



# Quality Compass

## Quality for all: How to stay ahead of risks in franchise provision

July 2024

Welcome to the eighth edition of Quality Compass - QAA's publication exploring current topics to help you navigate future challenges and potential opportunities. QAA is grateful to Professor Karen Heard-Lauréote, a Higher Education Consultant, for her support in producing this edition.

Focused on supporting members with or considering franchise operations, this issue aims to help higher education (HE) providers anticipate, navigate and overcome common franchise provision challenges.

Given the prominence of this topic, it also addresses common misconceptions about franchising to ensure the policy and regulatory landscape is fit for purpose with regard to this type of provision. With a specific focus on the undergraduate level, it offers guidance on ensuring academic rigour, operational robustness, regulatory compliance and high-quality programme delivery, fulfilling the potential that franchised provision can offer the student population and wider sector.

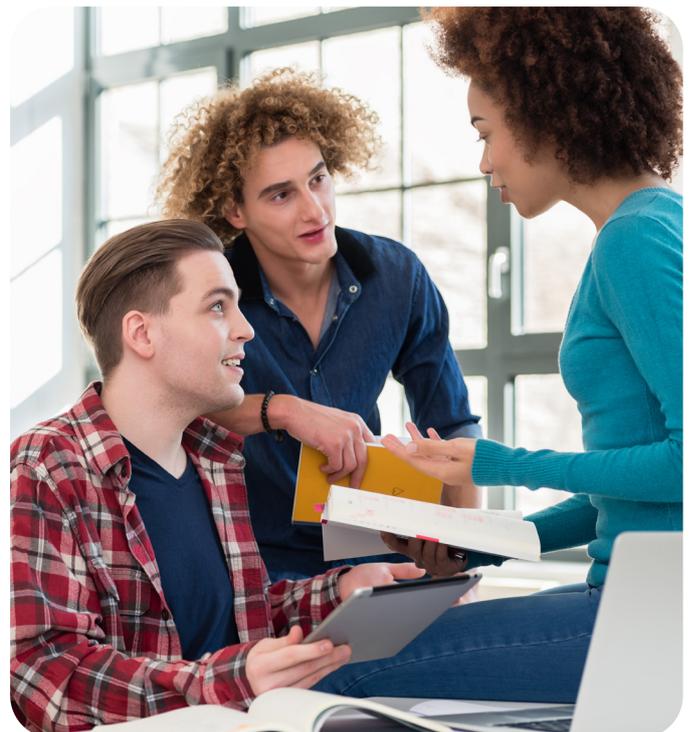
Quality Compass is a conversation starter linked to our more comprehensive Membership offer. We are keen to engage with you and provide the opportunity to share your thoughts and practices. If you would like to contribute to future editions or respond to anything we have covered in this issue, please get in touch at [membership@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:membership@qaa.ac.uk).

### Scope

Collaborative partnership arrangements in the sector span a full spectrum, from fully franchised to validated provision and everything in between. The focus here is on undergraduate franchise provision that is undertaken by degree-awarding bodies (DABs).

**DAB, or franchisor:** Refers to the provider responsible for awarding the qualifications and issues that are specifically relevant to the DAB. This term is used to distinguish responsibilities between the DAB and any other organisation within the partnership. Organisations within the partnership, who are not the awarding organisation, can still consider the guidance for their own implementation as good practice.

**Partner, or franchisee:** The provider delivering aspects of teaching, learning, assessment or student support under delegated authority of the 'awarding organisation'



## Introduction

Thousands of students study at franchised providers. Over a quarter of DABs registered with the Office for Students (OfS) in England have created partnerships with franchised providers. The relationship between DABs and these partners should be characterised by mutual benefits, rigorous standards and consistent collaboration to create an environment conducive to student success and regulatory compliance.

However, recent scrutiny of franchised HE provision has thrown this characterisation into doubt. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has [raised serious concerns](#) about value for money for students at franchised providers and regulatory oversight. The National Audit Office investigated [fraud and abuse of student loan funding](#) at franchise providers, recommending that regulators should reiterate that providers bear direct responsibility for the governance and management practices in franchise agreements.

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Independent HE are also currently involved in initiatives to review and improve academic partnerships in the UK HE landscape. HEPI found much of benefit in a [recent review](#), but also called for a code of practice and better support for new entrants to the sector. New UK Quality Code Advice and Guidance on partnerships is due to be developed and published in 2025. Additionally, there is an emphasis on the critical role of franchised HE in expanding access and the importance of implementing strong student protections.

Concerns about the quality and standards of franchised provision particularly relate to the perceived variability in educational delivery and whether it consistently provides the same academic rigour and student support as providers' 'in-house' programmes.

This edition of Quality Compass aims to close the knowledge gap, provide a useful framework and set out some ways providers can meet some of the challenges when setting up and operating collaborative arrangements.

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## What is franchised provision?

