

## Partnership Approval Process

The Partnership Approval Process provides the requirements and process to approve a new collaborative partnership. This process should be read in conjunction with the [Collaborative Academic Arrangements Policy](#). The approval and management of collaborative academic partnerships is informed by the [Office for Students \(OfS\) Regulatory Framework and Conditions of Registration](#) (OfS, 2022) and the expectations of the Higher Education sector set out in the [UK Quality Code \(QAA, 2024\)](#) and guidance provided in the [UK Quality Code, Advice and Guidance: Partnerships \(QAA, 2018\)](#).

The Director of Quality and Educational Development, in consultation with relevant colleagues, is responsible for determining the exact nature of the approval process in terms of information required, financial, legal and academic scrutiny, and the requirement for a formal approval visit. The process will vary according to the nature of the collaboration proposed, and consideration of the risks involved.

### 1 Types of Academic Partnerships

- 1.1 The University of Worcester is involved in a number of different types of collaborative relationships, as set out below in the [Collaborative Arrangements Typology](#). This typology is not definitive, and from time to time the University agrees to initiate other forms of collaborative partnership, and/or to vary the nature of the arrangement in order to take account of particular circumstances or needs. Such variations will always be considered and approved through the relevant Executive and Committee processes.
- 1.2 **The Collaborative Arrangements Typology** and definitions of the possible types of Collaborative Arrangement are as follows:
- 1.3 **Articulation:** Articulation is a formal arrangement where the University recognises all or part of another institution's named award as providing credit towards specific University of Worcester courses, guaranteeing admission with advanced standing. The right to such advanced standing applies to all students covered by the Articulation agreement, who have gained that specific credit, without a further consideration of that credit, subject to any limitations set out in the agreement. As the University in receipt of the credits, it will need to assure itself of the quality and standards of the learning that is undertaken at the partner institution. For further information see [Annex 1: Principles and Process for the Approval of Articulation](#).
- 1.4 **Recognition:** an arrangement whereby a named award delivered by another institution is formally recognised as appropriate for entry with or without advanced standing to one or more specified University programmes, thereby providing a basis for individual applications to the course. There is no guaranteed entry through any recognition arrangement. For further information see [Annex 2: Principles and Process for the Approval of Recognition Arrangements](#).
- 1.5 **Validation:** a partnership arrangement whereby a new or existing course owned, developed and delivered by a partner, following University protocols on academic quality management, is approved and validated by the University as of appropriate quality and standard leading to a University award. The course is delivered by the partner and the University remains responsible for the academic standards of the award granted in its name.

- 1.6 **Franchise:** an arrangement whereby a partner delivers a course or part of a course owned, developed, designed, approved and/or delivered by the University leading to an award or the award of credit by the University. The relationship is based on a formal agreement, in which the University (also known as the lead provider) allows a partner (known as the delivery provider) to deliver a University course. The University retains overall control of the course content, delivery, assessment and quality assurance arrangements.
- 1.7 **Offsite Delivery (including Flying Faculty):** University credit-bearing modules or courses delivered by University staff outside University premises in conjunction with a partner which provides premises and equipment, learning resources, and/or student or administrative support that is integral to the student learning experience.
- 1.8 **Dual Award:** an arrangement where the University works with one or more degree-awarding bodies to offer a jointly conceived programme leading to separate and independent awards granted by each awarding institution. Dual awards require students to achieve more than one set of learning outcomes. Each degree-awarding body is responsible for its own award, but the two components form a single package. Where a student meets the requirements of one degree-awarding body only, they receive only a single award. For further information, see [Annex 3: Principles and Process for the Approval of Joint and Dual Awards](#).
- 1.9 **Joint Award:** an arrangement where the University works with one or more degree-awarding bodies for the purposes of programme design, development, delivery, assessment, management and decision-making on student achievement of a programme and where a student successfully completing the programme gains a single award jointly awarded by all of the degree-awarding bodies. For further information, see [Annex 3: Principles and Process for the Approval of Joint and Dual Awards](#).

