

Academic Partnerships in the UK – an IHE project

Final Report

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DATE PUBLISHED

10 July 2024

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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 80 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 partnered with law firm Pinsent Masons LLP 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.

1. Executive Summary

This comprehensive report provides valuable insights into academic partnerships in the UK. Various sector bodies within UK higher education have produced reports on good practices related to components of academic partnerships, which we highlight below. However, until now, a crucial piece of the puzzle was missing.

We needed more information on the size of this part of the sector, why and how partnerships form, how they are perceived as valuable, and the costs associated with setting up and running them – as well as the processes involved when they need to end or change. We also needed widely accessible information on methods for managing quality and risk, and an understanding of whether there was a common approach. The project has sought more information on the effects of regulation on partnerships and how both teaching and awarding partners see it shaping their future endeavours in this area. We aimed to understand data sharing, complaints and appeals handling, and student access to services.

Crucially, we sourced this information not just from awarding and teaching partners, but also from the students who study in partnership arrangements, providing a comprehensive view of how these partnership components fit together and create choice and opportunity.

Our findings highlight themes of transparency and collaboration as integral to managing risk. While common mechanisms for risk management exist, more support for students is necessary. The partnership environment remains stable, with providers seeking to maintain or grow their provision. To support this growth, it would be beneficial to foster developmental partnerships that help teaching partners achieve goals such as Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs). Successful academic partnerships thrive on open communication, active information sharing, goal alignment, and trust. The regulatory environment continues to impact partnership formation as the sector heads towards the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), bringing uncertainty about the best ways to embrace opportunities.

The report concludes by recommending further work on data sharing arrangements, student support services, complaints handling, and appeals processes. We also call for a directory of those seeking partners, addressing the challenges of partnership creation. Ongoing efforts are needed to understand the evolving partnership landscape both now and into the future.

The report provides the first in-depth look at the key facets of academic partnerships, highlighting the need for collaboration among all stakeholders to support these valuable relationships for the benefit of students and providers in an ever-changing educational landscape.

2. Introduction

Academic partnerships are agreements between two or more education partners to deliver qualifications that are more than the sum of their parts. Together, academic partners create innovative course models, deliver specialised teaching, and create inclusive environments that attract students who may not otherwise go to higher education, as well as those who come back to study later in life. They take many forms, shaped as they are by what each higher education provider has to offer, and the stakeholders they are serving – from students to industry and the communities they operate in.

This report reflects the insights of academic partners; those who award and those who teach, as well as students who learn as part of these partnerships. A culmination of two years of research – through surveys, focus groups and seeking the perspectives of experts from across the higher education landscape – the report aims to provide insights into how academic partnerships are created, managed and developed in the UK. Its intent is to offer context to those seeking to understand more about academic partnerships, as well as identifying the strengths, opportunities and risks in the most common partnership models in our current system.

Academic partnerships remain largely on the fringes of regulation across the UK. Some models are part of the regulated environment, with both partners submitting data and receiving regulatory benefits including funding from either the Office for Students (OfS) in England, or through the public funding or specific course designation for student finance systems in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, our research found many more partnerships are not directly regulated. In some models, only the awarding body is regulated, and partnerships account for a small subset of regulated provision, often rarely visible in current regulatory models. For others, the teaching delivery is not directly regulated as it attracts no funding, student finance or international student visa rights and, as such, providers are not required to submit information outside of the partnership.

Regulatory models are now changing and there is growing interest from the tertiary education sector to understand these partnerships better. This research is a response to these changes, as well as a response to concern from higher education providers that academic partnerships remain poorly understood. It is our belief that a greater insight into how partners find each other, how partnerships are managed and resourced, how risk is managed, and how partnerships end will benefit providers and regulators alike. More awareness of the practical approaches to partnerships and the shifting motivations of partners will build stronger partnerships in the future and support better policy making to deliver the outcomes students and stakeholders need.

3. 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, partnerships still form an integral if largely obscured part of the quality and standards landscape of UK higher education, with the aim 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.

4. Method

To inform the project we sought information from a number of sources, as set out below. The project also drew on the guidance of an advisory group of key sector stakeholders in addition to IHE and Pinsent Masons, including representatives from the Association of Colleges (AoC), Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Universities UK (UUK) and an independent sector representative.

- **Roundtables with teaching partners:** Initial roundtables with IHE members in relevant IHE Networks in summer 2022 to understand experiences of partnerships and refine questions for use in the teaching partners survey.
- **Teaching partner survey:** Based on advisory group feedback and roundtable discussions, a survey was launched in November 2022, running for six weeks, seeking feedback from three distinct types of teaching partners:
 1. Providers with no current partner, but who have had partnerships as the teaching partner in the past, or are looking for a partner
 2. Providers delivering teaching with between one and three partnerships
 3. Providers delivering teaching with four or more partnerships.

[Note that Further Education Colleges (FECs) did not take part in this survey.]

There were 24 responses to this survey. Around 80 questions were posed to those with between one and three partnerships as they were asked to answer for each partner separately, which provided insight into each partnership. The question bank was reduced for those with more than four partners, focused more on partnership strategies, to keep the length of survey manageable for respondents. Those with no current partners were asked only relevant questions such as those around their search for partners and future intentions.

- **Focus group with Further Education Colleges (FECs):** A focus group for FECs with higher education provision was attended by 10 different FEC providers and facilitated by AoC. Key questions from the teaching partner survey were used to inform the conversation to test where commonalities or differences occurred.
- **Awarding partner survey:** A survey of awarding partners was designed which mirrored the thematic questions of the teaching partner survey, to allow a fuller understanding of the components of the partnerships. This survey was open only to those who awarded undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications as part of an academic partnership. The survey was open from January 2024 for four weeks. There were 22 responses to this survey.
- **Student focus group:** Students were brought together twice, in June 2023 and November 2023, in a small focus group drawing on student representatives from within IHE members. Questions focused on understanding of partnerships, the reasons for studying within a provider that delivers education through a partnership, and reflections on how partnerships could best support the student experience and success.

5. Understanding the typology, shape and size of academic partnerships in the UK

Revisiting the IHE typology of partnerships

In February 2024, IHE published a working paper exploring the typology of partnerships identified through the project and the data collected on the size and shape of partners. We sought through this paper to identify the most common types of partnerships and offer insight for regulators and policy makers exploring why risk occurs differently in different partnership models. See Appendix 1 for an excerpt from this earlier publication of the common types of partnership arrangements.

Regulators across the UK place value on a single distinguishing factor for access to their regulatory model: which provider contracts with the student to collect fees and deliver academic provision. The student contract remains the single most important feature to determine what funding and finance a student can receive, and which provider is responsible for student outcomes within the partnership. Only those partners who hold the contract with students directly are eligible for regulation. OfS identifies this group as 'sub-contract' in their register, but no provider operates only on a sub-contract model within the current register.

The other broad feature is the design and delivery of the curriculum. The broad title of 'validation' has been applied to providers who own the design of their curriculum and course, and partner with an awarding body which 'validates' the programme with their award. The design of the curriculum can also be owned by the awarding body and licensed to the teaching partner through a franchise agreement.

Our surveys sought to understand which providers identified as a validation, sub-contract, franchise, joint venture or other partnership model, and how this related to the distinct variables outlined above. We asked providers to identify first their type of partnership, and then to identify who the student contracted with and who designed the curriculum and retained control of the intellectual property.

70% of the teaching partners in our survey identified themselves as in a validation partnership, but that reduced to 58% when both conditions of validation were accounted for, i.e. that they contracted directly with the student and designed the curriculum, retaining control of their intellectual property.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PARTNERS (TEACHING PARTNERS)

SELF-DECLARED PARTNERSHIP MODEL ¹	SURVEY COUNT	REVISION BASED ON DEFINITIONS
Validation	70%	58%
Sub-contract	13%	17%
A combination of both validation and sub-contract	9%	0
Joint venture	4%	4%
Teaching only	4%	4%
Franchise	0	16%

Public information on academic partnerships

As noted in our working paper, there is no single source of information on academic partnerships in the UK. Regulators like OfS, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)², and the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)³ publish lists of providers operating under a validation partnership who have access to the benefits they offer, such as student finance. In some cases, they note who the teaching and awarding body are; in others they simply note that there is a validation or sub-contract in place.

We offer the information below to provide context on the type of information available via the OfS register, which is only a starting point for details on UK partnerships.

TABLE 2: 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)

¹ The typology is outlined in our recent paper *Academic Partnerships in the UK: Working Paper on definitions and early data* <https://ihe.ac.uk/latest/publications/academic-partnerships-working-paper-definitions-and-early-data>

² <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/media/3vdnrcwd/sfw-website-list-29-05-24.pdf>

³ <https://www.saas.gov.uk/guides/private-colleges-and-training-providers>

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 Research Degree Awarding Powers (RDAPs); otherwise excluded.*

In addition to the OfS list in Table 2, course designation in Wales provides us with a further seven teaching partners operating under a validation partnership as each must hold the contract with the student to be eligible for student finance through the course designation model.

No clarity is given on the types of partnerships in any of the data published by the different regulators. For example, we know that three of the providers with course designation exclusive to the Welsh course designation list have partnerships with the awarding organisation Pearson. This model suggests the curriculum is owned by the awarding organisation, as that is Pearson’s dominant model and the student contract is held with the college as must be the case for course designation from non-publicly funded higher education providers – however, there is no clarification if this is the case.

We provide a further commentary on the challenges with published data on partnerships in our earlier working paper⁴.

Further desk-based research by IHE identified an additional 221 providers operating in either validated or franchise/sub-contract partnerships. This data was sourced from public information including through regulators in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and from provider websites where they indicated a partnership was present. Due to the limited information available, providers were classed as franchised/sub-contracted where they had access to student funding but did not appear on the relevant course designation register. All other partnerships were classed as ‘validated’.