The term 'franchised provision' encompasses a range of partnership arrangements where, normally, the qualification and curriculum is designed and owned by the DAB (franchisor), requiring the partner (franchisee) to deliver instruction in adherence to the prescribed programme. This framework ensures consistency and fidelity in delivery, as the franchisee is required to implement the programme as specified by the DAB. The contract with the student is owned by the franchisee.

However, the specific parameters and criteria that define such relationships can vary. It can range from the DAB retaining direct responsibility for all the programme content, the teaching and assessment strategy, the assessment regime and the quality assurance, or delegating some of these responsibilities to the partner organisation.

This variability stems from multiple factors, including the diversity in academic programmes offered, the nature of agreements between partner institutions and the differing expectations of regulatory bodies. The evolving nature of educational demands and the introduction of new technologies and teaching methodologies continue to blur the traditional boundaries of franchised provision. There is also some debate around the technical understanding of some terminology - where providers across the UK may broadly agree with how we describe franchising here, in England the OfS would consider it 'sub-contracted provision'.

Consequently, while the core idea of collaboration - extending educational offerings through partnerships - remains clear, the detailed execution and operationalisation of franchise agreements are often subject to interpretation, negotiation and adjustment. An [interim release](#) from IHE's academic partnerships project with Pinsent Masons (2024) defined a proposed typology of partnership arrangements for providers and policymakers to use. Different types of collaborative partnerships will also be specified in QAA's forthcoming Advice and Guidance linked to the 2024 edition of the UK Quality Code.



Franchising is similar to, but distinct from, other types of collaborative provision:

- **Validation** - where the teaching partner takes the lead in curriculum design, although it undergoes an approval procedure conducted by the awarding body. The student contract is owned by the partner (the franchisee).
- **Validation - standardised curriculum** - where 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. The contract is owned by the partner (the franchisee).
- **Joint venture** - where 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, and which partner owns the student contract, is determined via contractual agreements.
- **Sub-contracted provision** - where 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. Responsibility for curriculum design is determined via contractual agreements. Student contracts are owned by the awarding body (most common) or by the partner. The OfS in England uses sub-contracting as a term for collaborative provision.

Complicating this further, partners typically have a contract with students, even if the 'parent contract' is between the students and the DAB.

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## How franchise provision can enhance the student experience

Franchise provision within HE is designed to extend the reach and scope of the educational offer and significantly enhance the student experience in a variety of ways:

- **Geographic reach** - partners often operate in smaller cities and towns, which can attract a broader range of individuals, including those who need to stay closer to their homes and communities, enhancing the opportunities available to learners.
- **Promoting social mobility** - by attracting and making HE accessible to underrepresented groups, providing them with more flexible opportunities and enhanced tailored support to engage in HE.
- **Tailored support and flexible delivery** - this can include additional language assistance for international students to them integrate more smoothly, and classes in the evenings and on weekends allowing students to balance their studies with work or family commitments.
- **Professional accreditation and international recognition** - students can study courses leading to professional status where a DAB has professional body accreditation. These accreditations are often recognised internationally, boosting the student's professional profile and making these programmes more appealing to prospective students.
- **Prestige** - students will ultimately have a degree with a recognised, prestigious name on the certificate, helping their employability prospects.



## Benefits to degree-awarding bodies and partners

**Franchise provision offers multiple strategic advantages for DABs**, strengthening any HE provider's ability to meet current challenges and future demands in a sector subject to constant change. Financially, franchising expands the student base and, in some cases, the international pipeline and contributes to revenue. Franchise arrangements can be seen as less of a risk for the DAB as they can potentially maintain high levels of control over curricula, unlike other types of collaborative provision.

Franchise provision can align with the sector's commitment to widening participation and social equity - in England, this means the achievement of Access and Participation Plan targets.

Staff development is another critical benefit, by interacting with partner staff and taking on roles such as Link Tutors - which we will explore later. DAB staff will also see first-hand other providers' approaches to academic delivery and quality assurance.

These partnerships bring fresh perspectives and innovation to DABs' curricula, improving teaching methods and enriching educational content. By establishing flexible and robust educational networks, franchise agreements position DABs to meet future educational demands, including the developing focus on lifelong learning. Franchising enables partners to take advantage of the expertise and delivery track record of providers that may be better suited to deliver certain courses/programmes.

**Franchise provision also benefits partners**, aiding their strategic development through gaining access to the established brands and reputations of DABs. This partnership can boost the partner's market appeal and attract more students by being associated with a respected institution. Franchise arrangements may suit partners seeking entry into HE, enabling them to test the water before seeking degree-awarding powers, creating a potential pipeline of new providers. Or they may help develop their maturity in the HE market, giving valuable insights they can lean on when validating their own programmes. Partners benefit from using established student support, quality assurance functions, resources, curricula and teaching materials of the DAB. This can lead to significant cost savings in programme development and enhances resource efficiency.

