

What can QAA reviews tell us about what works in collaborative provision in the UK?

Background

‘Collaborative provision’ can refer to any partnership arrangement, normally where one higher education provider delivers a course and another grants the award. There are many benefits to collaborative provision, such as extending geographic reach, widening participation, and offering tailored support and flexible delivery. Across the UK, many types of collaborative provision are delivered within higher education providers including franchising, validation and joint venture.

Recent months have seen increased scrutiny of franchised provision in particular, raising questions around regulatory oversight of this type of provision within UK higher education. Some of this scrutiny is a result of a lack of information about this method of delivery and the limited assurances that can therefore be given at a sector level. In highlighting these issues, it raises legitimate questions about the oversight applied to different types of collaborative provision and the information that is publicly available.

QAA's reviews of providers across the UK¹ provide valuable insight into current practice, including partnership provision. From the publicly available reports, we have produced original analysis on the areas of strength and necessary improvement in current practice and have identified evidence-based areas of focus to better guide the debate at a sector level.

The three criteria for successful partnerships

QAA's reviews include ‘collaborative provision wherever and however it is delivered’ and cover providers who operate as lead partners and those operating as delivery partners.

Analysis of these reviews demonstrates that the following three criteria are crucial in delivering effective partnerships.

Robust oversight

The most effective partnerships that QAA reviewed had robust and consistent oversight arrangements in place to monitor the quality and standards of all collaborative provision at an institutional and faculty level. This needs to be embedded across the partnership lifecycle: in the due diligence before entering a partnership, the ongoing monitoring of provision and assurance, and the safeguards in place should a partnership end.

¹ QAA reviews tertiary providers in Scotland (colleges and higher education providers), higher education providers in Wales and Northern Ireland, and higher education providers in England who are not registered with the Office for Students.

Examples of good practice include:

- 1 A clear structure of oversight, with executive responsibility held at Pro-Vice-Chancellor level, a designated committee with the power to establish working groups on emerging issues, and overview from the Academic Board, ensuring both operational and strategic oversight.
- 2 Joint Boards of Study which provide holistic oversight of course delivery, a regular forum to discuss the student experience in partner institutions, and early indication of the developing needs of partners.

Areas for improvement include:

- 1 Clarity on the roles and responsibilities for those with oversight of collaborative provision to ensure consistency across faculties and schools.
- 2 Data management that tracks types of provision, number of programmes delivered and number of students enrolled to secure detailed reflections on and oversight of collaborative activity.

A coherent student experience

Effective examples of collaborative partnership involved close working between lead and delivery partners to ensure a coherent and consistent student experience across all collaborative provision. Partners worked together to clearly communicate demarcations about what is accessible to all students and what is accessible to students on certain campuses. This includes access to facilities and learning resources, the engagement of students in their learning, and the available mechanisms for student representation and consistent approaches to student complaints and academic appeals.

Examples of good practice include:

- 1 An annual Partner Organisations' Student Survey to gather independent feedback from students studying at each of the lead institution's collaborative partners. The information generated provides oversight of the student experience across and between partnerships and allows the awarding partner to compare the experiences of students receiving teaching through a partner with those studying on-campus.
- 2 Development of a sense of shared identity and ethos engendering a sense of global community among all staff and students through broad consultation and dissemination across all campuses of the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

Areas for improvement include:

- 1 Clear communication to students and staff about what aspects of the student experience are common across all students, including those at partner institutions, and those that are not.
- 2 Consistent approaches to engage students and support them in developing an identity as students of the lead partner where appropriate.

Constructive relationships

Lead partners with particularly effective partnership arrangements ensure strategic, equal and adequate support and information is communicated between themselves and their partners. In effective collaborative arrangements, relationships were maintained through regular touchpoints, including visits, and designated fora to discuss emerging issues, developing needs and necessary adjustments.

Examples of good practice include:

- 1 The development of a partnership handbook which sets out key questions against which proposals are considered, ensuring alignment with the lead partner's strategic objectives. The handbook also sets out the policies and processes that underpin management of the partnership, including approval, operation, monitoring and termination, and the quality and standards expectations of partners, so that everyone involved operates with the same understanding.
- 2 Effective support provided by the lead partner to help delivery partners in understanding and implementing all relevant requirements for the assurance and enhancement of quality. Examples included specific training on the procedures for continuous monitoring and use of the awarding partners' Risk Matrix to assist staff in assigning risk ratings to their courses.

Areas for improvement include:

- 1 Reliance on the awarding partner's procedures for periodic review of courses and programmes can lead to gaps in addressing actions resulting from module and programme reviews within the delivery partner, posing a quality risk.
- 2 Involvement of students from collaborative partner institutions in the development of teach-out plans when courses are being closed.

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