to promote the values of diversity, flexibility, innovation, student focus and collaboration within UK higher education. We achieve this by advising, supporting and promoting the institutions in our membership, all of whom in joining sign up to these values and commit themselves to putting them into practice.

In 2023 IHE celebrated 15 years of representing and supporting independent higher education providers. The 77 providers in our membership today reflect the remarkable diversity of the independent higher education sector, with a wide variety of student numbers, histories and missions, but they are all highly student and teaching-focused and include many small and specialist providers.

One of IHE's principal strategic aims is to facilitate an SME model of higher education, enabling new approaches and innovation to flourish within a flexible and proportionate regulatory environment. Critical to this aim is the continuing availability and affordability of effective partnership arrangements to provide quality assurance and recognition of the higher education qualifications that SME providers deliver, and a regulatory environment which supports this outcome.

We ensure that the voice of independent providers is heard and the interests of their students are protected.

B. IHE's academic partnerships project

IHE has partnered with Pinsent Masons on a project exploring collaborative provision in the higher education sector, taking in the experiences of teaching partners, awarding partners and students to understand the state of play for academic partnerships in the UK.

About the project

The majority of higher education providers in the UK do not have their own recognised awarding powers, meaning they can only deliver higher education qualifications in partnership with an awarding partner (typically a university), and this proportion is steadily increasing. These partnership models were for a long time the only route into the sector for new entrants who have something different to offer to students, and the only way to make higher education available locally in many parts of the country through further education colleges. Today they still form an integral if largely invisible part of the quality and standards landscape of UK higher education, ensuring that all degree programmes and other recognised HE qualifications offered in the UK align with the expected standards and common practices of the sector.

The project aims for greater understanding of the costs and burdens associated with creating, maintaining and ending partnerships. Additionally, it focuses on perceptions of the value of partnership provision, including from the student perspective. Under the guidance of a group of sector stakeholders and experts, the project seeks to identify tools to support more effective and long-lasting partnerships for the benefit of awarding and teaching partners, and ultimately their students.

About the working paper

As part of the project, this working paper has been produced to establish definitions of common types of arrangements. It also seeks to give new insights into the size and scope of partnerships in the UK, as well as insight from early data into the funding and regulatory arrangements, and the types of courses being delivered. We hope that both outputs from the working paper will prove useful to the Department for Education (DfE) and the Office for Students (OfS), and the devolved governments and funder/regulators in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as they consider the further development of policy and regulation for higher education across the UK.

C. Definitions and typology

The need for definitions

An increasing level of public interest and regulatory scrutiny has made it more important than ever to be able to talk about partnership arrangements with clarity and precision, but there remains no universally accepted typology or terminology that would allow us to do so. Various terms and definitions have been used by funders, regulators and sector bodies over the years, as well as by individual providers who enter into a partnership, but the absence of a shared vocabulary has caused confusion and misunderstanding. The terms in common use are often contradictory or are used interchangeably without sensitivity to the potential significance of nuanced distinctions.

Across the different types of partnership arrangement which exist in the UK sector today we consider two distinguishing features to be the most significant:

- Curriculum design: The partner which has designed the qualification and created the course content will retain a level of academic responsibility for its delivery and, in most circumstances, will retain the intellectual property associated with it.
- Owning of the student contract: The partner which enters into the contract with the student will be in charge of administration linked to the student record such as registration, statutory returns, confirmation of attendance to the Student Loans Company, etc.

The definitions proposed below represent the most common types of partnership arrangement between higher education providers but are by no means exhaustive. The definitions as proposed also do not touch upon every aspect of higher education provision under a partnership but do address the most significant distinguishing features. Under each type a number of sub-types may exist which share common features, while there are certain elements of a partnership arrangement which will often vary and thus can only be confirmed by reference to the individual contracts concerned.

These definitions will allow a framing of partnerships to facilitate the final report from IHE's academic partnerships project, due for publication later in spring 2024.

Common types of partnership arrangement

Validation

The teaching partner takes the lead in designing the qualification, though it undergoes an approval procedure conducted by the awarding partner. This approach ensures that the qualification meets established standards and criteria. Responsibility for curriculum design belongs to the teaching partner. The student contract is owned by the teaching partner.

