University of Essex
Partnerships Team

Academic Partnership Approval Process

1   Introduction

The procedures for the approval of new partnerships are informed by the Expectations and Core practices of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, in particular the Partnerships theme, which notes that:

Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure and that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

Further advice and guidance is available from the Partnerships Team.

2   Procedure for the approval of a new partnership arrangement

There are two strands to the approval process for a new partner institution:

i)   an evaluation of the strategic, financial and legal/contractual aspects of the proposal to establish a prima facie case for moving to Stage 2

ii)   an evaluation of the academic and quality assurance aspects of the proposal

3   Evaluation of strategic, financial and legal aspects of the proposal

As a first step, the project proposer should undertake preliminary discussions with the Partnerships Team, and the relevant Head(s) of Department and Executive Dean as appropriate, regarding the potential benefits and risks to the University of the partnership. Depending on the scale and complexity of the project it may be appropriate to present a brief written proposal to the University Steering Group (USG) in order to determine whether, on initial reflection, there is a convincing strategic case to warrant investing University resources into the detailed evaluation of the strategic, financial and legal aspects of the proposal.

The project lead works in conjunction with relevant Departments and the Partnerships Team to undertake the early-stage evaluation, which should include:

i)   further discussions, internally and with the prospective partner institution, in order to assess the potential benefits and risks of the proposal to the University and alignment with the University's strategic aims

ii)   initial due diligence checks to ensure that the organisation is reputable, financially sound, and has the legal capacity to enter into a contractual arrangement (see due diligence checklist)

iii)   development of preliminary costings to evaluate the resource implications of the proposal (in liaison with the Director of Finance or nominee and relevant Faculty accountants).

An outline business case should be produced summarising the academic and business proposal (including an outline financial plan, risk assessment analysis and project plan). In order to obtain in-principle approval to proceed with the academic and quality assurance aspects of the approval process, the proposal is subject to the following approval processes:

Proposals initiated via broader institutional contact require approval by USG, following consultation with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and the Partnerships Team. Proposals

initiated by individual departments[1], which are noted to normally involve an individual department, should be approved by the Faculty Executive Dean, as Chair of the Faculty Education Committee (FEC), following consultation with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and the Partnerships Team and may be referred to USG for further consideration and approval.

i)   If the case is referred to USG for consideration, it may either:

- accept the proposal
- refer the proposal back for further information
- refer a decision on the proposal to Strategy and Resources Committee and/or Council
- reject the proposal

If USG grants in-principle approval, plans can proceed for the approval of the academic and quality assurance aspects of the proposal - the format and requirements for this may vary depending on the nature of the arrangement under consideration, but typical arrangements for validation or franchise partnerships and dual or joint awards are outlined below.

4   Evaluation of the Academic and Quality Assurance aspects of the proposal – Validation or Franchise partnerships

4.1   Institutional validation

The institutional validation process is the initial approval of a potential partner organisation at institutional level as suitable for the conduct of Higher Education programmes leading to an award of the University of Essex. It is distinct from the validation of specific courses.

The University's Education Committee is responsible for making recommendations to Senate regarding the establishment of new collaborative partnerships.

In establishing a new partnership, the University must assure itself that the prospective partner institution has the appropriate infrastructure to deliver HE courses and/or identify areas where input from the University is needed to ensure that the required standards of quality management and enhancement are established and maintained. The institutional validation process enables the University to evaluate the proposed partner organisation's existing policies and procedures, particularly in those areas which underpin the subsequent validation of individual academic programmes, such as quality assurance and enhancement systems, HE resources and student support systems. Consideration is given to the institution's capacity to implement any necessary changes or additions to existing processes or resources. Discussions involve senior staff from both institutions and a decision is typically made following a series of formal and informal meetings, leading up to an institutional validation event, which is normally held at the partner institution.

