

## **Programme | IHE Academic Partnerships Conference 2026**

Tuesday 24 March 2026 | 09:00-16:00

*Pinsent Masons LLP, 30 Crown Place, Earl Street, London, EC2A 4ES*

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**09:00–10:00**

**Registration, refreshments and networking**

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**10:00–10:10**

**Welcome**

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**10:10–10:40**

**The role of partnerships in supporting skills and the LLE**

Higher education is being asked to move faster and work differently - delivering local skills plans, enabling modular learning through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), and responding quickly to employer demand. Partnerships will be central to meeting this challenge.

This session will explore the practical opportunities for partnerships in skills and the LLE as of March 2026, and how academic collaborations can create clear, flexible pathways for learners. Speakers will examine approaches to credit recognition, award-building, and responsive skills provision, alongside the role of partnerships in meeting local and regional priorities. The discussion will also highlight areas where policy and practice are still evolving, and how partners can prepare now for what comes next.

**Speakers:** *Benn Chacksfield, Director of Higher Education & Partnerships, Tiro; Joy Elliott-Bowman, Director of Policy & Development, IHE; Vanessa Wilson, CEO, University Alliance*

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**10:40–11:10**

**Partnership models in a changing sector**

As providers navigate a changing regulatory environment, partnership structures are under pressure to adapt. This session will consider how and why providers may transition from one model to another, such as subcontracting to validation, and what models best support both partners as regulated providers. Our speakers will outline their own experience of transition, and we will explore the strategic considerations that underpin successful partnerships in an evolving sector.

**Speakers:** *Robyn Corcoran, Director: Partnerships, Vocational Qualifications and Quality, The Open University; Katie Drapes, Director of Student & Academic Services, UCFB; James Newby, President & Chief Executive, NMITE*

**Chair:** *Alan Fenton, Deputy Principal, Newcastle College*

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11:10–11:40

**Refreshments and networking**

11:40–12:30

**Breakout session 1**

*Each breakout session runs twice.*

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**1A – Collaboration to enhance the student experience**

Student experience should be central to every partnership. This session will explore how partners can work together to enhance resources, support, and engagement for students, and how these approaches contribute to meeting regulatory expectations such as OfS Condition B2. Short provider presentations will highlight practical models of collaboration, followed by an interactive discussion for delegates to share insights on effective resource sharing and partnership practice.

**Speakers:** *Sian Pering, Head of Higher Education and Adult Learning, Yeovil College; Jeff Sorrill, Head of Educational Partnerships, Sheffield Hallam University*

**1B – Quality and risk in partnerships**

Effective management of risk is essential to maintaining quality and standards and supporting successful partnership delivery. Drawing on the latest data analysis from QAA, the session will address common misconceptions about partnership provision, highlighting where assumptions do not align with sector evidence. The session will explore how providers are using the recently published Advice and Guidance: Principle 8 – Operating partnerships with other organisations of the UK Quality Code for HE to strengthen their approaches to identifying, assessing and mitigating risk within partnership arrangements.

**Speakers:** *Rebecca Robinson, Data Analyst (Higher Education Insight); QAA Helena Vine, Lead Policy Officer for England, QAA*

**1C – Partnering effectively in student recruitment**

Marketing and recruitment responsibilities can be complex within partnership arrangements. Collaboration and oversight must be carefully balanced at all stages from research, to application, to enrolment. The workshop will review the new CMA guidance before exploring together how responsibilities can be shared while maintaining appropriate oversight, how smaller providers can retain the agility needed for responsive recruitment, and how to support strategic alignment within partnerships to support student success.

**Speakers:** *Rami Labib, Partner, Pinsent Masons; Nick Miller, Chief Commercial Officer, QA Higher Education; Rhian Williams, Senior Manager, Policy and Compliance, The Open University*

12:30–13:30

**Lunch and networking**

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**13:30–14:10**

**Breakout session 2**

*Each breakout session runs twice.*

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**2A – Collaboration to enhance the student experience**

Repeated session, as above.

**2B – Quality and risk in partnerships**

Repeated session, as above.

**2C – Partnering effectively in student recruitment**

Repeated session, as above.

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**14:10–14:30**

**Refreshments and networking**

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**14:40–15:40**

**A governance evolution**

Strong and adaptive governance is fundamental to effective partnership working. This session will explore how governance frameworks must develop to support partners at different stages of their journey. The panel will examine the risks and spaces for innovation across the full partnership lifecycle, and identify the governance practices that manage these most effectively. The panel will highlight how governance can evolve to enable growth, safeguard quality, and support two way staff development between institutions.

**Speakers:** *Gayle Ditchburn, Partner, Pinsent Masons; Sue Edwards, Senior Director of Compliance & Accreditation, Kaplan International; Katy Grundy, Head of Governance Policy, Office for Students; Professor Sarah Williams, Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations), Buckinghamshire New University*

**Chair:** *Charlotte Snelling, Head of Regulation Policy, UUK*

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**15:40–16:00**

**Closing remarks**

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We update this programme regularly. Details are correct at publication and subject to change.

Visit the [IHE Academic Partnerships 2026](#) web page for further details.