Validation – Standardised Curriculum

The qualification is designed and owned by the awarding partner, requiring the teaching partner to deliver instruction in adherence to the prescribed programme, complying with key aspects such as assessment tasks and timelines. This framework ensures consistency and fidelity in delivery across any providers teaching that programme. Not only is the teaching partner required to implement the programme as specified by the awarding partner, but the awarding partner also needs to ensure adherence to a model stipulated by professional or statutory regulatory requirements. This is found in cases such as Teacher Training or courses which grant certain professional accreditations. Responsibility for oversight of the curriculum belongs to the awarding partner. The student contract is owned by the teaching partner.

Joint Venture

The qualification is created by a partnership with a specific focus in mind, which may be time-limited by design, and a joint board is established by the partners to manage the venture itself and matters relating to curriculum, quality and assessment. Responsibility for curriculum design is determined via contractual agreements. The partnership agreement will outline which partner owns the student contract. Although this is ordinarily the awarding partner, the contract can be with either partner, or with both.

These partnerships can include joint degrees between two institutions which both have degree awarding powers. Collaborations to create joint degrees are often in subjects which have limited access to funding, such as medicine, nursing or teaching.

Franchise

The qualification is designed and owned by the awarding partner (franchisor), requiring the teaching partner (franchisee) to deliver instruction in adherence to the prescribed programme. This framework ensures consistency and fidelity in delivery, as the teaching partner is required to implement the programme as specified by the awarding partner. Responsibility for curriculum design belongs to the awarding partner. The student contract is owned by the awarding partner.

Sub-contract

The qualification can be designed by either partner, although the awarding partner will control the methods of assessment as part of the programme approval process. This allows awarding partners to access the subject-specialist knowledge of teaching partners, while retaining closer control over qualification development than in Validation agreements. Responsibility for curriculum design is determined via contractual agreements. There are two models of ownership for the student contract:

- 1 The awarding partner owns the student contract. This is the dominant model. It allows teaching partners to gain access for their students to student finance which would otherwise not be available for their courses.
- 2 Some students, who do not require access to student finance, contract directly with the teaching partner. This may be the case for international students, or those who pay their own fees.

EVIDENCE FOR AN EXPANDING TYPOLOGY

One type of partnership which is notable but not yet common enough to be included in the definitions above is an arrangement by which an awarding provider contracts with another provider to deliver specialist teaching or modules within their degrees.

An example of this arrangement is the Culinary Industry Management BBA from Birkbeck, University of London, with specialist teaching provided by Le Cordon Bleu (an approved provider on the OfS Register, without their own Degree Awarding Powers).

<https://www.bbk.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/culinary-industry-management>

D. Data from public sources and project surveys

Availability of information on types of arrangements

There is no single comprehensive source of information on how many students are registered and taught under which type of arrangement, and which providers are responsible for those students as teaching or awarding partner. As an example, the OfS Register of English higher education providers lists the following categories of information for each registered provider:

- A Does the provider deliver validated provision on behalf of another provider?
- B Does the provider deliver sub-contracted provision on behalf of another provider?

Table 1 shows the type of information that can be derived from the Register. 338 providers of a total of 425 on the Register are categorised as delivering either validated or sub-contracted provision (or both) on behalf of another provider. Of these, there are 285 providers on the Register which are classified as A or B above and do not have their own Degree Awarding Powers at Level 8 on the FHEQ (RDAPs).

Assessing those without RDAPs is most likely to show the providers with restricted ability to offer their own awards, even where some type of awarding power has been gained. In Table 1, the types of partnerships visible on the Register are shown for those without RDAPs. The total figure including RDAPs providers is given in brackets.

TABLE 1: OFS REGISTER PARTNERSHIP INFORMATION

DATA POINT	NUMBER OF PROVIDERS*	PERCENTAGE*
Providers with partners	285 (338)	67 (80)
Validated provision on behalf of another provider	252 (263)	59 (62)
Sub-contracted provision on behalf of another provider	155 (201)	36 (47)
Both sub-contracted and validated provision on behalf of another provider	122 (128)	29 (30)

* Number and percentages in brackets include providers with their own RDAPs; otherwise excluded.