## 2 **Establishing a Partnership**

- 2.1 As an awarding institution the University has ultimate responsibility for all awards made in its name, including for programmes delivered at and by partner organisations, in accordance with the [Office for Students \(OfS\) Regulatory Framework](#) for higher education. It is therefore important that every effort is made, in collaboration with our partners to ensure that Office for Students' [Conditions of Registration](#) (OfS, 2022) for quality, standards and positive outcomes for students are met and that an appropriate learning environment exists and is maintained for all students studying under collaborative arrangements. This requires the University to have robust procedures in place for the approval of new collaborative arrangements and to effectively manage any risks.
- 2.2 Partnership Approval is granted by Academic Board following a process of due diligence to assure the University of the probity, financial and academic soundness of the proposed partner. This is undertaken through the submission of information, scrutiny of documentation and normally a Partnership Approval visit. The purpose of Partnership Approval is to assure the University of the standing and probity of the potential partner organisation and ensure mutual understanding of the basis for the partnership.
- 2.3 Partnership Approval is granted without prejudice to the outcome of any Course Approval process. Approval of collaborative provision follows similar processes for [Course Approval](#) as internal provision with the necessary amendments or additions to reflect the particular requirements of collaborative partnerships, with full costing of the course proposal. Where appropriate, the Partnership and Course Approval process

will be integrated to minimize duplication and burden.

- 2.4 A formal Partnership and Course Approval process must be completed prior to registering students on a University programme to be delivered in collaboration with a partner. The different stages of the Partnership Approval process are as follows; a summary of this process in flow chart form is available on the [Partnership Approval](#) webpages:

**Stage 1:** Identification of potential partnership

**Stage 2:** Preliminary enquiries and partnership risk assessment submitted to Academic Planning and Portfolio Group (APPG)

**Stage 3:** Approval to proceed and confirmation of arrangements and timeline for Partnership Approval

**Stage 4:** Due Diligence

**Stage 5:** Partnership Approval visit

**Stage 6:** ASQEC and Academic Board approval of the proposed partnership

**Stage 7:** Agreements

### **3 Stage 1: Identification of potential partnership**

- 3.1 Initiatives for collaborative partnership may come from the University or from the organisation proposing the relationship. Potential arrangements may take a variety of forms (see Section 1: Collaborative Arrangements Typology).

- 3.2 Partnerships can be initiated by Schools, by the Pro Vice Chancellor Partnerships or the Deputy PVC International and External Affairs (for non-UK Partnerships). Where the partnership relates to one School, the Head of School would usually lead on the discussions concerning a new potential partnership and the early stages of assessing the viability of a new partnership through to submission of the Preliminary Enquiries Form to the University's Academic Planning and Portfolio Group (APPG).

### **4 Stage 2: Preliminary Enquiries and Risk Assessment**

- 4.1 At the commencement of preliminary enquiries, the Pro Vice Chancellor Partnerships, or the Deputy PVC International and External Affairs (for non-UK Partnerships) and the Director of Quality and Educational Development should be informed and, where pertinent, involved in any initial discussions.
- 4.2 Where led by the School, the Head of School is responsible for making preliminary enquiries about the potential partner through initial discussions, published material in the public domain and the organisation's website, to assist in assessing the viability of the proposed partnership. Where multiple Schools are involved, these preliminary enquiries may be coordinated by the Head of Collaborative Programmes.
- 4.3 Initial discussions should make clear to the proposed partner that there is a formal process of partnership approval involving detailed due diligence that commences after APPG has given assent to proceed. It is advisable that staff engaged in preliminary discussions keep a written record of matters discussed and matters agreed in principle.
- 4.4 [Annex 4: Collaborative Academic Partnerships – Preliminary Enquiries Form](#) is used by Schools/Departments to seek agreement from APPG to commence the formal Partnership Approval process relating to academic (taught and/or research) activity. The Preliminary Enquiries Form provides a summary of the proposed collaboration and its rationale, and the outcome of initial enquiries and discussions about the suitability of the proposed partner.
- 4.5 The Preliminary Enquiries Form detailing discussions with a partner should be submitted

to APPG with [Annex 5: Risk Assessment for New Academic Partnerships](#) (see Section 4.9 below) for APPG to make an informed judgement on the strategic fit of the proposal, to determine if there is a viable business case for the proposed partnership arrangement and to identify issues which can be addressed in the initial stages of development. The Preliminary Enquiries Form should be submitted at an early stage, normally *at least* 12-18 months before a new partnership might commence.