Support and training from the DAB can improve the quality of the partner's educational delivery. This includes professional development for teachers (professional accreditation and doctorates), access to research and technological resources, and guidance on good practice. Being part of a franchise arrangement also means that partners benefit from the DAB's quality assurance processes and accreditation, ensuring that educational quality is upheld and qualifications are valued nationally and internationally.

Partners can leverage the DAB's marketing and student recruitment networks, allowing access to a broader pool of prospective students through more sophisticated marketing strategies. Depending on what is in the contract, students at partners can benefit from access to the DAB's progression routes, more comprehensive resources such as libraries and online databases, students' union membership, societies and student support services, significantly enhancing their educational experience and satisfaction.

### Key points - Benefits of franchised provision

#### For DABs

- expands the student base and meets demand
- maintains control over areas like curricula
- supports the achievement of access and participation targets
- helps develop staff

#### For partners

- gains access to DABs' established brands and reputations
- boosts market appeal
- tests the water for partners aiming for degree awarding powers
- relying on established student support, quality assurance functions, resources, curricula, and teaching materials can lead to significant cost savings
- improves educational delivery quality
- broadens the pool of potential students via recruitment networks and marketing
- enhances student experience through access to DABs' progression routes, libraries, online databases and support services.

## The journey to franchising

Establishing good practice is essential to ensure the success and integrity of franchised provision in HE. There are a number of steps providers can take, starting with grounding courses in the UK's sector reference points (such as the UK Quality Code), due diligence processes, solid contractual arrangements and securing academic standards.

### The UK Quality Code

The starting point for any franchise arrangement should be the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#). The 2024 Quality Code has a fresh emphasis on operating partnerships with other organisations which helps DABs establish effective collaborations with other organisations to ensure the integrity and credibility of their academic programmes.

The 2024 Quality Code has a dedicated Principle (no. 8) on **operating partnerships with other organisations**. It advises providers and their partners to agree proportionate arrangements for effective governance to secure the academic standards and enhance the quality of programmes and modules. The Key Practices supporting the Principle go through many of the areas covered by this edition of Quality Compass, at a higher level, and can act as an initial basis for discussions about franchise provision and for developing agreements themselves. We will shortly start work on new Advice and Guidance, tailored to align with Principle 8.

### Strategic direction

Both parties considering partnerships need to consider how collaborative provision aligns with, or flows from, their strategic direction. This should consider the type of partnerships the DAB seeks to take on, as well as the number. Providers may, for example, be facing limits to campus sizes and increasing partnerships may become the focus for growth instead. Strategies around partnerships can also cover institutional values, appetite for risk, the location, programme coverage and a framework for partnership work.

### Due diligence

Before contracts are signed, **extensive mutual due diligence checks** are vital. These checks should cover thorough financial, legal and academic due diligence before approval to proceed. The DAB will also need to ensure that the partner has an effective governing body in place.

Due diligence should look at the values, history and reputation of the other organisation, the quality of their provision, as well as their governance arrangements. It is also advisable to consider and discuss any **proposed mutual governance arrangements development** at this stage, which may include mutual representation of both parties' students and staff - up to senior leadership staff - **on relevant governance committees**.

This due diligence should be taken seriously. Both parties should consider how to mitigate any identified risks, and any concerns raised should be acted upon to manage these risks from the outset. The subsequent legal agreement can **manage any risk with clear strategies, including termination clauses**.

If the partner is located internationally there are other considerations around the landscape it operates in - for example, ease of doing business, cultural and political differences, and attitudes to partnerships. If travelling to the partner is logistically difficult or expensive, this may be an early red flag against pursuing the agreement.

A significant risk to DABs with international partners is that the former **should not assume the latter understands UK quality assurance and enhancement**, learning, teaching and assessment approaches, the regulatory landscape, and student engagement expectations. It may be necessary to specify and clarify these at the outset.

## Establishing contractual arrangements

A foundational element of good practice is establishing **tight contractual arrangements** between the DAB and its partners from the outset. This contract should **delineate responsibilities and expectations, especially governance arrangements**. It will ensure both parties are aligned and committed to mutual goals and help foster a deeper understanding of each other's roles within the partnership. Precise contractual documents are the main recourse if things go wrong.

**Contractual arrangements should be proportionate and informed by the initial due diligence.** Legal teams at both parties should be engaged early. For larger institutions with several partnership arrangements, an institutional register will be necessary, as will a named role or roles responsible for updating it. It is also important to understand what is part of any contractual agreement and what may be agreed outside it.

Knowing where the signed copy of the contract is located within the DAB is vital - especially where there can be high staff turnover and loss of institutional memory with each staff departure.