⁴ <https://ihe.ac.uk/latest/publications/academic-partnerships-working-paper-definitions-and-early-data>

Regulating partnerships

In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland teaching and awarding providers in partnerships can be regulated under two separate models to receive the following benefits⁵:

- **Public funding:** Teaching and awarding providers eligible for public funding are regulated for the purposes of direct funding and access to student finance for eligible students on eligible courses. Providers apply to the relevant body within the devolved nation. Most providers regulated under this model complete a quality assurance process through QAA which meets the requirements for educational oversight to allow them to apply for a student sponsor licence through UKVI. FECs may meet these requirements through different processes.
- **Course designation for student finance:** Teaching providers who wish to apply for their courses to be designated for student finance, so students can access tuition fees and maintenance loans, as well as funding for disability support, childcare and similar areas. This normally also requires a quality assessment by QAA as part of the application. This assessment often meets the requirements for educational oversight to apply for a student sponsor licence through UKVI.

Teaching providers seeking to only apply for a student sponsor licence through UKVI can apply directly to QAA for educational oversight.

In England, awarding partners must be regulated by the OfS. Teaching partners can also apply to be regulated to access the following benefits⁶:

- **Designation for student finance for eligible courses and eligible students (Approved and Approved-fee cap category).**

⁵ Awarding providers must be regulated to maintain their status as awarding providers and access public funding. Providers seeking course designation for student finance can choose to apply for this form of regulation but there is no licence to operate for higher education in the UK and provision can be delivered without access to student finance if a provider does not choose to apply for regulation. For more information see: Northern Ireland:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-division>;

Wales: <https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/en/regulation/>; Scotland: (public funding) <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/our-funding/>;

(course designation) <https://www.saas.gov.uk/files/760/saas-2024-private-provider-designation-guidance-for-approved-providers-january-2024.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/>

- Public funding for teaching, capital and project-based activity (Approved-fee cap category only)
- VAT exemption (Approved-fee cap category only).
- Educational oversight to apply for a student sponsor licence through UKVI (Approved and Approved-fee cap category).

Teaching providers who are not eligible to register with the OfS may be able to obtain alternative educational oversight to apply for a student sponsor licence through UKVI^z.

6. Academic partnership overview

Through our surveys of teaching and awarding partners we were able to better understand the size and shape of academic partnerships.

Courses offered

Partners in our survey created partnerships primarily to offer specialist provision. 79% of teaching partners and 56% of awarding partners delivered specialist subject provision as part of their partnerships. The majority of awarding partners' partnership provision were degrees, with 83% offering undergraduate degrees, 67% offering foundation degrees, and 78% offering Master's degrees. 22% of awarding partners offered research degrees through partnership models. Online provision was also prominent, with 38% of teaching partners and 28% of the awarding partners surveyed delivering online learning through partnership.

TABLE 3: TYPE OF COURSE DELIVERED UNDER PARTNERSHIP (AWARDING PARTNERS)

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

^z <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-sponsor-guidance/higher-education-regulatory-reform-accessible>

Specialist subject provision (at any level of study)	10	56
Pathway course preparing students for degree level study	8	44
Certificate or Diploma of Higher Education or equivalent (FHEQ 4/5; SCQF 7-8)	7	39
Online course (at any level of study)	5	28
Research degree (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

* FHEQ – Framework for Higher Education Qualifications; SCQF – Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; RQF – Regulated Qualifications Framework

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
Multi-subject provision (at any level of study)	2	8
Accelerated degree provision	3	13
Other	5	21
Level 4/5 provision	6	25
Flexible provision (at any level of study)	8	33
Online course (at any level of study)	9	38
Specialist subject provision (at any level of study)	19	79

Students

The majority of partnerships represent small numbers of students. While there were some patterns in the survey data, approximate student numbers did not always correspond to the number of partnerships a teaching or awarding body held.

Teaching partners predominantly had only one partner (73%) and their partnership student numbers are small. 67% of all teaching partners with one partnership and 66% of those with two to three partnerships have less than 500 students.

TABLE 5: TEACHING PARTNER – PARTNERSHIP STUDENT POPULATION (APPROXIMATE NUMBERS)

NUMBER OF PARTNERSHIPS	LESS THAN 500	500-1000	1000-2500	2500+
4+				100%
2-3	66%	33%		
1	67%	19%	13%	

Our survey asked awarding partners to indicate the student numbers, within a range, of different types of partnership arrangements spanning our typology^a. The data suggests that awarding partners with lower numbers of partnerships have fewer students learning across the partners. Those with ten or more partnerships have noticeably higher numbers of students across those partnerships.

TABLE 6: AWARDING PARTNER – PARTNERSHIP STUDENT POPULATION (APPROXIMATE NUMBERS)

NUMBER OF PARTNERSHIPS	LESS THAN 500	500-1000	1001-2500	2501-5000	5001-10,000	10,000+
10+				75%	25%	
6-10				25%	75%	
1-5	38%	31%	23%		8%	

^a More detailed data is available in our working paper: <https://ihe.ac.uk/latest/publications/academic-partnerships-working-paper-definitions-and-early-data>

7. What do we know already about academic partnerships?

The aim of this project is to set out the current state of play, rather than replicate or create specific guidance on good practice. There are a number of documents in existence which can help those seeking good practice for the purposes of creating or managing academic partnerships in the UK.

*Academic partnerships – working paper on definitions and early data*⁹

As an early stage of this project, IHE released a paper with a typology of partnerships for use by providers and policy makers, as well as an exploration of the data from respondents to our surveys. The definitions used in this report are those found in the working paper.

*Piloting a streamlined approach to validation*¹⁰

In 2017, IHE worked with The Open University and QAA to recommend good principles of validation and give recommendations for a streamlined approach for the future. These included the need for clarity on processes for approval from the beginning of negotiations between parties, transparency of costs, and recommendations for supporting the role of regulation to enable intentions within the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) to open up the sector to competition.

UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2024

In June 2024, QAA published a revised version of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which includes Principle 8 - Operating partnerships with other organisations¹¹. This Principle, and supporting key practices, should guide providers in their creation and ongoing management of all partnerships for academic delivery. At the time of publication of this report, QAA is developing accompanying advice and guidance with sector colleagues which will align with this Principle of the Code.

⁹ IHE (2024) *Academic partnerships – working paper on definitions and early data*. Available from <https://ihe.ac.uk/latest/publications/academic-partnerships-working-paper-definitions-and-early-data>

¹⁰ IHE, QAA, OU (2017) *Piloting a streamlined approach to validation*. Available from <https://www5.open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships/sites/www.open.ac.uk.validation-partnerships/files/files/A-Z/Validation-report-2017-Web.pdf>

¹¹ QAA (2024) *The UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Available from <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/2024>

Delivering learning opportunities with others

OIA publishes guidance as part of their Good Practice Framework on Delivering Learning Opportunities with Others¹². This helps to outline expectations throughout the whole lifetime of a partnership when dealing with student facing processes, from the point of establishment through to the potential ending of an agreement. Case studies give examples of what the OIA would consider in different types of provision and is a useful way of considering risk management, underscoring the need for transparency for all stakeholders. For awarding partners, this will help grow understanding of how the overarching good practice principles apply in partnership contexts; for teaching partners there is practical advice throughout all stages of partnerships. Students and their advisers can also use this as a guide for what they should expect from their teaching and awarding partners.

Collaborative teaching partnerships during the pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, IHE worked with UUK and AoC to produce guidance for those operating in partnerships during this challenging period¹³. The guidance remains useful in any situation where urgent changes need to be made, focusing on transparency and communication across the breadth of areas which can be affected by unexpected, complex situations with shared responsibilities in partnerships. This is particularly useful when designing or reviewing policies, to consider whether arrangements are sufficiently robust and flexible for possible future scenarios.

¹² OIA (2024) *Good Practice Framework on Delivering Learning Opportunities with Others*. Available from <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/media/f5rdeol3/oia-gpf-delivering-learning-opportunities-with-others.pdf>

¹³ UUK, UUKi, IHE, AoC (2020) *Principles and Guidance for Collaborative Teaching Partnerships During the Pandemic*. Available from <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-09/principles-guidance-collaborative-teaching-partnerships.pdf>

C. Project findings

“Experience of both providers becomes interchangeable and you get to learn and improve as well as provide your learners with access to degree programmes within their local areas”

Teaching partner (2022 survey)

8. Why do providers create partnerships?

Early roundtables suggested that the motivations of awarding and teaching partners provided the cornerstone of initial partnership negotiations. Motivations could also shape the type of partnership, the design and delivery of the qualifications, and the long-term strategies of both partners. To understand this better, we asked both awarding partners and teaching partners for their top three reasons for creating partnerships.

For awarding partners, widening participation was the top motivator for creating partnerships, but noticeably this does not extend to non-traditional course types as a method of widening participation. 17% of respondents selected the wish to support local provision. Few selected options such as creating top-ups or Level 4/5 provision. This suggests that geography plays a larger role in shaping partnerships where widening participation is the main motivator, rather than the type of qualification or delivery model. This was also reflected by participants in the focus group with FECs and during roundtables with IHE members, who felt there were less opportunities to create partnerships for qualifications outside full degree-level including Level 4/5, modular or shorter qualifications at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Given that both sets of survey respondents also indicated that student finance and student fee revenue were also motivators, choices of qualification may also be driven more by the current funding system, which until recently incentivised partnerships for full degree-level qualifications.

TABLE 7: TOP THREE REASONS FOR CREATING PARTNERSHIPS (AWARDING PARTNERS)

REASON	PERCENT
Widening participation	25%
Increase revenue from student fees	19%
Supporting local provision	17%
Creating pathways to undergraduate or postgraduate programmes	10%
To innovate/create something new with a partner	10%
To deliver international pathway programmes with partners in the UK	6%

Teaching partners were given a slightly shorter list of options for strategically seeking partnership delivery. The following table shows the combined list of all respondents, including those seeking partnerships but without any currently in place.