4.6 In certain cases, the Pro Vice Chancellor Partnerships, the Deputy PVC International and External Affairs (for non-UK Partnerships) or the Director of Quality and Educational Development may consider it advisable to bring forward aspects of the due diligence process before completion of the preliminary enquiries. This may, in discussion with the Director of Finance, include the Financial Sustainability and Management (FSM) checks (see section 6.4 and [Annex 7 Due Diligence FSM](#)).

4.7 Initial considerations will cover matters such as:

- nature and reputation of proposed partner; for overseas organisations this should include their record on Human Rights and/or Freedom of Expression and any recent Home Office travel restrictions
- compatibility of mission and strategic objectives
- legal and financial status of the organization
- suitability of resources to underpin proposed collaboration
- current experience of delivering higher education (HE) and current partnerships (if relevant)
- appropriate corporate and academic governance and management framework of the organisation
- effective management of quality of provision.

4.8 In the case of overseas organisations, checks may be made with the British Council and other independent sources. This may include government offices and agencies of the country in which the prospective partner organisation is based and/or from the UK ENIC (the UK National Information Centre for the recognition and evaluation of international qualifications and skills) as to the recognition and standing of the proposed partner and its awards. For some International arrangements there may also be a need to ascertain whether a license to operate is required.

4.9 In parallel with the preliminary enquiries process, the Academic Quality Unit will complete [Annex 5: Risk Assessment for New Academic Partnerships](#) to ascertain the level of due diligence required. This may involve a request to the University's International Office to provide a background report on the proposed country of delivery and implications for the University in working with a partner to deliver higher education. The completed Annex 5 Risk Assessment for New Academic Partnerships is submitted to APPG with the completed Annex 4: Collaborative Academic Partnerships – Preliminary Enquiries Form.

4.10 At the same time, it is usual for the School to submit the course proposal, including the business case and full costings, to APPG for approval. The PVC Partnerships and Head of School (or nominee) are responsible for ensuring that the financial arrangements for the partnership in terms of student fees, collection of fees, and split of income is negotiated and agreed with the proposed partner as part of the initial course proposal process. The University Director of Finance should be fully involved in this process.

- 5 Stage 3: Approval to proceed and confirmation of arrangements and timeline for Partnership Approval**
- 5.1 APPG initial approval of a proposed partnership is required to ensure that the proposal fits with the University's overall strategy and that the likely benefits, costs and risks associated with the initiative have been considered and assessed, to determine whether the proposed collaboration should be pursued, and the formal Partnership Approval process commenced.
- 5.2 If APPG agrees that the proposal should be taken forward, the Academic Quality Unit writes to the prospective partner indicating that the formal Partnership Approval process can commence.
- 5.3 At the same time, the proposed partner is informed of the University's formal processes for Partnership and Course Approval and discussions will take place regarding the approval processes. This will normally include a proposed outline schedule for Approval. It is usually expected that a partnership proposal is linked with a specific course proposal; it would be unusual to progress a Partnership Approval without identified course provision.
- 5.4 A Memorandum of Understanding can help to develop a relationship further, particularly with non-UK partners. This type of agreement does not commit the University to specific activities and is not legally binding but is a useful tool to show commitment to the further development of the relationship with a partner organisation.
- 5.5 The proposed partner is required to indicate in writing acceptance of the schedule for approval and associated requirements such as any responsibility for costs as determined by APPG, before the partnership approval process may commence.
- 5.6 Following initial agreement from APPG that Partnership Approval may proceed, the Academic Quality Unit will:
- consult with the Director of Quality and Educational Development on the requirements for Partner Approval and due diligence
  - provisionally agree with the School(s) and the prospective partner a mutually acceptable timetable for Partnership Approval
  - request the partner to complete the due diligence form and provide associated evidence and information
  - initiate arrangements for the scrutiny of the documentation
  - where relevant, advise Professional Support departments, including Library Services, of the proposed partnership and provide notification that a resource statement has been requested.
- 5.7 At the same time as requesting due diligence information, the Academic Quality Unit will provide the potential partner with an information pack about the University composed of (as relevant):
- Link to University of Worcester Course Pages for Undergraduate and Postgraduate provision (as appropriate)
  - University of Worcester Strategic Plan
  - Partnership and Course Approval processes
  - Collaborative Academic Arrangements Policy
  - Standard Template for Partnership Agreement
  - Links to relevant University information, e.g., about the School, Library Services and Student Services, International Recruitment etc
  - Principles of University collaborative financial arrangements and weblink to the University's student fees page.