4.2   Documentation requirements

The institutional validation process requires documentary evidence of the partner institution's policies and procedures. Material that is typically considered includes:

Prospective Partner Institution Information
- evidence of the credibility of the proposed partner institution as an academic partner (including, where relevant, academic standing in national and international league tables)
- for international proposals, information on the legal, financial and cultural environment (particularly in relation to quality and standards and language issues) from relevant national government offices and agencies and UK bodies with a presence in the country (e.g. the British Council, UK NARIC and UK government offices)
- institutional mission statement and operational plan, accompanied by a supporting statement as to why the institution wishes to enter into a relationship with the University and how this is reflected in its mission statement and operational plan

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[1] For example a proposal for a dual or jointly-delivered award

- confirmation of the legal status of the proposed partner institution and its capacity to enter into formal collaboration agreements
- HE strategy
- a list of HE courses offered by the institution, including student numbers for the past five years
- prospectus and other relevant publicity material
- organisation chart and information on key HE staffing roles
- contact information for relevant staff
- HE committee structures, terms of reference and memberships
- sample HE student and staff handbooks
- information on any collaboration at HE level with other institutions
- for international proposals, information on the proposed language of instruction and assessment for any programmes to be delivered under the arrangement

Regulations, Policies and Procedures
- HE learning, teaching and assessment strategy
- academic appeals policy/procedure
- complaints procedure
- equality of opportunity and diversity policy
- disability statement
- recruitment and selection policies and procedures (including entry criteria for HE courses)
- any other relevant HE regulations, policies and procedures

Staffing
- CVs for all HE academic staff – full and part-time (outlining relevant qualifications, current and recent positions held, and relevant publications – maximum three sides of A4 paper)
- Staff recruitment and development policy
- Staff appraisal scheme
- Details of recent staff development activity (including evidence of scholarly activity)

Student recruitment, retention and performance
- HE admissions statistics for last 5 years:
  - number of applicants
  - number of admissions
  - ratio of applicants to places
  - actual intake as a percentage of the target intake
- student entry profiles (including gender, age, ethnic origin, disability and highest qualification on entry)
- student retention, progression and achievement data for the past three years, by course and year of study
- destination of graduates (employment, further training)
- details of student record system
- examples of student transcripts

Quality Assurance and Enhancement
- documentation relating to assessment strategy including marking and moderation arrangements, examination boards, invigilation procedures, appointment of external examiners and a definition of their role
- external review reports, such as QAA, HEFCE, Ofsted or PSRB reports
- external examiner reports and associated correspondence
- student representation and feedback mechanisms
- student satisfaction data
- internal academic development, approval and review procedures
- AP(E)L procedures
- mapping to UK Quality Code expectations

Student Support and Guidance
Information on:
- tutorial support system
- student support and guidance services
- careers guidance

Resources
Information on current and planned HE resources including:
- teaching accommodation
- library (books, journals and electronic resources)
- ICT
- other specialist resources

Employer Engagement
- information on links with employers
- work placement and work-based learning policies and procedures

The documentation should be submitted to the Partnerships Team in an agreed electronic format at least six weeks in advance of the institutional validation event. A briefing pack containing relevant documentation is sent to members of the institutional validation panel at least three weeks in advance of the event.

For international proposals, all documentation should be submitted in English.

The University reserves the right to inspect students' work and to observe HE teaching at the prospective partner institution, at the discretion of the Chair of the institutional validation panel.

4.3 Institutional validation panel

Panel membership is approved by the Dean of Partnerships on behalf of the Partnerships Education Committee and typically comprises:

- Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) (Chair)
- Dean of Partnerships (alternative Chair)
- external academic with appropriate experience in collaborative provision
- Academic Registrar or nominee
- The Deputy Director or Academic Services (Quality and Development) or nominee
- a representative nominated by the proposed partner institution
- a senior administrator from the Partnerships Team (Secretary)

The membership of the panel may be varied at the Chair's discretion. In the absence of one or more panel members on the day of the event, the decision as to whether the validation event should proceed is at the Chair's discretion.

4.4 Institutional validation event

The institutional validation panel will meet at the partner institution. The validation event usually takes place over a full day and the agenda is based on a template which may be modified if appropriate for a specific validation event. The institutional validation event will normally include a tour of relevant facilities and panel members should normally meet with students and/or recent graduates of the prospective partner institution.

The Chair will normally commence by:

- explaining the purpose of the event
- introducing panel members
- confirming the agenda

- explaining institutional validation procedures and the responsibilities of the panel
- identifying any collective or individual issues raised by panel members in relation to the validation documentation.

Partner institution members of the institutional validation panel are present for all the panel's discussions, except meetings with students and/or graduates of the institution under consideration.