However, this will only give a portion of the picture:

- Providers in joint ventures such as joint degrees are amalgamated with the more common partnership types of validation and sub-contract. 53 of the 338 providers delivering on behalf of another have their own Research Degree Awarding Powers, suggesting that access to awarding powers is not the motivation for partnership.
- The register only covers England, but partnerships in the UK span all four nations.
- There is no clarity given on what is encompassed by the term 'sub-contract'.
- The real diversity of partnership types is obscured by the simplification of terms.
- It is impossible to see from the register which providers act as awarding partners.
- The number of partnership arrangements per provider is not available.
- The number of students involved in the partnerships is not clear.

Despite the limitations of the information available on the Register, the OfS is the only funder or regulator in the UK to make partnership data available at this level of detail.

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the OfS in England are expected to bring in new requirements for reporting on UK-based partnership data for the 2025/26 reporting year, following the proposal to expand the student record to collect data in respect of partnership students in the Aggregate Offshore Record consultation in 2023. These changes may, for the first time, bring students into the data return that are taught under partnership arrangements by providers not themselves registered with the OfS or accessing funding from one of the funding bodies. Although the funding council and regulator will achieve greater visibility on student numbers studying under partnerships within data returns, it is not clear whether this will be made public, or if so what form that visibility might take.

Once these changes are in effect, there will still be no comparable data set across all of the UK nations.

Initial findings from our project surveys

The IHE academic partnerships project has used two surveys to inform a report due for publication later in spring 2024. The first survey was of teaching partners, and the second of awarding partners. Some of the initial findings help to inform the state of play in academic partnership arrangements in the UK as these are indicative of size and scope. The following type of information can be found in the sections below, split into sections for teaching partners, and for awarding partners.

- Number of partners
- Regulators/funding bodies
- Number of students
- Length of existing partnerships
- Courses offered
- (For awarding partners only) Type of partnership arrangement

Note that percentages have been rounded throughout.

Survey of teaching partners

Number of partners

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF PARTNERS (TEACHING PARTNERS)

NUMBER OF PARTNERS	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
One partnership	16	73
Two partnerships	2	9
Three partnerships	1	5
Four or more partnerships	3	14

Regulators/funding bodies

73% of the teaching partners who responded to the survey and had partnership arrangements were registered with the Office for Students.

27% of the teaching partners were not registered with any regulator or funding body.

A further two respondents to this survey were not in partnerships but were seeking arrangements; in both cases, the providers were registered with the Office for Students.

Number of students, and length of time in partnership delivery

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF STUDENTS AND LENGTH OF TIME IN PARTNERSHIP DELIVERY (TEACHING PARTNERS)

NUMBER OF ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS	STUDENTS TAUGHT/REGISTERED IN 2021/22 (RANGE)	LENGTH OF TIME DELIVERING EDUCATION THROUGH A PARTNERSHIP MODEL
Four or more	10001-20000	Over 5 years
Four or more	2501-5000	Over 5 years
Four or more	5001-10000	Over 5 years
Three	301-500	Over 5 years
Two	101-300	Over 5 years
Two	501-1000	Over 5 years
One	1001-1500	3-5 years
One	1001-1500	Over 5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	101-300	3-5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	101-300	Over 5 years
One	26-50	Over 5 years
One	26-50	0-2 years
One	501-1000	Over 5 years
One	501-1000	3-5 years
One	501-1000	Over 5 years

One	76-100	Over 5 years
One	76-100	Over 5 years
Zero	101-300	Delivered education through a partnership in the past but are not doing so currently
Zero	Up to 25	Not yet delivered education through a partnership

Courses offered

TABLE 4: TYPE OF COURSE DELIVERED UNDER PARTNERSHIP (TEACHING PARTNERS)

TYPE OF COURSE DELIVERED UNDER PARTNERSHIP	NUMBER (COUNT)	NUMBER (PERCENTAGE)
Pathway courses preparing students for degree level study	2	8.3
Multi-subject provision (at any level of study)	2	8.3
Accelerated Degree Provision	3	12.5
Other	5	20.8
Level 4/5 provision	6	25.0
Flexible provision (at any level of study)	8	33.3
Online course (at any level of study)	9	37.5
Specialist subject provision (at any level of study)	19	79.2