## 6 Stage 4: Due Diligence

- 6.1 Due diligence is the process of examining the legal, corporate, financial, academic governance and resource underpinnings of an organisation and requires timely, sufficient and accurate disclosure of all information and documentary evidence to inform the University's decision making. The primary purpose of the due diligence process is to ensure that the proposed partner is of appropriate standing, that it can provide a suitable learning environment and meet expectations for the quality and standards of delivery of programmes of study leading to a University award, and that the proposed partner is financially viable. Due diligence enquiries reduce the risk to the University of failure of any new partnerships.
- 6.2 All proposed partners will be subject to due diligence activity, although the extent of the due diligence will be defined through a risk-based approach. The Director of Quality and Educational Development will determine the level of due diligence required.
- 6.3 Full due diligence, requiring completion of [Annex 6 Collaborative Partnerships Due Diligence Form](#) and submission by the proposed partner organisation of relevant evidence is required for most new partner organisations. Specific requirements are reviewed for each proposed partner in advance of requesting completion, to take account of the nature of the proposed partnership and the status of the partner, in order to ensure relevance and clarity of information required. Possible exceptions in relation to full due diligence may include:
- some internationally recognised and long-established Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
  - NHS Trusts, and some other Governmental Agencies.
- 6.4 Proposed partners may be required to undergo additional Financial Sustainability and Management (FSM) checks ([Annex 7 Due Diligence FSM](#)) where it is considered that there is potential greater risk and a specific requirement to confirm an organisation is of sound financial standing. This involves the scrutiny of the financial sustainability and management arrangements of the proposed partner organisation and any subsidiary, parent company or linked organisation. Partner organisations must offer evidence that they are financially sustainable, financial management is sound and a clear relationship exists between the organisation's financial policy and the safeguarding of the quality and standards of its provision. Therefore, organisations undergoing the FSM check are required to provide further information including:
- details of the organisation, trading names and addresses, key individuals (directors, shareholders, trustees) and relationships with other organisations
  - latest set of signed, audited, full financial statements
  - assurance of financial sustainability
- 6.5 The Academic Quality Unit will write to the proposed partner organisation with the due diligence request, outlining the documentation that is required and the deadline for return. The Academic Quality Unit will also review publicly available information, such as recent published information/reports on academic standing from accreditation or other bodies relevant to delivery of higher education, alongside the returned documentation.
- 6.6 For organisations that have or have had links with other degree awarding institutions, the Academic Quality Unit will contact these to enquire about their satisfaction with the partner. Cases where other HEIs have withdrawn from a partnership will always be followed up.