TABLE 8: TOP THREE REASONS FOR CREATING PARTNERSHIPS (TEACHING PARTNERS)

REASON	PERCENT
To gain accreditation for courses/deliver degree programmes	47%
To access basic student loan funding for students	15%
To access visas for international students	11%
To innovate/create something new with a partner	11%
To deliver international pathway programmes with partners	6%

9. Concept of value in partnerships

All survey and roundtable participants were asked how they viewed their partners. There was consensus between the two sets of survey respondents that they are collaborators. Teaching partners were more likely to see their partners as critical friends, closely followed by enablers, whereas awarding partners saw their partners as innovators and enablers more than critical friends, despite innovation being equally important as a motivator for both groups when asked about motivations for creating partnerships.

This slightly contrasts with the views from the focus group with FECs, who were given the same list of words as survey respondents. The most common theme in their comments was around partners as enablers. This was followed by a relatively even split between collaborators and competitors, either dependent on the partner or reflecting the ability for a partner to be both at the same time.

TABLE 9: DESCRIPTIONS OF PARTNERS (TEACHING AND AWARDING PARTNERS)

DESCRIPTION	TEACHING PARTNERS	AWARDING PARTNERS
Collaborators	38%	45%
Critical friends	24%	13%
Enablers	20%	16%
Innovators	9%	18%
Developers	4%	8%

Survey participants were asked how they perceive the value of their partnership arrangements in a free-text field. Strong themes emerged from the comments:

Teaching partners – comments on value

- Academic credibility and quality – both from association with the awarding partner but also through the scaffolding of the quality assurance processes.
- Resources – partnerships bring greater access to physical resources and advice.
- Developmental – for course creation, and institutionally on the path to DAPs.
- Student benefit – the quality of the awarding institution providing brand assurance.
- Shared best practice – collaborating to complement skills and develop in a two-way exchange of ideas.
- Enabling concepts – the words communication and trust also came up frequently as underpinning these themes.

Awarding partners – comments on value

- Accessing higher education – the overriding consensus was that the value is for widening participation, increasing access, choice and local opportunities for students. (See Case Study: Matrix College.)
- Shared best practice – both to support small providers and FECs with higher education provision, but also to learn from each other.
- Financial value and economies of scale – some mentioned financial value, with one respondent pointing out the unexplored opportunities to strategically share services with partners.
- Transnational education (TNE) – although outside the scope of this project, the respondents noted the positive impact of international partnerships for attracting foreign investment and promoting diversity of background, context, and perspectives, particularly among students. (See Case Study: Richmond American University London.)

CASE STUDY: MATRIX COLLEGE

Matrix College of Counselling & Psychotherapy in Norfolk is a small, specialist provider of counselling training. The College offers CPD, diploma and degree programmes that equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills essential for their careers. The curriculum is designed to meet professional standards, with faculty professionals who provide mentorship and real-world experience, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to enter the workforce.

Matrix College schedules its courses with a strong emphasis on flexibility to accommodate the diverse lives of its students, who range from their late twenties to their seventies. Classes are typically offered over weekends, allowing those who are working or have other daytime commitments to attend, with small class sizes of 12 – 15 students enabling an optimal learning environment and individualised support.

The College is one of the major providers of counselling training in East Anglia. Their students deliver hundreds of voluntary counselling hours in placement as part of their training, offering a valuable service to society.

Matrix College have pursued their own registration with the Office for Students, rather than operating in a franchise model, as a reflection of their commitment to the widening participation agenda. Working with their awarding partner to award degrees has allowed the partnership to create opportunities for students in this area that would otherwise not exist.

CASE STUDY: RICHMOND AMERICAN UNIVERSITY LONDON

Richmond American University London is a small university offering dual UK and American degrees to students from around the globe, and has been operating in London for over 50 years.

With both UK and US degree awarding powers they can offer partners a diversity of experience from two of the most respected global higher education systems. Richmond's international model puts them in a unique position to partner globally, with universities and colleges as well as with industries and community groups. Their global partnerships allow UK students the rare opportunity to attend a university with study and internship abroad opportunities as part of its ethos and an international approach to its courses.

A broad range of majors and minors are offered in subjects from computer science and international sports management, to psychology and international business. Richmond offers a close-knit community with only 700 undergraduate and 200 postgraduate students, but their partnerships around the world extend their reach for staff and students, enabling a small university to thrive in a global environment.

Richmond is a bridge between the UK and US in higher education, provides degree validation to institutions in Europe, and has extended the presence of UK higher education to Tier Two and Tier Three cities in China through a unique collaboration model with private Chinese universities.

Their global community brings diversity and shared cultural experiences into the heart of their curriculum – and offers benefits beyond what they could offer in the UK.

How do students view partnerships?

It was important for this project to understand if students were particularly motivated to study in partnerships and, if so, did they share similar motivations to their academic partners. The project tested this by asking focus group participants questions around their understanding and experiences of studying in partnerships.

Students in the focus group reported the primary reason for selecting their courses was the relevance of the specialist delivery for their career goals, either through specialist subjects not offered by many providers or because of access to excellent facilities.

Some, but not all, participants were partly motivated to study at their teaching partners because the award certificate would have the name of the awarding body on their final degree. Some students discussed how the prestige of the awarding university provided a certain level of reassurance to students on their course, while others were more interested in factors such as the opportunity to work in industry alongside their studies, and were unaware of the validating partner on application. One participant appreciated the balance of being taught by current industry professionals, who may have contacts for future career opportunities, but were equally reassured by the reputation of the awarding partner for the quality of the course.

Do students purposefully choose to study in partnership arrangements?

Members of the focus group had a good understanding of the nature of the partnership arrangements once they were studying, but not before. Students noted these relationships could at times be complex, involving work placements or professional body requirements as well as those of the teaching and awarding partners. For most, this in-depth knowledge had developed through nuances of changes during their time studying, including positive experiences such as an example of an institution achieving DAPs, with students kept well informed of transition arrangements from an awarding partner. Students from this particular teaching partner noted that when the courses were re-launched under the teaching partner's own DAPs they had been improved for new students based on student feedback, through the embedded and effective student representative structures established during the validation partnership.

10. Partnership strategies for teaching partners

To understand more about approaches to strategy, teaching partners were asked questions about how many partnerships they had, the length of time they had been in partnership with each partner, and the qualification levels of courses delivered with each partner.

From the survey of teaching partners, 91% of respondents had current partnerships. Of these current partnerships, 82% have been delivering for more than five years overall and 73% have only one partner.

A single partner approach is common in providers who are focused on subject specialisms and missions around widening participation in their local area, or on prioritising the delivery of a personalised education experience for their students, often in a niche area. These providers have small student numbers, with 44% of single partner

teaching partners indicating a student range of 101 – 300¹⁴. Those who had a partner for six years or more, or two long-term partners, were more likely to have a wider portfolio of courses delivered on the FHEQ/SCQF/RQF frameworks. This indicates that most partnership numbers remain low per provider, and student numbers remain low within those partnerships, with courses expanding within existing partnerships as relationships become established. This evidence was seen both for those with validation and franchise partnerships within the teaching partners survey. It should be noted that some teaching partners with only one partnership may well be doing so in order to more readily rely on the current VAT exemption available for eligible bodies by operating as a ‘college of a university’.

PATHWAY PROVIDERS

Pathway providers deliver courses to students at the beginning or at a transition phase in their learning journeys. They offer pre-degree and/or pre-Master’s programmes and are increasingly delivering the first year of a partner’s degree programme to support students to gain the necessary academic skills and knowledge to complete a degree programme at a partner higher education provider. Their partnerships with awarding partners include articulation, franchise, and validation models.

Respondents to the teaching survey with more than three partnerships were operating pathways models, deliberately developing a strategy of numerous partnerships and being specialists in this field. All pathways respondents to the teaching partners survey had been delivering through partnerships for over five years. Pathway providers open up opportunities for students from overseas and those returning to education to gain the necessary skills, with tailored support to make their higher education experience a success.

In the focus group with FECs with higher education provision, it was apparent that FECs predominantly actively opt to have more than one partner. FECs tend to be much larger organisations than the providers who responded to the teaching partner survey,

¹⁴ IHE (February 2024) *Academic Partnerships – working paper on definitions and early data*. pp 11-12, Table 3
Available from <https://ihe.ac.uk/latest/publications/academic-partnerships-working-paper-definitions-and-early-data>

therefore better able to resource multiple partnerships, and it was evident that this is a method of managing the risk of a single partnership ending. However, the focus group also found evidence that FECs have been consolidating their portfolios more recently, reducing the overall number of partnerships. Cost is the most frequently cited exit reason. Academic partnerships can be seen as an expensive option, for example compared to alternative technical and professional higher education courses regulated by Ofqual.

While growth is important for many teaching partners that were part of roundtables, most are prioritising delivery of a niche area of specialism or the ability to provide higher education in their local area, as reflected by the single partner approach in the teaching partner survey. Their smaller scale puts them at a disadvantage in the regulatory environment, meaning that students pay much more for regulation per head than those with larger higher education provision. Demands which may appear reasonable when modelled on larger universities can become disproportionate in small settings with less available data or resource. This can affect the decisions of small providers when opting to enter the regulated space or, in the case of England, affect whether they are able to afford the resource to access the benefits associated with the Approved (fee cap) category.

For those teaching partners who have opted for a franchise relationship as their sole partnership arrangement, for some this reflects the early stage of provider development and may act as a stepping stone towards regulation, validation or DAPs as the provider develops the required processes.

CASE STUDY: ACADEMY OF LIVE TECHNOLOGY

The Academy of Live Technology (ALT), formerly Backstage Academy, was established by the owners of Production Park in Wakefield, Yorkshire, to address skills shortages in the live events industry. As industry leaders in rehearsal space for live acts, they understand the need for specialist staff across the industry, from sound engineering to stage management.