Survey of awarding partners

Number of partners

TABLE 5: NUMBER OF PARTNERS (AWARDING PARTNERS)

NUMBER OF PARTNERS	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
1-5	10	56
6-10	4	22
10+	4	22

Types of partnership

The awarding provider survey requested respondents to indicate the type of partnership arrangements that they had in existence. There were no definitions provided, instead the respondents selected based on their own understanding of the categories. They were, however, instructed that sub-contract and franchise were to be interpreted the same way.

It should therefore be noted that the terms used below were self-selected by providers and so do not follow the definitions proposed earlier in this paper, but reflect instead the assumptions of respondents regarding possible definitions and how they are represented in their own partnership arrangements.

TABLE 6: TYPES OF PARTNERSHIP (AWARDING PARTNERS)

TYPE OF PARTNERSHIP	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS
Validation	100
Sub-contract/franchise	50
Joint venture	33
Other	11
Collaborative provision	6

Regulators/funding bodies

- 72% of respondents to the survey of awarding providers were registered with the Office for Students.
- 33% of respondents were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.
- 6% of respondents were funded by Scottish Funding Council.
- 6% of respondents were funded by Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.

From the above, only one respondent was registered or funded by the regulator and funding councils in all 4 UK nations

Number of students, and length of time in partnership delivery

The awarding providers were asked to indicate the student numbers, within a range, of different types of arrangements. The table below shows these ranges per respondent, alongside the number of partnership arrangements and the length of time they have delivered through partnerships.

The types of partnerships were classified as follows within the survey question on student numbers:

- Type A: Learning on a qualification awarded by the awarding partner, but registered and taught by a teaching partner
- Type B: Learning on a qualification awarded by the awarding partner, registered with the awarding partner, but were being taught by a partner provider
- Type C: Learning as part of a joint venture
- Type D: Learning as part of another type of partnership arrangement

TABLE 7: NUMBER OF STUDENTS AND LENGTH OF TIME IN PARTNERSHIP DELIVERY (AWARDING PARTNERS)

NUMBER OF ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS	TYPE A	TYPE B	TYPE C	TYPE D	LENGTH OF TIME DELIVERING EDUCATION THROUGH A PARTNERSHIP MODEL
More than 10	1,001 – 2,500	251 - 500	n/a	n/a	More than 10 years
More than 10	1,001 – 2,500	501 – 1,000	501 – 1,000	< 250	More than 10 years

More than 10	> 5,000	n/a	n/a	< 250	More than 10 years
More than 10	> 5,000	< 250	n/a	n/a	More than 10 years
Between 6 and 10	1,001 – 2,500	501 – 1,000	n/a	n/a	Less than 5 years
Between 6 and 10	n/a	2,501 – 5,000	2,501 – 5,000	n/a	More than 10 years
Between 6 and 10	2,501 – 5,000	< 250	251 - 500	< 250	More than 10 years
Between 6 and 10	1,001 – 2,500	1,001 – 2,500	251 - 500	< 250	More than 10 years
One to five	< 250	n/a	n/a	< 250	More than 10 years
One to five	501 – 1,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	5 - 10 years
One to five	n/a	n/a	251 - 500	501 – 1,000	Less than 5 years
One to five	< 250	n/a	n/a	n/a	More than 10 years
One to five	< 250	n/a	251 - 500	< 250	More than 10 years
One to five	< 250	< 250	< 250	n/a	More than 10 years
One to five	n/a	251 - 500	n/a	n/a	More than 10 years
One to five	251 - 500	< 250	< 250	< 250	More than 10 years
One to five	n/a	251 - 500	n/a	n/a	More than 10 years
One to five	2,501 – 5,000	< 250	n/a	n/a	5 - 10 years