- 6.7 In the case of overseas (non-UK) organisations, the University will also seek the views of the British Council and other independent sources, including government offices of the country in which the organisation is based and/or from the UK ENIC (if this has not already been completed as part of the preliminary enquiries).
- 6.8 The Deputy PVC International and External Affairs will be asked to provide information on British Council and other relevant country reports for the country where the proposed non-UK partner is based and will be consulted on the appropriateness of the returned due diligence documentation.
- 6.9 Due diligence documentation is checked for completeness by the Academic Quality Unit. Preparations for a Partnership Approval visit may be postponed and further information requested or terminated if the quality of the documentation provided is deemed to be unsatisfactory.
- 6.10 Documentation relating to the approval is reviewed by the PVC Partnerships, Deputy PVC International and External Affairs (for non-UK Partnerships), the Head of School (or nominee), the Head or Deputy Head of Academic Quality, the Head of Collaborative Programmes, the Director of Finance (regarding financial information) and, where appropriate, other members of the University with relevant expertise. Comments on the documentation provided are forwarded to the Academic Quality Unit in advance of the approval visit.
- 6.11 AQU will forward the partner's completed learning resources statement and due diligence checklist to the University's Library Services for consideration. Based on this information and any further correspondence required, Library Services will review the partner's general learning resources and infrastructures and assess their adequacy and compatibility with University resources. University Library Services is responsible for forwarding a brief report of its conclusions to AQU for the Partnership Approval visit, together with the completed checklist. The report will also include information for staff at the partner organisation on support available from the University's Library Services for students and staff.
- 6.12 Based on the information provided by the partner and the information from the due diligence checks, the Academic Quality Unit begins to draft the Partnership Approval Report and collate any key documentation to inform the approval visit. Additionally, drafting of the Partnership Agreement is begun in order that this can be shared with the proposed partner in advance of the Partnership Approval visit.
- 7 Stage 5: Partnership approval visit**
- 7.1 Approval visits are chaired by an appropriate senior member of University staff and may involve the PVC Partnerships, Deputy PVC International and External Affairs (for non-UK Partnerships), the Head of School (or nominee) from the sponsoring University of Worcester School, the Head of Collaborative Programmes and the Head or Deputy Head of Academic Quality or other AQU Quality Officer who acts as officer for the event.
- 7.2 In the case of proposed overseas non-UK partnerships necessitating a visit, or other 'high risk' partnerships, an appropriately qualified and experienced Independent External Adviser may also form part of the Approval process. The nature of the External Adviser involvement in the Approval process will be agreed by the Director of Quality and Educational Development.
- 7.3 The Director of Quality and Educational Development will approve the visit team, and may require additional membership of the Panel, where such expertise is required. It

will be the responsibility of AQU to identify and nominate an appropriate Independent External Adviser when required.

- 7.4 The External Adviser should be employed in (or recently retired from) a senior position at a UK HEI, and have experience of managing or operating collaborative arrangements, including overseas collaborations if the proposed University partner is an overseas organisation. The External Adviser should be familiar with the OfS Regulatory Framework and Conditions of Registration and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and have experience of current practice and developments in learning, teaching and assessment, and quality management in HE. The nominee should not have any affiliation (currently or for the last five years) with the University or the proposed partner.
- 7.5 The Academic Quality Unit will make and confirm all arrangements for the Partnership Approval visit which normally lasts between a half day and one full day. In certain circumstances, the visit and meetings to approve the associated course/academic collaborative provision can take place on the same day. If this is the case the Director of Quality and Educational Development (in consultation with colleagues) will agree the arrangements and the External and Internal panel members to be involved in each part of the process. Alternatively, where the proposed partnership is particularly complex and/or of higher risk, the Director of Quality and Educational Development may advise a pre-meeting of the visit team in advance, in order to discuss issues, determine the Agenda and identify any requests for further information.
- 7.6 Documentation to be provided for the Partnership Approval visit will normally comprise of:
- draft Partnership Approval report compiled by Academic Quality Unit based on due diligence documentation submitted
  - draft Partnership Agreement (or relevant template)
  - copies of any key documentation provided by the proposed partner (to be determined by Academic Quality Unit)
  - Partnership Approval process document for reference.
- 7.7 The Agenda will be informed by the draft Partnership Approval report and should be appropriate to the nature of the proposed partner and proposed partnership and scrutiny of the documentation provided.
- 7.8 The Agenda may include consideration of the following as appropriate to the nature of the proposed partner and proposed partnership and scrutiny of the documentation provided:
- a) history and legal status of the organisation
  - b) size, mission, and key objectives of organisation
  - c) rationale for development of partnership in context of HE strategy
  - d) links with other HEIs
  - e) recognition of partner by other organisations (e.g., British Council /UK ENIC for overseas organisations; OfS/Ofsted/QAA etc)
  - f) financial status of organisation (based on assessment by the University's Pro Vice Chancellor, Finance & Resources or representative)
  - g) governance and management structure
  - h) funding of students (actual or planned)
  - i) nature of financial arrangements (for first proposed course)
  - j) equality and diversity, health and safety policies, including insurance arrangements
  - k) current academic provision (subject range and level)
  - l) quality assurance framework and processes
  - m) curriculum development and delivery (experience and track record)