To address the skills shortages in their own workforce, as well as those who came through the performance space, they developed a range of technical qualifications with industry bodies – but students had to be able to self-fund. Working closely with the University of Bolton in a franchise model they brought these skills together into a more comprehensive degree offer, allowing students the time and funding to study towards careers across the live events industry.

Production Park were industry leaders, but not experts in higher education. The University of Bolton were able to support them through a subcontract model, applying their quality assurance, academic governance and student regulatory compliance activity to gradually build processes within ALT.

After 10 years of subcontract, ALT moved to a validation model and applied for their own registration with the Office for Students. They are now preparing to apply for their own DAPs, having taken the time to build their academic and professional higher education capacity, including a funded research centre for the live events industry.

11. Partnership strategies for awarding partners

Awarding partners were asked about the length of their experience delivering in partnerships, and how many partnership agreements they have in place, along with the qualification levels being delivered. 78% of respondents had been delivering in partnerships for more than 10 years, and 56% had between one to five partners, with only 22% having more than 10 partners. Unlike teaching partners, there is no correlation between diversity of qualification level and length of time in partnership, nor did those with lower numbers of partners indicate a limited breadth of qualification level being

delivered via the partnerships. As may be expected, those with the largest numbers of students were more likely to have the highest numbers of partnerships¹⁵.

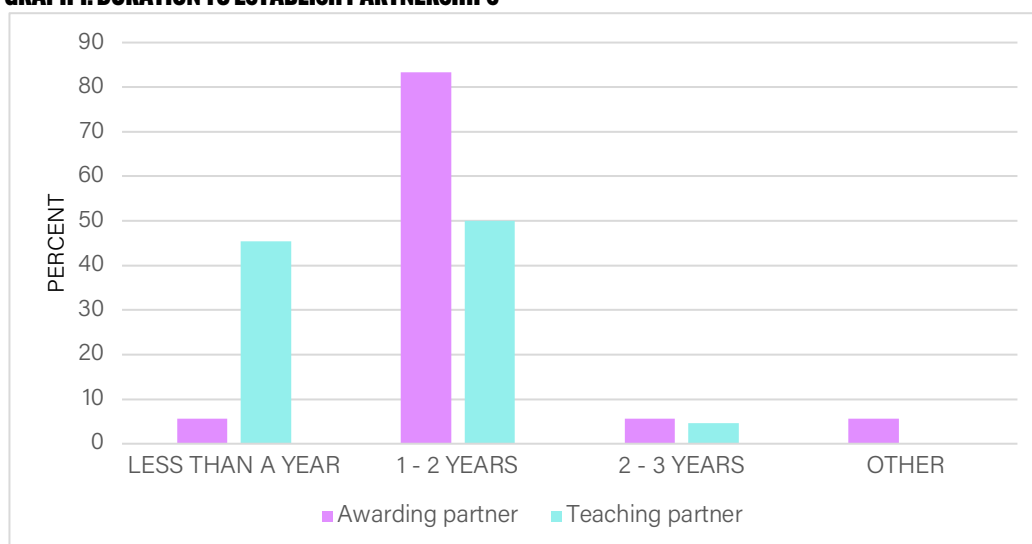
A possible link was found between the frequency of partnerships strategy review and motivation for partnership creation. When cross-referencing awarding partners that strategically review their partnerships every year, all of those with an annual review selected increased revenue from student fees as one of the top three priorities for partnership delivery. From those reviewing strategies every four to five years, only 40% of providers listed increased revenue from student fees as an aim.

12. How do providers find partners?

We sought to understand how partnerships were formed, including how teaching and awarding partners initiated discussions, at what strategic level, and how long the process took before students could be recruited. We asked both awarding and teaching partners questions about why they partnered and what challenges they experienced.

Both surveys asked how long it ordinarily takes to create a new partnership, from establishing contact to initial approach to enrolling the first students. For both parties, there was a consensus that the standard time is between one to two years, though teaching partners almost as frequently found it took less than a year.

GRAPH 1: DURATION TO ESTABLISH PARTNERSHIPS



¹⁵ IHE (February 2024) *Academic Partnerships – working paper on definitions and early data*. pp 11-12, Table 3. Available from <https://ihe.ac.uk/latest/publications/academic-partnerships-working-paper-definitions-and-early-data>

89% of awarding partners had a central point for potential partners to approach, which may include an open call for specific types of courses and/or guidance on the processes involved. 39% had individual departments or faculties as a possible route for the first point of contact, but where this was the case most were using dual systems with centralised processes and opportunity for contact through other routes too.

Teaching partners were also asked whether they found the overall experience of identifying a partner difficult. 42% responded it was either very or somewhat difficult, 37% found it somewhat easy and 21% that it was very easy. We asked the teaching partners to tell us more about the difficulties they experienced as part of that search for a partner. The most frequently cited difficulty is finding a partner without competition concerns, followed by prohibitive costs. FECs similarly cited competition concerns as one of their challenges with partnership creation during the focus group discussion, along with a lack of understanding of the type of qualifications they wanted to establish.

TABLE 10: CHALLENGES IN THE SEARCH FOR A PARTNER (TEACHING PARTNERS)

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR SEARCH FOR A PARTNER?	PERCENTAGE
Competition concerns from partner	21%
Cost of partnership did not make the arrangement financially viable	16%
Difficulties or delays due to inexperience of the awarding partner in establishing partnerships	13%
Lack of clarity on how to apply or who to contact to establish a partnership	11%
Undue delays in the partnership process	11%
Difficulty identifying partners in my subject area/overall	11%

A partnership matching service?

To explore methods of facilitating transparent partnership creation across the sector, survey respondents were asked whether they would be interested in being part of a directory (updated regularly) of those who are open to new partnerships. This was a recommendation in the 2017 report *Piloting a streamlined approach to validation*¹⁶. The majority of respondents were interested in being part of a directory of this nature.

¹⁶ IHE, QAA, OU (2017) *Piloting a streamlined approach to validation*. Available from

<https://www5.open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships/sites/www.open.ac.uk.validation-partnerships/files/files/A-Z/Validation-report-2017-Web.pdf>

TABLE 11: INTEREST IN JOINING A PARTNERSHIPS DIRECTORY

RESPONSE	AWARDING PARTNER	TEACHING PARTNER
Yes - interested in joining a directory	61%	86%
Unsure	28%	0%
No	11%	14%

13. Contracts

To understand the types of contractual arrangements governing relationships, our surveys included questions on the length of partnerships and whether any restrictions were imposed as part of these.

The length of contracts show that there is stability in the relationships. All of the awarding partner respondents and 75% of teaching partners had contract lengths of three to six years.

45% of teaching partners have minimum student numbers in the contract, and 20% have maximum student numbers.

Teaching partners, on the whole, did not need to seek permission of the awarding partner before establishing new partnership contracts either by course or subject, or with a new partner. Where this did occur (21%), it seemed more likely to affect pathway providers. This finding was mirrored in the awarding partner survey, with 89% of respondents stating they did not contractually restrict their partners from forming other partnerships in any way. For those that did, the student numbers in their partnership arrangements were low and they had between one to five partnerships. It is possible that the smaller awarding partners see these restrictions as part of risk management.

14. Fees and finances

Within the free text of the surveys, and from the roundtables with teaching partners, it was clear that there is a strong desire for more transparency around the fees and costs of partnerships.

In teaching partner roundtables, there was a view that the awarding partner would retain a higher proportion of the student tuition fee if there were more services the student could access. In testing this assumption through both surveys there was no strong correlation between the fee paid and student access to services. This is explored further below.

For teaching partners with between one and three partners, an extensive set of questions was posed around fees, asking for responses per partner. These questions

were not mandatory within the survey; responses received show extreme variations in fees paid, and models of fee structures. For awarding partners, we mirrored some of the key questions to better understand their strategic decisions and create a rounded view of the fees landscape.

Annual fees

32% of partnerships had an institutional partnership fee to pay per annum. These range from flat fees of £5,000, to 12% of fee income, to £80,000. Only one of these providers has more than 300 students, indicating that the annual fee has no link to size.

68% of partnerships had a per student fee. Of these, 40% were paid as a percentage of the student fee, ranging from 15–30% of tuition fees. For those in franchise partnerships this is slightly higher, with 20–30% of fees being retained by the awarding partner and the rest paid to the teaching partner.

Within the survey, 18% of respondents with current partners had been delivering within partnership arrangements for up to five years. 75% of these are represented in the student fee percentage cited above; those delivering for longer within partnerships are more likely to be using different payment terms. There is a small correlation between newer partnership relationships and the use of a percentage of tuition fees as the contractual mechanism for setting fees.

For others paying a fee per student, this varied from flat fees of £500 per student to £1,200, including where it was calculated per credit, or varied per programme. All of these represent less expensive models for the teaching partner than the percentage fees listed above. All of these providers have been delivering for more than five years.

The survey found it was rare for providers to pay an annual fee, and a fee per student. Where this did happen, the annual flat fee is on average £5,000 but the fee per student varies significantly – from £600 per student to 22.5% of the tuition fee.

Changing fees

Teaching partners were asked whether they required consent to change the tuition fees they charge. 30% of respondents confirmed that they do require the consent of the awarding partner to change their tuition fees.

When teaching partners were asked whether their contractual fees with awarding partners had changed over the last three years, 57% responded that they had stayed the same, and 39% responded that they had increased. It should be noted that the standard contract length is three to five years, therefore the data was checked to see whether this may be an indication that many partnerships are mid-contract, or whether the 57% of respondents with unchanged fees indicated stability. For those who have their partnerships reviewed annually, or every two to three years, 43% had a fee

increase in the last three years, and 57% had remained the same. Overall though, respondents who indicated an increase are predominantly those with fees per student in the region of £500 - £850.

When awarding partners were asked whether the fees charged to partners had changed in the past three years, 33% responded that they had stayed the same, 39% do not have a standard approach, and 28% had increased.