The agenda will include one or more blocks of time in which the panel may discuss the proposed partnership in detail with members of the senior management team of the prospective partner institution, and in which members of the prospective partner institution will have the opportunity to respond to points raised. The Chair is responsible for highlighting positive aspects of the proposed partnership and raising issues in a constructive manner.

Towards the end of the event, the panel will meet to determine their recommendations. The Chair normally commences this private meeting of the panel by summarising the issues and the prospective partner institution's responses and s/he will conclude the meeting by agreeing the outcome of the event with the panel before inviting members of the prospective partner institution back for verbal feedback. A unanimous decision of the panel is required for the conclusion of the institutional validation event.

During the feedback session, the Chair will announce the outcome of the event and notify the partner institution of any conditions and/or recommendations for the partner institution and/or the University and/or the University and the partner institution jointly to action or to consider. A deadline will be set by which conditions and/or recommendations should be met and/or responded to, and the Chair and Secretary will liaise to ensure that draft conditions and recommendations are circulated as soon as possible after the event.

Conditions are those issues that must be addressed to the satisfaction of the validation panel, normally prior the commencement of the partnership

Recommendations are those issues on which action is to be considered, possibly after the partnership has commenced.

The panel may also identify **commendations**, providing an opportunity to congratulate the institution on aspects of good practice.

4.5   Institutional validation report

The secretary to the validation panel will prepare a summary of the panel's discussions in the form of a report which will be circulated to panel members for confirmation. The report may include conditions and/or recommendations for the partner institution and/or the University and/or the partner institution and the University jointly to action or to consider.

The Partnerships Education Committee considers the institutional validation report and makes a recommendation to Education Committee and Senate that the partnership be validated, subject to any conditions contained in the report being met.

4.6   Responding to conditions and recommendations

The institution should make a formal response to the institutional validation report by the agreed deadline(s), evidencing how specific conditions have been met and addressing any recommendations. This response should be submitted to the validation panel secretary for onward submission to the validation panel chair. The Chair will review the response and decide whether the conditions have been met, in liaison with other panel members where necessary. The Partnerships Education Committee will monitor progress against any conditions and recommendations and will report to Education Committee when the conditions have been met.

5 Evaluation of the Academic and Quality Assurance aspects of the proposal – dual or Joint Awards

A **dual or multiple award** is defined by the University as an arrangement whereby the University and one or more other awarding institution(s) together provide a programme leading to *separate awards* of both or all of the institutions. Such arrangements usually involve accruing credit elsewhere. The University of Essex is individually responsible for the quality and standard of the award made in its name.

A **joint award** is defined by the University as an arrangement whereby the University and one or more other awarding institution(s) together provide a programme leading to *a joint award* of both, or all, institutions. Such arrangements usually involve accruing credit elsewhere.

The development of dual, multiple or joint awards should normally only be considered where:

- degree awarding powers are held by all partner institutions, and, in the case of joint degrees, that the proposed partner institution(s) have the necessary legal powers to award a joint degree

- the University of Essex and the partner institution(s) already have successful provision in the subject area at an equivalent academic level

- the proposed partner institution(s) are compatible with the University of Essex in terms of institutional values and systems

- the academic standards of the award will meet the University of Essex's expectations in relation to relevant UK benchmarks (for example the FHEQ and relevant subject benchmark statements), irrespective of the expectations of the partner institution(s).

The evaluation of the academic and quality assurance aspects of the proposal is undertaken at both institutional and course level, through an approval process which leads to the approval by Senate of both the partner institution and the joint award.

At institutional level, the approval process involves an evaluation of the proposed partner institution's academic infrastructure and existing policies and procedures, such as quality assurance systems, HE resources and student support systems. At course level, the process for approving a dual or joint award involves evaluating the programme of study as a whole and the comparability and "fit" between components of the course undertaken at each institution, and determining whether the course as a whole, and the components within it, are of an equivalent academic standard to comparable modules/courses within the University and across the UK Higher Education sector as a whole. For provision at postgraduate research level, alignment with the University's Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Degrees should also be ensured. The Code is available online at:
https://www.essex.ac.uk/about/governance/policies

Where students are to be taught and assessed in a language other than English for the component of study at the partner institution, sufficient language preparation should be a pre-requisite for study at the partner institution, or alternatively this should be built into the course prior to study at the partner institution.