Another essential aspect is **ensuring that the contract addresses power dynamics**. These may occur when a partner feels like the lesser party with less room to manoeuvre and negotiate in a partnership. This may even lead to the former accepting less favourable financial terms to secure a partnership arrangement with a sought-after DAB. DABs may impose standard agreements, which may not cater for partner's unique needs. Competition concerns may arise when DABs restrict course validations to avoid overlap, hindering partners' ability to address local skills needs. Partners should be mindful of the **affordability of the fees** that DABs charge.

To address these challenges, partners can take several steps. Negotiating longer-term agreements with reasonable termination notice periods can ensure stability. Rather than accepting standard templates, partners could push for more equal, negotiated elements within agreements, such as pricing, resource access and validation processes. Leveraging the partner's value as a pipeline for students, including those from underrepresented groups, can strengthen their negotiating position. Fostering open communication and relationships between DABs and partners, especially at the most senior levels, helps build trust. Dedicating sufficient resources at the partner, such as staff and administration, is equally essential to support partnership activities properly.

Contractual documents should also specifically reference whether and **how students registered with a partner will have access to learning resources** held by the DAB, such as the library, VLE, student portal and other student support.

Contracts must **explicitly state where responsibilities lie for all aspects of the partnership at all stages of the student journey**, ensuring absolute clarity and alignment between the DABs and partners. This should include who is responsible for the awards and the academic standards. It must be explicitly defined **whose regulations and policies and procedures will apply** in various contexts at all stages. This should include:

- student complaints
- appeals
- academic misconduct
- who appoints external examiners
- who chairs the examination board
- monitoring and evaluation processes.

These procedures can be difficult to navigate, as role titles and responsibilities may differ in 'traditional' or research-focused HE providers and smaller or more technically focused organisations. DAB policies often cannot be taken 'off the shelf' and applied to collaborative provision without some form of adaptation and support for the partner.



**There should be agreement over how programmes are advertised and marketed**, how they are publicly communicated, and who signs off the materials. Both parties should regularly audit websites and promotional materials.

The contractual agreement securing a commitment from both parties to adhere to the defined terms and conditions from the outset must be **signed before any students are even enrolled, let alone commence their studies**. Approval of franchised provision requires the same level of external scrutiny as any other, even if it has already been approved as a programme of study at the DAB for its own students.

**Mechanisms must be considered for regular scrutiny of the provision**. It may be that the DAB's **business-as-usual annual review processes** will apply to the partner provision, or, recognising the provision's collaborative nature, **additional measures may be implemented** to ensure regular programme review. This should also include marking criteria reviews. If a DAB annually monitors or periodically reviews at school/department or faculty level, any franchised provision should be subject to the same rigour.

A sometimes overlooked aspect in franchise provision concerns **data transfer**, which should form part of the agreement. There needs to be mechanisms in place for both partners to share student data where appropriate. Systems at each institution will need to be capable of sending and receiving data. For example, where a student is enrolled on a course delivered by a partner, data needs to be shared with the DAB so they can make returns to regulators on continuation and completion rates. The data from partners will therefore need to include student characteristics, and systems at the DAB will need to identify those studying on collaborative programmes.

At the later end of the student lifecycle, **graduation arrangements** for partner students to attend DAB ceremonies are also included in contractual agreements.

Another crucial aspect of the contracting document is **exit arrangements**, including appropriate notice periods and teach-out practices if the DAB or partner wishes to withdraw from the partnership agreement and explore alternative arrangements. Such provisions will help ensure that partners are not left at short notice without student cohorts and a DAB to award their provision - especially given that the natural academic cycle may mean one or two academic cycles before a new partnership can be established.

Contractual agreements should cover **escalation**, so operational staff are clear on when issues need to be escalated up through management and governance layers appropriately.

## Key points - The journey to franchising

- Consider how franchising may fit with DAB's/partner's strategic direction.
- Both the DAB and partner should undertake extensive due diligence checks, covering mutual governance arrangements, identification of risks and strategies to mitigate them, and understanding of regulatory and quality assurance arrangements.
- Good contractual arrangements should be proportionate and informed by the initial due diligence, delineating responsibilities and expectations, and address power dynamics.
- Contracts should cover where responsibilities lie, how students will access DABs' resources, advertising and marketing, review processes, data transfer, graduation arrangements and exit strategies

## Initial and ongoing activity

Once a franchise agreement is reached, there are several key pieces of ongoing work needed to maintain healthy provision.

### Assuring academic standards

As DABs are ultimately responsible for awards made in their name, they need to be certain about the **quality and rigour of franchised provision**, including the educational challenge and coherence of the courses. The DAB's expectations here should be covered in the agreement and reviewed by ongoing monitoring systems.

At the outset, DABs can work together with partners to **set learning outcomes and calibrate the marking criteria** that will be used at the partner against their own. Not doing so might mean that students may not be developing the necessary skills adequately - in England, this is something that sits within the requirements of the OfS. Additional issues may involve the assessment methods used, particularly the predominance of non-technical assessments in technically focused modules and inappropriate marking criteria for technical assessments.