Adaptations based on numbers

When asked if partnership fees are adapted based on student intake, most who responded to the question (68% of teaching partners) stated that the fee remained the same regardless of student numbers, and 26% stated that the overall cost is lower on a per student basis when there are greater student numbers.

When awarding partners were asked whether there were minimum student numbers in their contracts, 33% included this as standard and 56% did not have a standard model. No awarding partners that responded to the survey set maximum student numbers in their contracts.

There is a notable difference in approach from respondents to the teaching partner survey, where maximum student numbers are sometimes present in the contract, and the respondents to the awarding partner survey that did not use this mechanism. The project advisory group is aware that some awarding partners do set maximum numbers of students for reasons such as:

- Ensuring quality, which could be damaged by rapid growth in numbers.
- Keeping numbers in line with growth forecasts provided to regulators.
- Manage the potential introduction of student number controls, which had been subject to consultation by the Department for Education (DfE), by limiting partner numbers rather than their own.

Additional costs in academic partnerships

Survey respondents listed a variety of additional costs which can be incurred for services provided by the awarding partner. Most common was validation (and revalidation) events, institutional review processes, external examiner fees, or training of staff. Validation and review costs were listed in the region of £5,000 - £7,000. Less common were costs introduced for progression boards, student registration cards, attendance of awarding partner staff at graduation ceremonies, and a separate Service Level Agreement (SLA) for use of a partner's premises for teaching.

Example fee structures

■ Institution A

Does not pay a fee per annum for their institutional contract. There is a fee per student of 30% of the tuition fee income; this is the same regardless of year of study. The percentage tuition fee threshold applies regardless of how many students the provider recruits. There is a minimum student number requirement in the contract. The contractual partnership fee has not changed over the past three years. To change the fee charged to students, the provider must seek permission of the awarding partner.

This is a franchise partnership. Institution B has no other partners and has been delivering under partnership arrangements for between three to five years.

■ Institution B

Pays £500 per student instead of a fixed institutional fee or a tuition fee percentage. There is a minimum student number requirement in the contract. There is a minimum threshold that must be paid regardless of how many students are recruited, and the £500 fee applies per student beyond that threshold. During the last three years, contractual partnership costs have increased. Additional costs include external examiner fees and validation fees for new programmes. The provider can charge their students a different level of tuition fee without seeking permission from the awarding partner.

This is a validated partnership. Institution C also has a franchise partnership; there is a fee per student of 20% of the tuition fee income; there are no minimum or maximum number requirements. The provider can charge their students a different level of tuition fee without seeking permission from the awarding partner. The contractual partnership fee has stayed the same over the last three years. Institution C has been delivering under partnership arrangements for more than five years.

■ Institution C

Pays a fixed amount for their institutional contract of £80,000 per annum. There is no per student fee in addition to this, and student numbers do not affect the amount payable per annum; there are no minimum or maximum student numbers in the contract. The contractual partnership fee has not changed over the past three years. The provider can charge their students a different level of tuition fee without seeking permission from the awarding partner.

This is a validated partnership. Institution A has no other partners and has been delivering under partnership arrangements for less than three years.

Teaching partners with four or more partnerships

Those with four or more partners were asked slightly different questions about their fees. There had been either no change, or no clear change, to the fees they were being charged in the last three years. There was no standard approach for contracts to dictate whether minimum or maximum student number clauses applied; none of the respondents selected the option to say that minimum or maximum student number clauses never applied.

FECs feedback on fees

FECs are aware that awarding partners are charging different partners varying amounts and feel there is no relation between fees paid and students' access to partner resources.

The models of fee structure described by the FECs were the same as those outlined by the teaching partners in the survey, with fees per programme, or per student, or a combination. Distance from the partner – and therefore feasibility of access to physical resources for students – did not make a difference to setting of the fee.

15. Managing quality and risk

The main focus of all partnerships is managing the quality of provision and the experience of students. Our focus groups indicated there were a number of ways that both teaching and awarding partners managed this process.

As part of the research into methods for assuring quality and standards within partnerships, we asked a range of questions of teaching and awarding partners regarding oversight of academic quality to understand more about where responsibility lay.

Teaching partners were asked who had responsibility for a number of different areas, as indicated in the table below.

TABLE 12: RESPONSIBILITY FOR QUALITY AS INDICATED BY TEACHING PARTNER (TEACHING PARTNER SURVEY)

AREA OF PROVISION	AWARDING PARTNER	TEACHING PARTNER	BOTH
Setting of assessment regulations	61%	30%	9%
Appointing external examiners	48%	22%	30%
Assessment boards & conferring marks	39%	30%	30%
Final say on admissions decisions	35%	57%	9%

Final approval of marketing materials	35%	48%	17%
Setting admissions regulations	30%	43%	26%
Setting summative assessments	13%	83%	4%
Carrying out marking	0%	96%	4%

Managing academic quality

Through initial roundtable discussions with IHE members, it was clear that a variety of methods are used to monitor quality and risk within partnerships, and that these can change as providers develop to reflect their growing expertise in these areas. Both surveys sought details on the prevalence of monitoring methods between the two groups of provider types, with results aligning between the two surveys. These are combined below indicating the involvement of awarding partner to give an overview.

TABLE 13: MONITORING QUALITY (ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS)

METHOD OF MONITORING ACADEMIC QUALITY	PERCENTAGE
Attendance at exam board	19%
External examiners processes owned by the awarding body	17%
Regular validation exercises	16%
Approving new staff	11%
Attendance at teaching/learning committee	10%
Audit rights/on spot checks	9%
Sign off of RPL in admissions	9%
Interviews with students	7%

The most common types of monitoring are attendance at exam boards, with all respondents selecting this option, closely followed by external examiner processes and regular validation exercises. For teaching partners, named partnership managers and invitations to learning and teaching conferences were also prevalent. There was no difference in approach for those teaching partners in franchise partnerships. When looking at partnerships in the teaching partner survey which have been in existence for six years or more, there were consistently fewer methods of monitoring quality selected by respondents than those in newer partnerships. Almost half of awarding partners (47%) indicated that they apply a developmental approach, changing monitoring mechanisms based on the maturity of the partnership.

Awarding and teaching partners were asked, as a free text question, whether there were additional support structures to help develop teaching partners' capacity for delivering high quality provision.

The themes which emerged were broadly as follows, and mirrored by both sets of respondents:

- Development opportunities – staff development, such as postgraduate certificates and Fellowship (FHEA), partnership conferences, and seminar series.
- Collaborative academic management – help with preparing for external review and OfS registration, moderation support.
- Governance and oversight – programme management arrangements, annual monitoring and feedback (including as part of internal awarding body quality committee oversight processes), moderation, exam board and other policy/process training, approval of changes mid-validation cycle, sharing of minutes from key committees.
- Communication and relationship building – named contacts, periodic meetings with partner representatives, link tutors.

Regulation of partnerships

Each UK devolved nation has their own regulatory models for providers delivering in partnership with others. Across all four nations, students studying under sub-contract or franchise agreements, where the student is registered/has their contract with the awarding body, are included in the awarding body's regulation. Those teaching partners with validation partnerships are required to join the regulatory model where they are based to access any of the benefits for themselves or students.

In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, teaching partners with validation partnerships can apply to the funding body for the nation where they are based to receive specific designation for their course. This allows students to access student finance relevant to their course and provider, with most nations offering students a student finance package specific to the designation process. There are no clear routes in any of these three regulatory environments to access direct teaching grant funding. In England, the OfS offers a pathway to any provider who can meet regulatory requirements to access student finance with a lower loan limit, or public grant funding with a higher loan limit and fee cap.

Barriers to registering with the OfS as a franchised provider

The Committee of Public Accounts report on loans to franchised higher education providers identified that around two thirds of franchised providers in England were not registered with the OfS and has made the recommendation that the DfE should consider requiring this of all franchise partners¹⁷. Our research identified a number of challenges for providers under sub-contract or in franchise models should registration with OfS be required¹⁸.

No appropriate registration category

The current OfS register is not designed for a franchise model, and consideration would need to be given to how to relate conditions of initial and ongoing registration to be proportionate to these providers. Alternatively, an additional category of registration would be required. For instance, it is an initial condition of registration for providers to be able to demonstrate compliance with conditions B7 and B8. Within a franchise agreement, the qualification is designed and owned by the awarding partner, and responsibility for curriculum design belongs to the awarding partner. OfS conditions B7 and B8 are not designed for providers operating solely under franchise agreements as they do not have control over quality and standards, which remain under the control of the awarding body.

Timelines and related costs

Consideration would need to be given to business planning for any delay in registration. The Committee of Public Accounts noted that in 2021/22, 229 (65%) of the 355 franchised providers were not registered with OfS. Members of roundtables have noted that operating in the gap between application to the OfS and confirmation of an outcome put considerable strain on business operations because of the inability to plan and publicise courses. The timelines reported for preparations to register are indicatively as follows:

1. Renegotiation of contracts with partners to clarify responsibilities for delivery, e.g. to change some of their arrangements from sub-contract to validation: average time nine months.
2. Concurrently, preparation for application to the OfS: three to six months, in advance

¹⁷ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (April 2024) *Student loans issued to those studying at franchised higher education providers*. Available from <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44377/documents/220669/default/>

¹⁸ The regulatory models in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland do not permit providers who operate solely under sub-contract or franchise models to apply for regulation as these students are all covered under the regulation of the awarding partner.

of submission through internal governance structures for approval.

3. Application to OfS: average turnaround time is anecdotally 18 months, exceeding the published timelines.

If registration were to become a requirement, there is anecdotal evidence that some franchise providers would not register in a new category were one to become available. Instead, they would opt for Approved or Approved (fee cap) as they are in the process of preparing to apply in the short to medium term already. The OfS would need the resource to process the more complex type of application to register alongside those who will continue to operate in a franchise model.