Courses offered

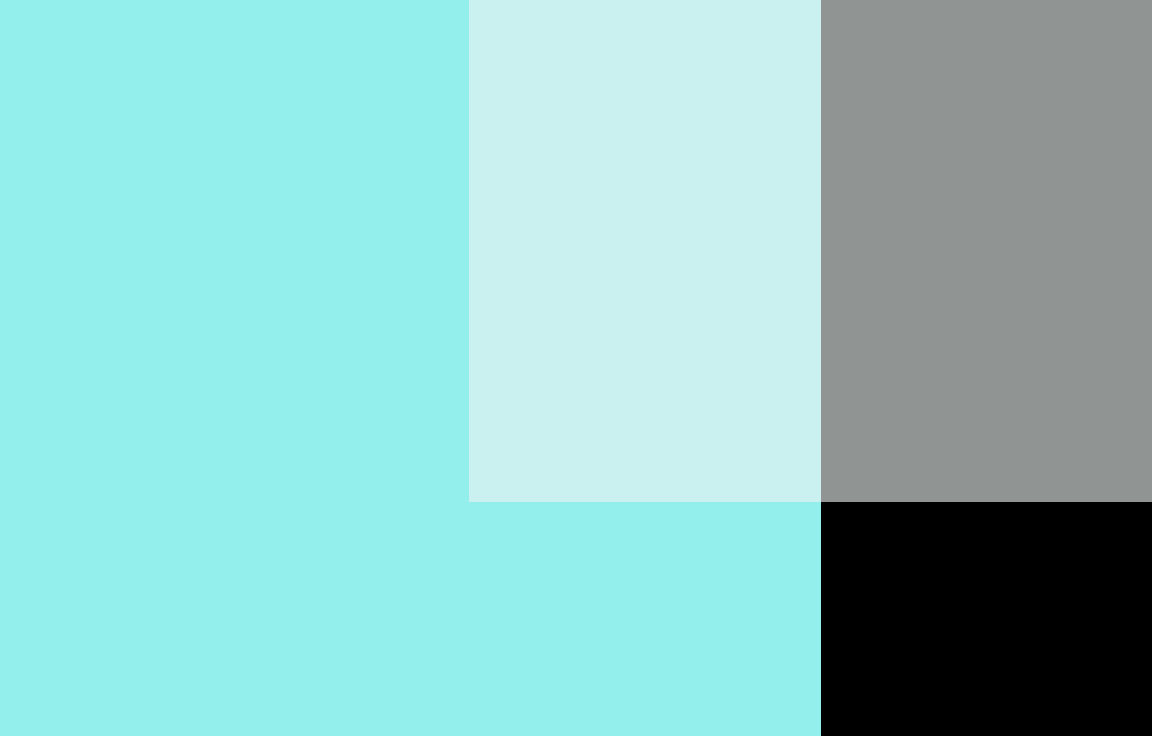
TABLE 8: TYPES OF COURSE DELIVERED UNDER PARTNERSHIP (AWARDING PARTNERS)

TYPE OF COURSE DELIVERED UNDER PARTNERSHIP	NUMBER (COUNT)	NUMBER (PERCENTAGE)
Undergraduate Degrees (FHEQ 6; SCQF 9/10)	15	83
Masters Degrees (FHEQ 7; SCQF 11)	14	78
Foundation Degrees (FHEQ 5; SCQF 7/8)	12	67

Specialist subject provision (at any level of study)	10	56
Pathway courses preparing students for degree level study	8	44
Certificates or Diplomas of Higher Education or equivalent (FHEQ 4/5; SCQF 6-8)	7	39
Online course (at any level of study)	5	28
Research Degrees (FHEQ 8; SCQF 12)	4	22
Short courses and micro credentials (less than a full level on RQF/FHEQ/SCQF)	3	17
Flexible provision (at any level of study)	3	17
Accelerated Degree Provision	2	11
Other	1	6

Future publications from our project

Later in spring 2024, IHE will publish the full findings from our academic partnerships project. This will include the full data sets from both surveys, roundtable feedback from members of the Association of Colleges, and feedback from students at IHE members. The initial data on questions relating to size and scope in this working paper has been provided to give insight to sector stakeholders as soon as it was available. We look forward to sharing more, accompanied by analysis and commentary, to assist all those supporting academic partnerships to flourish.



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