### Governance

Ongoing governance is crucial for maintaining oversight, ensuring the quality of partnerships and creating a framework within which the partnership can operate efficiently and transparently, and they should be set out in the contractual agreement.

There may already be **dedicated partnerships committees** in larger DABs. This approach may not be suitable for all partners depending on the proportion of their business that is franchise provision, however. An alternative would be adding responsibility for oversight to an existing committee, adjusting terms of reference where needed.

Governing bodies at both DABs and partners need to be **fully cognisant of the risks of franchise provision and scrutinise these regularly in the context of their institutional risk register**. The risks are not just financial and should be considered naturally higher because they are not fully controlled in-house. There should also be a process for escalating risks within that register if problems arise. The DAB's governing body may need training and development in the risks posed by franchise provision to ensure that they are sufficiently informed and prepared to exercise their scrutiny role and be assured of overall quality and standards. This may require more work for management teams to prepare them and to provide appropriate papers for governance meetings.

A common issue can, for example, arise during the student enrolment phase, where there can be **technical delays in getting students registered with a partner enrolled at the corresponding DAB**. Robust management processes at this early stage within the DAB are crucial, whereby academic registry and student support service colleagues have the authority to act given by relevant heads of service and are familiar with partner student enrolment processes and how to do this. This helps establish from the outset the principle that partner students' experience and outcomes are equally as important as those of the DAB's on-campus students.

**Regular monitoring of cohort performance, student experience and the development of action plans** are critical components of any partnership framework, enabling DABs to stay well-informed about the operations and performance of their partners. **Link Tutor reports** could aid this ongoing oversight, ensuring that necessary adjustments can be made promptly and keeping the partnership aligned with DAB partnership objectives and compliant with internal and external quality standards and regulatory compliance. These platforms are essential for addressing issues, exploring opportunities for enhancement and making strategic decisions promptly and collaboratively.

One such significant area for committee work is student experience and engagement. Understanding the entire student offer available at partners and how it influences the overall student experience is essential. To achieve this, partnership committees should give **oversight of student engagement and assess the effectiveness of the partnership in fostering student continuation and progression**.

Partnerships committees can look at various aspects of student engagement such as academic support, extracurricular activities and social events to ensure that students have access to a well-rounded and enriching experience. They can pinpoint areas that require improvement and take timely action to address them. This can contribute significantly to the long-term success of the partnership and can help create a strong sense of community and belonging among students.

Any franchise provision considered high risk from the initial due diligence checks should be on a shorter review cycle. This will help maintain the partnership's relevance and efficacy and reinforces the commitment to continuous improvement and adaptation in response to feedback and changing circumstances.

## Regulatory compliance and quality assurance

DABs are responsible for ensuring that partners are fully aware of, and compliant with, the regulatory requirements in each relevant UK nation. This may include implementing measures to guarantee that the assessments conducted by partners are valid and reliable and maintain high standards of academic integrity and quality of education.

To meet these high standards, DABs may need to **upskill and build capacity** within partners by providing training, development programmes and resources to help partner staff members - academic and student services staff - remain informed and up-to-date with current HE policy and pedagogical developments. This training may include DAB expectations concerning assessment. It is also vital for DABs to **establish and maintain strong links between administrative teams across institutions**, as this can help to enhance organisational understanding and support and foster a collaborative environment that promotes the sharing of good practice and expertise.

## Formative assessment practice

It is generally good practice for **formative assessments to be embedded in all modules**, but it is particularly important here as students at partners are likely to have less support from peer networks familiar with higher education and may require additional help. Formative assessments also support module pass rates and provide an additional early indication for DABs of student success and engagement at the partner. A formative assessment approach will provide all parties with a more comprehensive understanding of student progress and help identify students needing additional support.

## Collaborative team and regular communication

In each institution, there should be clear team structures in place with responsibility for overseeing partnerships, and roles within those teams will also have job descriptions and performance indicators. What this looks like depends on the size of the institution and their existing structure; it is the identification of appropriate resource that is key. This may be a dedicated **Partnerships Team**, an additional role or roles within a central services department (for example, in a Quality Team) or the expansion of job responsibilities for existing staff. Larger providers will often have existing structures, managing multiple partnerships.

There should also be reporting lines up through to the highest levels of management, committees and governance, and their oversight roles will need to be clearly set out. All these structures, roles and responsibilities need to be clearly understood by both parties, with dedicated points of contact. The importance of **personal relationship building** is paramount here.

When a DAB collaborates with its respective partners to **establish a mirrored teaching provision**, that is course and module content and a teaching week programme, it creates an opportunity for a cohesive and collaborative cross-institutional team. This approach allows for the sharing of good practice, resources and expertise, and it can lead to the development of new ideas and strategies for teaching and learning. By working together, DABs and partners can create a more streamlined and efficient teaching process, benefiting students. Additionally, this approach can ensure that the curriculum is consistent across DABs and partners and that students receive a high-quality education that meets industry standards. Overall, **strong communication between all parties is vital to avoiding later challenges**. To enhance collaboration and foster a strong partnership leading to better student outcomes, Link Tutors or Officers within DABs and course/module teams at DABs and partners should have regular meetings. These will provide a platform for ongoing communication and prompt issue resolution.