- n) teaching, learning and assessment (strategy and track record)
- o) progression and achievement (track record)
- p) policy on student feedback/evaluation
- q) student recruitment (market and track record) and means for assuring the accuracy of information for prospective students
- r) student academic support and guidance (policy and services)
- s) student pastoral support and advice (policy and services)
- t) student complaints policy and procedures
- u) student records (system and operation)
- v) recruitment and appraisal of staff (policy)
- w) staff development, including teaching qualifications, research and scholarly activity (policy and track record)
- x) learning resources (as assessed by Library Services)
- y) terms for partnership agreement
- z) arrangements for teach out of students, should the partnership be terminated.

7.9 The possible outcomes of a partner approval visit are:

- Recommendation to Academic Board of Approval of the proposed partner organisation as one with which the University would wish to collaborate, with or without conditions and/or recommendations; or
- Referred with a request for further information from the partner organisation and/or the School; or
- Partnership proposal: Not Approved.

7.10 Where Approval is granted subject to conditions and/or recommendations, the date by which a response to these is required is agreed. Responses to conditions and recommendations must be sent to the Academic Quality Unit in writing detailing the ways in which each condition and recommendation has been met, together with, where relevant, revised documentation (highlighted as appropriate).

7.11 Partnership Approval is normally granted for a maximum period of six years at which point a full Partnership Review will be conducted.

7.12 At the conclusion of the Partnership Approval visit, the Chair may provide feedback in relation to any outstanding matters that need to be evidenced, conditions and/or recommendations that are likely to be in the final report, together with some indication of the next steps in the Approval process.

7.13 The AQU Quality Officer attending the Approval visit completes the Partnership Approval report, normally within two weeks of the Approval visit. The unconfirmed report is sent to the Chair and others involved in the approval visit and to the head of the prospective partner organisation for comment and correction of factual errors.

## **8 Stage 6: ASQEC and Academic Board approval of the proposed Partnership**

8.1 Final Partnership Approval reports are considered by Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC) which makes a formal recommendation for approval to Academic Board. ASQEC is responsible for confirming that the due diligence and Partnership Approval process has been carried out robustly and in line with University policy and procedures. If ASQEC is satisfied with the report, it will recommend formal Approval of the proposed partnership to Academic Board. The Board will receive the Partnership Approval report for information.

## **9 Stage 7: Agreements**

9.1 A Partnership Agreement is issued after successful Approval of the Partnership. The

Agreement must be signed by the University Vice Chancellor and the appropriate senior representative of the partner organisation. Students may not be registered onto a University approved programme unless and until an Agreement has been completed, signed and lodged with the University Secretary's Office.

**Related Policies, Documents or Webpages:**

See [Partnership Approval Process](#) for Annexes and related forms

**Approval/Review Table**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Version Number	V1.4
Date of Approval	V1 approved 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2018
Approved by	Academic Board
Effective from	V1.4 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2024 V1.3 1 <sup>st</sup> July 2023
Policy Officer	Head of Collaborative Programmes/Head of Academic Quality
Department	Directorate of Quality and Educational Development
Review date	September 2027
Last reviewed	V1.4 July 2024 - Revisions and updating to ensure accuracy and consistency, addition of OfS requirements and revised responsibilities to include Deputy PVC International and External Affairs (for non-UK Partnerships) and Director of Finance  V1.3 July 2023 – Revisions and updating to ensure accuracy and consistency and revised responsibilities to include Pro-Vice Chancellor – Partnerships and removal of reference to terms and conditions of partnerships
Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)	N/A
Accessibility Checked	July 2024