Conflict with UKVI guidance

A small, but well-established, group of franchised providers operate as 'sites' of universities for the purposes of UKVI student sponsor licences¹⁹. These teaching partners are subject to intense oversight by the awarding partner, who must comply with strict UKVI requirements. There is low risk from such partnerships from a UKVI compliance perspective as the student application process is monitored by UKVI, alongside the student completion data. Teaching and awarding partners in these partnerships report conflicting guidance between UKVI and OfS on governance models for sites and partnerships, resulting in delays to OfS registration. UKVI rules state that a parent company must hold the licence for all centres regardless of their partnership model or location. This links with the requirement for control over all aspects of delivery. OfS considers sites and centres of the parent company eligible to register individually where they can meet the governance requirements and provided the parent company does not register as a provider. This poses two main challenges:

1. Parent companies or awarding partners with different centres In the UK nations have been asked to register only the English centres/provision with OfS. Adding other centres outside of England, but within the UK, may make the provider ineligible as 50% of the provider's 'activity' must be in England. This then requires separate regulatory conditions for separate centres under the same licence.

2. UKVI has required some teaching partners to hold a student sponsor licence they may not use, as the awarding partner must sponsor the student. Without direct students, and with the level of control required of the awarding partners by UKVI, some

¹⁹ Home Office (October 2023) *Student Sponsor Guidance Document 1: Applying for a Student sponsor licence*. Available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652670aa244f8e00138e73df/Student_Sponsor_Guidance_-_Doc_1_-_Applying_for_a_licence_October_2023_FINAL.pdf

teaching partners have struggled to meet the OfS regulatory conditions as they cannot control decisions on quality, doing so more in principle than practice. This is particularly complex where the awarding partner is in a UK nation under separate regulatory conditions, such as those delivering a 'London campus' of a Scottish university for example.

16. Registration and data

It is apparent that the registration of students is a component of identifying the type of partnership definition. It should therefore follow that those registering students would also return the data. In cases where a teaching partner does not collect their own data – for example in a sub-contract or franchise relationship – our surveys aimed to understand the availability of data for teaching partners via their awarding partner for purposes of quality management and transparency at key stages in the student journey.

Data access and sharing

For teaching partners with between one and three partnerships, a set of questions were included to understand more around ownership of the student contract and for managing data sharing. These questions were not compulsory, but most respondents replied, including those with more than one partnership.

TABLE 14: DATA (TEACHING PARTNERS)

	YOU	PARTNER	BOTH	NEITHER
<i>Whose terms and conditions does the student agree to on enrolment?</i>	58%	21%	21%	
<i>Which partner returns your student data to HESA?</i>	50%	38%		13%

Of the 38% of awarding partners responsible for returning student data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), most (78%) responded 'unsure' when asked whether there is a data sharing arrangement allowing the teaching partner to meet regulatory requirements for student outcomes.

Teaching partners were also asked whether their awarding partners collect any information directly from students, i.e. enrolment or awarding data. 13% were 'unsure', 52% selected 'no' and 35% selected 'yes'.

There were instances of the student contract being held by the teaching partner, and data returns being undertaken by the teaching partner, with data collected directly from

students by awarding partners with no mention of data sharing agreements being in place.

The responses to this question highlights variations in approaches to the collection of student data, the return of this data for regulatory purposes, and the sharing of data between providers. There also seems to be a lack of clarity between which partners need which data to support student experience and success, and how the agreements can deliver to these aims.

For teaching partners with four or more partnerships, who were asked a different set of questions, all respondents selected 'yes' when asked if a data sharing arrangement is a standard clause in their partnership contracts. In the survey of awarding partners, a single question on data was asked as the question bank was not as extensive. The responses showed that the majority (74%) have a data sharing agreement as a standard clause in partnership contracts and that 11% do not. A further 11% were unsure of whether such a clause is in place.

There appears to be a lack of alignment between teaching and awarding partners' understanding of data sharing arrangements, which will cause complexity in reporting requirements and the ability to interrogate metrics to support student progression.

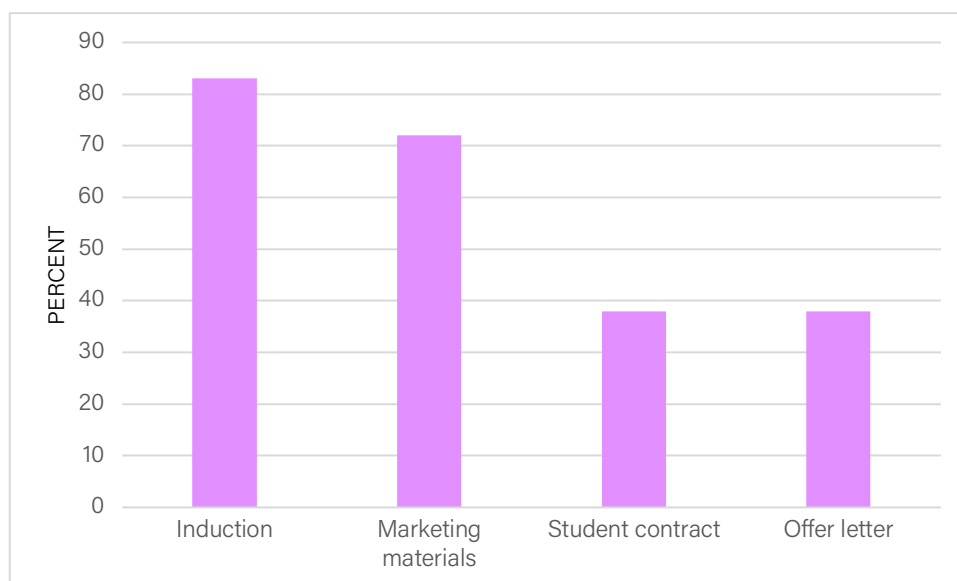
17. Student services

It is important for students to understand when they are studying as part of an academic partnership. This is reflected throughout all the existing guidance on partnership arrangements and is also part of Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) requirements. The project examined existing arrangements to understand how this operates in practice.

Transparency of arrangements and access to facilities

Teaching partners were asked how, in general terms, partnership arrangements are explained to applicants and students, including the responsibilities of each provider. 65% of respondents listed three of the suggested options shown below; some respondents did not select any of these methods.

GRAPH 2: TEACHING PARTNERS' METHODS OF EXPLAINING PARTNERSHIPS TO APPLICANTS



For the vast majority of teaching partners, their partnership agreements do not have complete access to their partners' student-facing services as though their students were a full student of the awarding partner. This was the case for all types of partnership, including those in franchise arrangements where the awarding partner remains responsible for the student contract.

The most common type of service accessed by teaching partners was graduation events, at 79%, followed by library resources, with 57% selecting digital library access and another 57% indicating physical library access. Although there was some overlap in respondents, not all those teaching partners whose students accessed library services had both types of library access included in their contract. Student Union (SU) membership (42%) and access to Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) (36%) were available in just under half of the academic partnerships. Work placements and careers were either not selected or insignificant in the findings, perhaps reflecting the very specialist nature of the courses and provision in partnership arrangements which requires tailored support from the teaching partner. (See Case Study: Academy of Contemporary Music.)

Students in the focus group did not report accessing the facilities of the awarding partners, though one participant noted anecdotal evidence that peers had done so in the past. It had also been the case that staff from the awarding partner would deliver some course content as guest lecturers.

CASE STUDY: ACADEMY OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC (ACM)

The Academy of Contemporary Music (ACM) enhances student engagement with the music industry through a unique partnership with its sister company Metropolis Studios, one of the world's most prestigious recording facilities. Through this collaboration, ACM students gain unique access to a professional environment where numerous iconic artists have, and continue to, record. This exposure allows students to observe and participate in high-level production processes, providing an invaluable, hands-on learning experience that bridges the gap between academic study and industry practice.

In addition to the direct experience at Metropolis Studios, ACM incorporates industry-led sessions within its curriculum, featuring masterclasses and workshops conducted by top industry professionals across their three campuses. These sessions offer students insights into the latest industry trends, techniques, and careers advice from experts who are at the forefront of the music business. This direct mentorship from professionals helps students build a strong foundation and network within the industry, enhancing their readiness for careers post-graduation.

ACM's strategic connections with industry facilitate real-world opportunities, such as internships and collaborative projects. Students often have the chance to work on actual recording sessions and live events, gaining practical experience that is crucial for their professional development. These opportunities allow students to showcase their skills, learn from seasoned professionals, and establish meaningful industry connections, making them more competitive in the job market upon completing their studies.

These deeply embedded industry connections would not be available through the awarding partner and show the strength of a deliberate approach to collaborative agreements that recognise where the value for students lies in each partner.

18. Student complaints and appeals

Our research sought to better understand the way academic partnerships managed complaints and academic appeals, from the initial informal process to who took responsibility for closing the procedure for both partners.

From the survey responses, it is apparent that there are no strong trends in the way partners manage academic appeals, although initial complaints are almost always made to the teaching partner regardless of type of partnership. From focus groups and our advisory group it is clear that it is part of the contractual agreement process to determine which partner is responsible for academic and non-academic complaints, with reference to sector practice and OIA guidance.

The surveys showed the most common trend is for teaching partners to carry out investigations for both academic and non-academic complaints; in most cases students were able to then appeal to the awarding partners, particularly for academic matters. The second most common trend was for awarding partners to carry out the investigation or for teaching partners to use the awarding partner's processes to manage all complaints, although this was less common. Completion of Procedures (CoP) Letters could be issued by either partner and there was not always correlation between the partner who managed the complaint or appeal stages, and the party issuing the CoP Letter allowing the student to take their complaint to the OIA.

Half of awarding partners require an annual report of complaints and appeals made to the teaching partner, regardless of their complaints handling model. There was no correlation between requirements for reports on complaints and appeals and other forms of quality monitoring mechanisms identified within the survey, such as quarterly reports or joint academic governance boards, where such details are likely to be considered.

Where would students go if they had a concern?