5.1 Documentation Requirements

The approval process requires documentary evidence, written in English, of the prospective partner institution's suitability for the conduct of higher education programmes that result in the awarding of credit that contributes to the award. This should be produced by the relevant academic Department(s) in consultation with the proposed partner institution, and material that is typically considered includes:

a) information on the proposed partner institution (including evidence of credibility as an academic partner, legal status and capacity to enter into international collaboration arrangements resulting in the dual or joint award of a degree)
b) information on the legal, financial and cultural environment (particularly in relation to quality and standards and language issues) from relevant national government offices and agencies and UK bodies with a presence in the country (e.g. the British Council, UK NARIC and UK government offices). *Please note: the International Office will be able to assist in collating this information.*
c) information on the proposed dual or joint award, including a programme specification, module outlines, information on learning, teaching and assessment methods, and a student handbook
d) evidence that students who have achieved credits at the partner institution will have attained the same standard as students studying at the University at an equivalent level
e) where the language of delivery and assessment at the partner institution is not English, evidence that students will have acquired the required level of competence in the relevant language to successfully complete the component of the course at the partner institution
f) the prospective partner institution's HE admissions policy and current entry qualifications
g) the admissions criteria for the dual or joint award, and arrangements for managing the admissions process (including the designation of a 'lead' institution to administer the process and deal with other day-to-day administrative matters)
h) assessment procedures and examination arrangements for the dual or joint award, taking into consideration the requirements and expectations of each institution
i) mutually satisfactory quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms, policies and procedures for the dual or joint award (including arrangements for the appointment of an external examiner)
j) resourcing at each institution, including IT and book/journal resources
k) information on the rights and responsibilities of students
l) student support and guidance mechanisms at each institution
m) information on how student complaints, appeals and disciplinary matters will be dealt with across all institutions
n) staffing policies and criteria for the appointment of academic staff at the partner institution
o) arrangements for the production of transcripts and certificates
p) arrangements for course management and administration.

5.2   Approval Process

An approval panel is identified and approved by the Dean of Partnerships on behalf of the PEC, and typically comprises:

- Dean of Partnerships or nominee *(Chair)*
- at least one external academic with relevant subject expertise
- Deputy Dean Education of relevant Faculty
- at least one member of the University's teaching staff from a cognate discipline area
- one member external to the programme team concerned but internal to the partner institution
- senior administrator from the Partnerships Team *(Secretary).*

The membership of the panel may be varied at the Chair's discretion.

The proposed partnership and dual or joint award arrangement are evaluated by the panel either by correspondence or via a meeting of the panel held at the University, supported where appropriate by:

(a) one or more visits to the partner institution by representatives of the approval panel to view facilities and resources and meet with students
(b) discussions with relevant members of the University Department(s) concerned.

The panel may request further information to be submitted by either the relevant University Department(s) or the partner institution at any stage in the approval process.

The approval panel will determine whether the proposed partnership and dual or joint award should be approved; any conditions and/or recommendations attached to approval for the University or the partner institution (or both) to action or consider; and the date when approval will commence. The panel's discussions will be summarised in a report of the approval panel which will be drafted by the panel secretary in liaison with the Chair and other members of the panel. A deadline will be set by which conditions and/or recommendations should be met and/or responded to.

The Partnerships Education Committee and the relevant Faculty Education Committee consider the report and make a joint recommendation to Education Committee and AQSC that the partnership and the dual or joint award be approved, subject to any conditions contained in the report being met. The PEC will monitor subsequent progress against any conditions and recommendations contained within the report, in liaison with the relevant Faculty Dean.

6   Legal Agreement

Following institutional validation of a new partner institution, and before any courses commence under the arrangement, a formal legal agreement should be drafted by the Partnerships Team in consultation with relevant colleagues within the University and at the partner institution, drawing on advice from the University's solicitors as appropriate.

Formal collaboration agreements with partner institutions are subject to review at regular intervals, normally on a maximum of a five year cycle, drawing on advice from the University's solicitors, to ensure currency and to continue to provide adequate safeguards for both parties.

The review may be brought forward when substantial changes to the partnership arrangement are proposed, for example changes to governance arrangements, significant amendment of the responsibilities of either party or institutional level changes to course delivery methods. Where deemed appropriate by the Dean of Partnerships, the review of the collaboration agreement may necessitate further institutional or course level validation or review activity.