Regular meetings will also allow for a continuous review of module pass rates, which can be analysed to identify any areas of weakness and strategies for improvement. In addition, these meetings provide an opportunity to effectively implement relevant action plans where they exist. Once again, the representation of students where appropriate is a critical element. Given the intensity and frequency of the suggested interactions, DABs should consider incentivising the Link Tutor/Officer role so busy academics are prepared to take it on.

## Link Tutors

Link Tutors work with both DABs and partners and ensure the terms of the agreement are upheld and support the delivery of a programme. They usually have subject knowledge and general knowledge of the DAB's quality assurance processes. They can work in assessment moderation and preparing partnership reports, but they can fulfil other roles such as in student support. A particular skill set is necessary to do this role well and thus requires consideration in specifying responsibilities, appropriate recognition and acknowledgement.

## Engagement

DABs could ensure they have access to tools such as the partner's online learning environment pages to verify student interaction with the course material. Similarly, attendance monitoring is important and DABs could scrutinise how partners manage and record attendance, especially given the implications for Student Sponsor visa compliance and other regulatory requirements.

## Quality assurance in teaching and facilities

The quality of teaching and facilities also demands close attention. DABs should consider regularly visiting and visually inspecting the teaching environments of partners to ensure they meet the contractual and educational standards. The professional development of partner staff delivering the DAB's curriculum is vital; DABs could oversee and contribute to their training, possibly through roles such as Link Tutors. Ideally these roles will have clear routes for career progression and promotion.

## Alumni engagement

An effective way to enhance the educational experience for students enrolled in partner programmes is to create dedicated LinkedIn pages for partner alumni. These pages can serve as valuable resources for current students, giving them insights into their predecessors' career paths and employment outcomes. By collecting and sharing graduation stories from partner graduates, students can better understand the opportunities and challenges ahead and the skills and knowledge employers most value in their respective fields.

## Key points – Initial and ongoing activity

- Assuring academic standards is the DAB's primary responsibility, and calibrating marking criteria is a key part of this.
- Governance arrangements should be proportionate, but will typically involve dedicated partnerships committees. Regular monitoring of cohort performance, student experience and development of action plans should be within governing bodies' remit.
- DABs are responsible for ensuring that partners are fully aware of, and compliant with, UK regulatory requirements - upskilling and capacity-building may be necessary to achieve this.
- Embedding formative assessment in modules is key, as students at franchised partners are likely to have lower levels of prior educational achievement.
- DABs and partners should have clear team structures with responsibility for overseeing partnership operations.
- Link Tutors, who work with both DABs and partners ensuring the agreement is upheld and supporting programme delivery, play a crucial role.
- DABs should look at how partners manage and record attendance and engagement.
- DABs should consider regularly inspecting teaching environments to ensure they meet the contractual standards.
- Partners should think about how to foster engagement with alumni.



## Recognising and mitigating risks

Although they offer numerous benefits, franchised educational arrangements come with risks. DABs should consider identifying potential problems early within their partners to safeguard the quality of provision and comply with broader regulatory expectations.

### Identifying issues

DABs should consider monitoring early warning signs that may indicate issues. One such indicator is too much **flexibility in operational processes** at the partner, such as students not engaging with inductions. This might suggest a need for more understanding of the importance of smooth transitions for students, which are crucial for student continuation and success.

The **non-submission of formative work** will be another indicator, as this will risk the progression of partner students.

A **robust data monitoring and review** process should be implemented. This should include regular staff meetings between the DAB and the partner, where any early warning signs can be addressed.

**Changes in leadership** at either institution will not ordinarily impact on partnerships, but changes in strategic direction may. Good communication about such changes between partners will help identify and mitigate any emerging risks to the partnership.

### Consistency in educational experience

A risk is associated with **student transitions from partners to DABs**, especially in 'top-up' provision scenarios where students complete their final year at the DAB. Students may feel alienated or underprepared, leading to perceptions of an uneven educational experience. To mitigate this risk, DABs should be proactively aligning educational content and teaching standards between them and their partners. But this may come with its own risks.

DABs seeking to enforce such consistency across their own and their partners' provisions, for example in contact hours, should be cautious and **demonstrate an appreciation of the nuance of the other party's contexts**. For example, partners may be offering higher levels of contact as a part of their unique offer due to taking students on who have lower levels of prior educational achievement.

Another issue for consideration is that DABs may encourage **students at their partners to become members of the DAB's students' union**. However, because students are not physically present at the DAB's campus and may not even be geographically close, it may be difficult to engage partner students in this way, leaving them feeling disconnected.