We asked the participants in our student focus group what they would do if they had any concerns during their course, and who they would turn to. Students do not think of the awarding body as the first port of call – it is not who they associate themselves or their studies with on a daily basis. Where issues do arise, there is not necessarily a clear route for students to raise concerns with a contact at the awarding partner; students have found themselves in situations where they do not know who to contact which was different to not knowing which organisation is responsible.

Students noted that a disconnect between the regulations set by the awarding partner and their interpretation by teaching partner staff resulted in increased risk for students, and the need for students to navigate between the two providers to mitigate that risk was stressful. This in itself could cause more complaints.

Students suggested partners should each have a named contact, who would take ownership of handling cases and help remove the stress of needing to navigate unfamiliar university structures. This is even more important for international students, who found additional barriers to navigating these issues.

19. When partnerships end or change

As referenced in OIA good practice²⁰, partnerships may change for a variety of reasons. Beyond ending a partnership, other types of change include when providers achieve their own DAPs. In an IHE survey of members and other independent providers of higher education conducted pre-pandemic, provider intentions showed an increase in plans to pursue DAPs. Regulatory changes in England have changed provider intentions, creating the perception of greater access to DAPs through the New Degree Awarding Powers (NDAPs) process for those without a track record of higher education provision through validation partnerships²¹.

From feedback in the roundtables with teaching partners, franchise partnerships can contractually be difficult to change whilst allowing continuity for students, as ownership of the student contract and curriculum design are both with the awarding partner. Sub-contract partnerships, where the curriculum and content could be owned by the teaching partner, potentially allow greater flexibility for transferring the contract without closing the programme or changing it significantly.

Providers may decide to move from one type of partnership arrangement to another:

- An existing partnership with validation for postgraduate students changes to add sub-contract arrangements for undergraduate students to enable access to student finance.
- An existing partnership with franchise courses is amended to a validation partnership as a long-term partnership develops. (See Case Study: Academy of Live Technology.)
- A teaching partner applying for DAPs may seek to move to a partnership to deliver research degrees to better support their development and/or application for RDAPs in future.

²⁰ OIA (2024) *Good Practice Framework on Delivering Learning Opportunities with Others*. pp 28-30 Available from <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/media/f5rdeol3/oia-gpf-delivering-learning-opportunities-with-others.pdf>

²¹ Office for Students (2022) *Degree Awarding Powers*. Accessible at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/degree-awarding-powers/>

Through the project surveys, we sought to understand the most prevalent reasons for partnerships changing or ending. The most common reason for both teaching and awarding partners was a change in strategic direction at the awarding partner (39% and 24%, respectively).

For teaching partners, the second and third most common reasons were changes in senior leadership at the awarding/funding partner, and institutional decisions of the awarding partner being at odds with their own vision and mission (both selected by 17% of respondents).

For awarding partners, the second and third most common reasons were partners gaining their own DAPs, and concerns over quality (both selected by 18% of respondents).

Feedback received during roundtables and focus groups also made it clear that changes in strategic direction were the most common reason for partnerships ending; many FECs manage this risk by having multiple partnerships to allow students to complete their route to their intended outcome which may take place over multiple qualifications.

Teaching partners and FECs confirmed that teach-out clauses were a mandatory part of any contract, and largely worked in practice. However, a number of concerns with the teach-out model were noted:

- Teach-out primarily focused on the qualification the student was undertaking, not the overall student journey. This left students who had planned to undertake a pathway programme and then a degree, or those undertaking a foundation degree and continuing to a top-up, unable to complete their programme with that partner. This was a particular concern for FECs, who may be the only higher education provider of these flexible models in a given locality.
- Partnerships were often terminated with little notice and courses could become unviable if new cohorts could not be recruited. It would become difficult to retain staff to teach if there was not another partner able to step in. Facility maintenance could also become an issue.

Survey data revealed that 74% of teaching partners had their own student protection plan and 37% were aware that details of their partnerships were covered by the student protection plan of the awarding partner. Within these plans, teaching partners expressed concern there still will not be sufficient scope to deal with the nuances of partnerships changing as they focus primarily on partnerships ending.

20. Future plans

Our research suggests strongly that partnerships are ever evolving and the appetite for new partners is difficult to predict. We asked both awarding partners and teaching partners what their plans were for academic partnerships in the future.

New partnerships and programmes

Awarding partners were asked whether they are looking for new partners and what type of course they are seeking to deliver in the future. Only 10% of respondents were not looking for new partners. Most (75%) were open to new approaches and 15% were actively looking. The types of future courses reflect the courses currently delivered through partnership arrangements, as identified in Table 3 above, with no change in the top four in the list. Table 15 indicates the intentions of awarding partners for delivery of government-supported Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) via partnerships. This is not a current priority area of future partnership course provision. This was reflected during the focus group with FECs who indicated that awarding partners were not prioritising the development of HTQs or other qualifications below Level 6.

TABLE 15: POSSIBLE FUTURE COURSES (AWARDING PARTNERS)²²

TYPE OF COURSES AWARDED/DELIVERED IN FUTURE*	PERCENT
Undergraduate degree (FHEQ 6; SCQF 9/10)	17%
Master's degree (FHEQ 7; SCQF 11)	15%
Specialist subject provision (at any level of study)	13%
Foundation degree (FHEQ 5; SCQF 8)	13%
Pathway courses preparing students for degree level study	8%
Certificate or Diploma of Higher Education or equivalent (FHEQ 4/5; SCQF 7/8)	8%
Online course (at any level of study)	7%
Short courses	5%
Flexible provision (at any level of study)	5%
Higher Technical Qualification	5%

* FHEQ – Framework for Higher Education Qualifications; SCQF – Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; RQF – Regulated Qualifications Framework

²² https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/the-frameworks-for-higher-education-qualifications-of-uk-degree-awarding-bodies-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=3562b281_11

Awarding partners were also asked whether they are planning on strategically reducing the number of partners they work with during the next five years. 72% of respondents were not planning to do so, with only 6% strategically planning a reduction, and the other 22% were unsure.

When teaching partners were asked about their plans for the next five years, 57% were not looking for new partnerships, and 14% were unsure. 29% were looking for new partners and all selected the same two reasons for changes in partners: to expand course offer and expand student numbers.

Overall, these were also the most commonly selected reasons for planned changes to existing partnerships, with 48% and 38% selecting these options respectively. In addition, termination of a partnership was selected by 24% of respondents.

Regulatory impact on partnership working

The teaching partner survey asked whether the partnership environment has changed since the HERA and the creation of the OfS, and sought comments (via a free text response) on the impact of that change.

38% of respondents did not feel changes to the regulatory environment had changed the partnership environment. Most still felt their relationships with partners remained positive, despite the new requirements for a data-led approach to quality. Both teaching partners and awarding partners approved of the concept of mutual accountability and the benefit of this to students.

For those who had identified impact from regulatory changes, this may have affected partnerships themselves, or the ability to operate under the regulatory requirements of the OfS more generally, thus putting pressure on provision overall. Heightened scrutiny and a perception of risk can make it difficult to enter into partnerships, innovate, and for new entrants to gain a toehold. For teaching partners responding to the survey, this included scrutiny of B3 metrics, though FECs reported during the focus group that they had yet to see specific examples of B3 impacting on their partnerships.

The positive addition of New Degree Awarding Powers (NDAPs) and changes to the processes around Teaching Awarding Powers (TDAPs) as an alternative to validation, made possible by HERA, were raised. Some teaching partners are using the support of their partners to prepare applications for DAPs, as evidenced by their responses to questions on perceived value in partnerships, and from focus groups held with IHE members. This could become an emerging area for planned partnership exit, and strategic review of partnerships should plan and facilitate this. A lack of understanding by OfS of small/specialist providers and their requirements was cited by respondents, and this may serve to slow down a future scenario of planned partnership exit with delays to DAPs applications being reported by roundtable participants.

During roundtables, teaching partners demonstrated an awareness that opportunities for further partnerships could come from changes brought about by the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE). For those with modular delivery, flexible programme structures and existing courses below Level 6 on the FHEQ (or equivalent), they hoped that the LLE would make these programmes more desirable to awarding partners, although they raised concerns that the regulatory process as it was currently modelled was not equipped to understand the profile of these students and the programmes they study. This was also true for FECs, with routes to higher education qualifications below full degree which would be 'stackable' into larger qualifications. Both groups reported concerns that approval processes with awarding partners for qualifications were not yet ready to support the extent of flexibility needed to take full advantage of LLE opportunities.

Awarding partners were asked whether the implementation of HERA, the creation of the OfS, and the implementation of the new B conditions changed the way they work with partners. 29% of awarding partners responded to this free text question either implying that they did not see any change, or with neutral responses. 71% felt there had been change to some extent in approach to partnership working due to regulatory pressures, either explicitly referring to B3 data, or to a focus on metrics and outcomes as part of governance and monitoring. Some responses refer to a need to develop processes that are risk-based. One Welsh institution commented on the increasing complexity of operating across UK nations:

“...working with providers in the other UK nations has become slightly more complicated due to the separate and different structures operating in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland therefore additional issues need consideration when developing 'cross-border' partnerships. It also complicates the messages of 'UK' quality and provision when working with overseas providers”

Awarding partner (2024 survey)

Awarding partners were also asked if they would create new partnerships, expand existing partnerships, or change how they manage risk in partnerships to take advantage of more flexible course funding under the LLE.

18% of respondents did not plan any change, and 47% were unsure, often stating that LLE itself is still too uncertain to be sure. 35% planned to make changes, including by building on existing partnerships and through new relationships or routes yet to be determined. It was notable though that most of those declaring positive intentions to take advantage of LLE were as yet unclear how to do so.

The future of academic partnerships

All survey respondents were asked what needed to change as the project sought to establish what would facilitate partnerships to thrive in the future.

The comments in the survey from awarding partners strongly advocated the importance of partnerships for both the institutional missions and the sector as a whole. There was a desire for more coherent terminology on definitions of the types of partnerships, and a call for regulatory oversight. One survey participant noted the higher education focus of the survey, offering feedback that it was not sufficient for capturing FEC views on HE in FE as a critical component of academic partnerships, suggesting more work could explore this particular aspect of the partnership environment.

The teaching partners were positive about their relationships with awarding partners, and support received. However, when asked about the future, there were themes in the comments around the need for change. Most notably, there was a call for greater transparency around fees. Additionally, respondents felt there should be the ability to celebrate good practice – and define what that is – to show the value to the sector of positive collaborative partnerships. More support for staff training, access to data, and access to resources for students were mentioned. The OfS was referenced as needing to do more to clarify the specific responsibilities of awarding and teaching partners in the regulatory environment.

One respondent mentioned that they would like to see a more flexible mindset from awarding partners, for the benefit of the non-traditional students that teaching partners tend to serve:

“... the partner [should] have a greater voice in the partnership and for systems to better accommodate the individual needs of the partner. For example, the HEI being more able, or open to, accommodate flexible study patterns which meet the needs of part-time adult learners”

Teaching partner (2022 survey)

During the focus group with FECs, one area of discussion was how partnership provision was being consolidated for cost reasons. Participants were unsure how LLE would affect overall partnership strategies, though there was hope for growing flexibility from awarding partners to enable FECs to take advantage of LLE opportunities.

D. Conclusion

IHE's academic partnerships project sought to uncover important practical information on the way academic partnerships are managed in the UK. Through this work we have identified a number of areas which are common to most partnerships, and some other areas which demonstrate just how diverse the partnerships landscape is.

Throughout, it has been clear that partnerships should be celebrated for their positive contributions to institutional missions, to student choice and opportunity, and to the sector as a whole. Good practice should be shared more openly, and work should continue to better understand how partners manage their responsibilities and collaborate to enhance the benefits of partnership arrangements for those students from widening participation backgrounds, a clear motivator for teaching and awarding partners alike.

A summary of the project's key findings and some of the areas identified for future work are set out below.

Key findings

Transparency and success

Partnerships are more successful when there is transparency and open discussion between partners, and with students. This is true at all stages of the lifecycle of partnerships, for all stakeholders, particularly around fees, costs and data.

Common risk management elements

Standard approaches are taken to risk management in quality assurance, although more adaptation is common as partnerships mature and teaching partners develop the capacity to deliver their own quality assurance processes. The handling of student complaints and appeals varies and students are not always aware of the processes, indicating a need for clearer routes for students to raise concerns. Strong student representative structures support more transparency for students and develop better collaborative models.

Student services

The provision of support and services to students varies, even within partnership models. There is no correlation between the cost of partnerships and the provision of services to students. Students studying in sub-contracted provision may not have access to all the same services as those studying on the campus of the provider they are registered with.

Development opportunities

Collaboration and development opportunities are crucial to successful partnerships, including staff development and engagement in external review processes. This forms a more evidence-based approach to managing risk for the awarding partner, creates stronger partnership relationships, and allows development of the teaching partner's staff to support the student experience.

Strategic planning

Most providers wish to maintain or expand their partnership provision over their strategic period, indicating a healthy partnership environment which is beneficial for student choice and opportunity.

Regulatory impact

The reasons for pursuing, changing and ending partnerships continue to be influenced by external regulatory pressures. The OfS regulatory environment has changed awarding partners' approach to partnerships, pivoting to a more data-focused approach and implementing more risk-based strategies. It has also opened more opportunities for teaching partners to pursue validation arrangements as they can access their own funding and higher fee limits for students. Future uncertainties in funding under LLE are causing hesitancy from all providers in confirming plans to expand partnerships to deliver more flexible models including modular delivery, or further courses at level 4/5.

Diverging regulatory environments across the four UK nations are posing some issues for cross-border partnerships as both teaching and awarding bodies remain unclear what their regulatory responsibilities are, and what funding and services students on these partnerships can access.

Future work

There are several areas where gaps in current knowledge or practices would benefit from further work by IHE or other sector bodies.

Data sharing arrangements

There is a misalignment between teaching and awarding partners' understanding of data sharing arrangements, leading to complexity in reporting requirements and the ability to support student experience and success.

Transparent and effective student support

Despite regulation from CMA and OfS, and guidance from OIA, all calling for more transparency in support for students in partnership arrangements, there remains uncertainty and inconsistency in the approaches of partners. The resources and services students can access at each partner are not always made clear to students, and practitioners are also unsure what help students can get from where across the partnership. There is benefit in further work to understand how resources and services are split between partners, what innovative practice exists to provide students with the best of both partners, and what collaborations have been created to offer something unique to the partnership. Most importantly, further work could explore how students navigate between partners to offer insight into the best ways to deliver resources and services and communicate with students so they can access what they need quickly when they need it.

Complaints and appeals

Students remain uncertain about how complaints and appeals mechanisms work between academic partners. This may be exacerbated by the different approaches taken by providers, which can lead to different students in a single teaching partner navigating different models for complaints and appeals. Further work in this area to understand how these processes can be more transparent to students, and where they could be better aligned, would benefit the student experience.

Challenges in partnership creation

A regularly updated directory of providers seeking partnerships would be valuable in helping both awarding and teaching partners to find partners aligned with their institutional aims and strategy. Maintaining transparency in costs to avoid any hidden fees or misunderstandings would also address challenges in partnership creation, and this could form part of the same list.

Understanding the scale and scope of partnerships now

Partnerships are ever evolving, and successful partnerships continue to adapt to new models. Further work to understand the full extent of partnerships in the UK would be helpful to policy makers, regulators, students and partners themselves. A single source of information on UK partnerships, that includes consistent data on awarding and teaching partners, their regulation and access to funding, student visas and any other benefits of regulation, with consistently applied terminology could help regulators and providers collaborate across borders. For example, the Quality Council for UK Higher Education could explore how consistent information on teaching and awarding partners could be collected in each regulatory jurisdiction, and how this could be publicly available to all stakeholders.

Understanding partnerships in the future

A further review similar to this research following the impact of the emerging regulatory changes in England²³, Wales²⁴ and Scotland²⁵ would also be beneficial to understand the extent to which specific regulatory processes promote or discourage the ongoing development of genuine collaborative partnerships that meet the motivations of all partners and offer more choice to students. This could be conducted by a UK-wide body that can offer a more distanced perspective from regulators, such as the new Quality Council for UK Higher Education.

²³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8143/investigation-into-student-loans-issued-to-those-studying-at-franchised-higher-education-providers/>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.wales/commission-tertiary-education-and-research/about-commission-tertiary-education-and-research-cter>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/post-school-education-skills-reform-consultation-legislation/>

E. Appendix 1: Extract from working paper on definitions and early data

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:

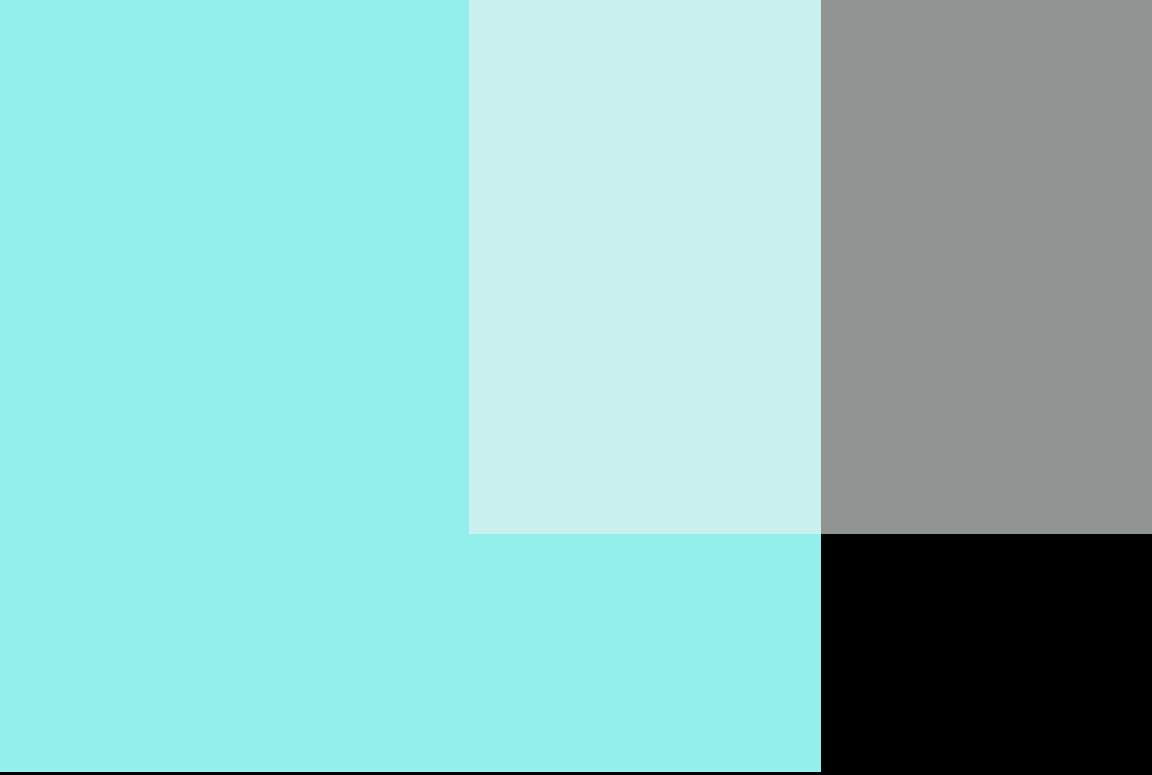
- 1 The awarding partner owns the student contract. This is the dominant model. It allows teaching partners to gain access for their students to student finance which would otherwise not be available for their courses.
- 2 Some students, who do not require access to student finance, contract directly 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 partner 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>



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