### Attendance monitoring

Maintaining effective attendance monitoring helps ensure that regulatory requirements are met - whether these are set out by the Student Loans Company, for example, or for Student Sponsorship licences. Tri-partite agreements for higher apprenticeship provision also feature attendance monitoring requirements. So, it is essential for DABs to ensure that the partner's **attendance tracking systems are robust and reliable**. Sound processes will also enable the gathering of early warning data on partner student engagement which could impact DAB withdrawal rates and continuation data.

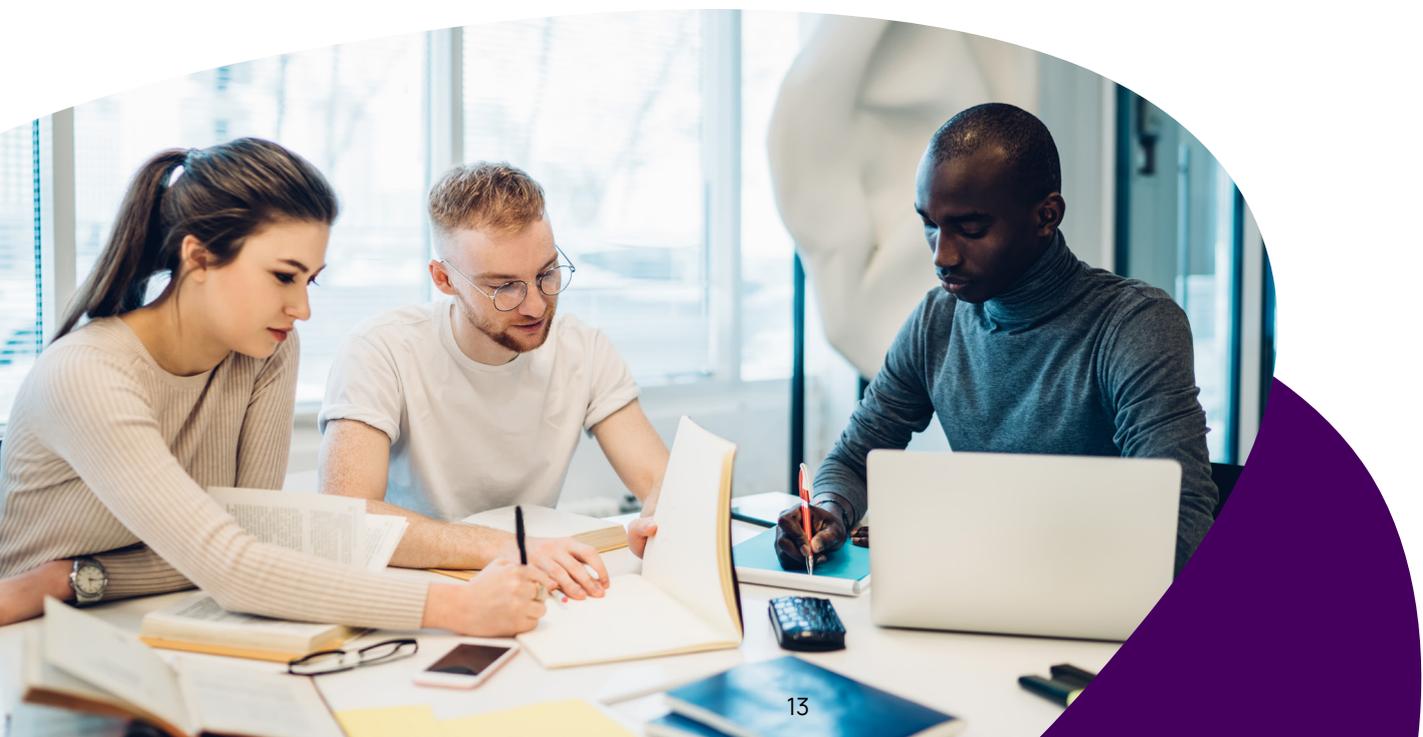
## Academic integrity

Uncovering academic integrity issues within partners is a sign that the franchise provision may be threatened. DABs must, therefore, keep a close eye on student misconduct issues within the partner to act when worrying patterns become apparent. Conversely, partners that discover no academic integrity issues should provoke further investigation, as this may suggest misconduct is not being detected effectively.

However, relying entirely on a model that identifies patterns in issues after they have occurred is not sufficient. So, both parties will also need proactive approaches to ensuring academic integrity. These could be strategic, so ensuring there are staff with academic integrity roles who are appropriately trained and resourced to detect and investigate matters, and operational such as monitoring unexpected peaks in assessment performance and employing random vivas. Approaches to teaching students about the ethical considerations of Generative Artificial Intelligence should also be considered. QAA resources on [Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education](#) and [Generative Artificial Intelligence](#) may help.

### Key points - Recognising and mitigating risks

- Too much operational flexibility, non-submission of formative work and changes in leadership may be indicators of issues at partners.
- Perceptions of uneven educational experiences is a risk, but the unique contexts of partners (for example, offering higher levels of contact) needs to be appreciated.
- Effective attendance monitoring helps ensure that regulatory requirements are met, so robust and reliable attendance tracking systems are essential.
- Academic integrity cases are a risk indicator, but a lack of cases may also be a cause for concern, suggesting matters are not being detected.



## What can DABs and partners do if things start to go wrong?

It is paramount that DABs and partners **maintain open communication** in all aspects of the relationship and delivery. This can help quickly identify and address any issues that may arise before they become more serious problems, and even where they become more serious, it can still help maintain healthy and productive working relationships.

**Finding mutually workable solutions** is essential to protect the student experience at the partner and the DAB. Resolution may involve **revisiting the contractual arrangement** between the DAB and the partner. This should be done annually, even where no obvious issues are apparent, to help avoid any future cliff-edge situations.

Where a resolution cannot be achieved at the operational staff meeting level, it is important to **escalate the issue to the appropriate decision makers**, who must ensure that day-to-day operations are not adversely affected.

There may be situations where issues are not resolvable. **Pausing or ending recruitment, or terminating the partnership entirely**, may be the only solution. In these cases, termination is not necessarily something to be avoided at all costs - if serious risks or issues have been identified, termination before students are adversely affected may be the prudent step.

These steps require a clear and strategic approach and thorough planning to ensure that the integrity of the student's education is upheld and that any transitions are as smooth and equitable as possible.

### Pause or end recruitment

When recruitment is temporarily suspended, the focus shifts to evaluating and recalibrating the partnership's terms or performance metrics. This pause could provide a crucial period for the DAB and the partner to address any issues, reassess their collaboration's efficacy, and make informed decisions about future actions without immediately affecting existing students.

### Terminating the franchise arrangement

This is the most drastic step and requires extensive preparation, particularly concerning the student's academic welfare - specifically, who assumes responsibility for their continued education. If the DAB offers similar programmes, assessing how the transition might affect the students' progression rates is crucial. Such shifts could present challenges different from the standard educational trajectories these students might have expected.

If the DAB does not offer the programme, alternative provisions such as reverse franchising may be considered. In this arrangement, the DAB would take over the delivery of the programme from the partner, guiding students through to their graduation.

Teach-out arrangements should be clearly outlined in the original contract to ensure a seamless transition for students who might be affected by the cessation of the partnership.

### Key points - What to do if things start to go wrong

- Maintaining open communication can help identify issues, but it is also crucial in addressing them.
- Finding workable solutions may involve revisiting the franchise agreement.
- If operational staff cannot resolve issues, they should be escalated to the appropriate decision makers.
- Pausing or ending recruitment, or terminating the partnership entirely, may be the only solution in the most serious cases - this should be carefully prepared for and managed.

## Conclusion

In any franchise arrangement, the overarching goal should be to forge a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between DABs and partners. A crucial starting point for nurturing such relationships is thorough due diligence and establishing tight contractual arrangements. These agreements serve as a solid foundation, clearly outlining roles, responsibilities and expectations, setting the stage for a successful partnership.

The landscape of collaborative educational partnerships is subject to constant change, with fully franchised provision being just one of several models. DABs and their partners must clearly understand the specific model employed in their arrangement, as each model comes with its own set of risks and management strategies. Clarity in these arrangements helps navigate the complexities associated with different types of partnerships.

However, the future of franchise provision remains uncertain. On the one hand, franchise arrangements may see accelerated growth as a cost-effective strategy for expanding student numbers and generating additional income. On the other hand, the sector remains vulnerable to potential scandals, which could precipitate a rapid decline in the popularity of such provision. Both DABs and partners must be wary of the significant risks involved and be prepared to manage these effectively to sustain the viability and integrity of franchise provisions. This balance of opportunity and caution defines the delicate dynamics of franchise arrangements in the HE sector.

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## Further support

The [UK Quality Code 2024](#) is a shared understanding of quality practice across UK HE, protecting the public and student interest and championing UK HE's world-leading reputation for quality.

QAA's Quality Code 2018 [Advice and Guidance on Partnerships](#) provides more detail on many aspects of Good Practice. This will soon be tailored to align with Principle 8 of the 2024 Quality Code and will be replaced with refreshed guidance in 2025, to include more detail about what represents high-quality practices associated with all types of partnerships.

QAA's [Subject Benchmark Statements](#) are an additional source of support for course and programme teams collaborating via Link Tutors and Officers with partners.

QAA can provide support, whether on behalf of a DAB or partner. Indeed, if providers struggle with any aspect of their broad collaborative partnership arrangements, particularly their franchised provision, QAA's [Targeted Quality and Standards Service](#) could be a good place to start. Contact [UKservices@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:UKservices@qaa.ac.uk) to find out more.

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