Guide to External Academic Partnerships
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Introduction

Heriot-Watt University (“HWU” or “the University”) actively pursues and participates in over a hundred Student Mobility Partnerships with higher education institutions worldwide. Academic Partnerships can be initiated by direct communication between the appropriate representatives at higher education institutions or can follow on from an existing partnership such as an Approved Learning Partner (ALP). They can also develop from a Memorandum of Understanding (where Schools establish a formal agreement confirming their wish to cooperate on the development of future programmes and/or articulation arrangements with partner(s)). However a Memorandum of Understanding is not sufficiently formal enough or detailed in terms of contractual commitments to constitute a Academic Agreement.

There are clearly defined steps for the approval of Academic Partnerships which are detailed in this document.

Risk Management

Risk management is a key step in the assessment and reassessment of its partnerships. The risk management process will help identify, mitigate and manage key risks in the pursuit and renewal of Academic Partnerships. The assessment of risk will enable the University/School to make informed decisions on whether or not the Academic Partner should be approved or re-approved. In stages 1 and 2 of the processes below we have included criteria to enable you to assess the risks.

It is not intended that this serves to provide a definitive position on whether a proposal or renewal of an existing partnership should be considered or not, but to assist colleagues to identify the level of risk associated with a partner. For example, a low risk partnership may be rejected (for example on financial grounds) whilst a high risk partnership may be explored further (for example on the basis of its potential and strategic importance).

Due Diligence - What is it and why do we need to do it?

Due diligence is a process that is undertaken to protect and preserve the University’s reputation. The scope and extent of a due diligence process will depend on the scale and nature of the partnership, but also on the location and the status of the proposed academic partner. Due diligence is a mutual exercise: do not be surprised if the proposed partner asks for similar information about the University as part of their own due diligence process. The earlier due diligence is started the better. The results allow the University and prospective partners to shape the partnership and better understand and evaluate the related risks.

There may be concern that starting a formal due diligence exercise is inappropriate in certain countries and may upset a potential partner and lead to a breakdown in negotiations that were progressing well. Although this may be an understandable reaction, it should not stop the University from carrying out due diligence.

You cannot always take things at ’face value’ so it is important that sufficient background checks are made and not rely solely on the word of a proposed partner. The School must consider the outcome of the due diligence exercise and, where called for, be prepared to walk away from a proposed
Guide to External Academic Partnerships

there is a significant risk to financial stability or damage to the University's local and/or international reputation.

There are a number of considerations before committing to an Academic Partnership. In the context of partnerships arrangements due diligence involves the gathering and review of information related but no limited to:

- University or School objectives – Considers the fit between the proposal and the University or School objectives – (This information is captured at the Proposal stage – Business Plan)
- Legal, political, regulatory and statutory environment in which the proposed partnership operates
- The Partner’s financial circumstances
- Academic Quality assurance
- Student Experience – Quality of facilities and services
- Insurance
- Visa implications
- The Partners academic reputation

Due diligence checks are the responsibility of the Academic Lead with help and support from a number of colleagues, for example:

- Risk and Audit Management Services - relating to risk identification and insurance
- Academic Registry
- Financial Controller - relating to the assessment of financial risk to income and the partners financial status
- Director for Academic Quality
- Director of Learning and Teaching

Academic Content and Programme Approval

An important part of the approval process for a Academic partner is to ensure that all aspects of the University’s programmes to be offered by the Academic partner are correctly approved via the relevant University Studies Committees, which operates with the delegated authority of the Senate. The Programme Director (or delegate) will be responsible for ensuring that the programme is approved through the relevant Committee.

Preparing Academic Agreements

The Guide to Academic Partnerships is available at https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/partnerships/partnership-agreements.htm and provide detailed information for consideration in the preparation of agreements. These guidelines have been developed and are aligned with the University Guidelines for all external partnerships such as Exchange, ALPs and Collaborative Agreements.

There are five distinct stages associated with the approval of an External Academic Agreement. These are described below:

Stage 1: Proposal (Business Case)
The first stage is the negotiation / due diligence and risk assessment processes, these stages assess the suitability of an academic partner and are required in advance of formalising an agreement.

Following the identification of a potential new or when renewing an existing Academic partner the Academic Lead will start to gather the relevant information, negotiation with the academic partner should initially take place directly between the School and the partner Institution(s) with the Quality and External Partnerships Section in the Academic Registry being kept informed.

Following completion of the Proposal process by the Academic Lead the Proposal will be reviewed by the School Management Group or Board who will review the proposal and either approve a preparatory visit or request further information to assist the Group/Board with their assessment. There are three possible outcomes:

- The proposal is approved and a visit can be arranged
- The proposal requires further work to provide assurance
- The proposal is not approved and no further work should be undertaken with the proposed partner at this time.

Stage 2: Assessment of Suitability and Visit

Following approval of Stage 1, the Academic Lead can begin the process of assessing the suitability of the Academic Partner. This process can start prior to a visit by referring to information that may be freely available on the partner’s web site and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice and business risk service web sites.

During the visit the Academic Lead will complete the Visit Report and Assessment Template and use the risk assessment criteria to assess the Academic partner. The template can be found at the following link: https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/external-partnerships.htm

Stage 3: Risk Register

Following the visit the Academic Lead should send the completed Visit Report to the Risk and Audit Management Service. This will assist with the completion of a risk register. This stage will normally require consultation with the Academic Lead to ensure that all the risks and controls to manage and mitigate the risks are captured.

Stage 4: Approval by the School

Following completion of steps 1-3 the Academic Lead will present the following documents to the School Management Group or Board to gain assurance to the suitability of the Academic partner:

1) Completed Proposal – Stage 1
2) Visit Report – Stage 2 (following the template provided at https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/external-partnerships.htm)
3) Risk Register – Stage 3
4) Agreement (University templates are available from https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/external-partnerships.htm or version provided by the partner)
There are three possible outcomes:

- The School Management Group or Board approves the partnership
- Further work is required to provide assurance
- The proposed partnership is not approved and no further work should be undertaken with the proposed partner at this time.

Following approval by the School the formal approval process can take place as described below.

**Important:** No students should be sent to the partner or accepted to study at Heriot-Watt University from a partner until a new agreement has been signed by both parties. Only once the fully completed and signed agreement is returned to the University may the agreement be considered to be fully approved and in force.

### Stage 5: Formal Approval by the University

This stage is the formal process of seeking approval of and obtaining the required signatures for the agreement. Following the completion of Stages 1-4, the Quality and External Partnerships team in the Academic Registry will ensure that all the necessary information is collated and the final approval process is followed. At any stage, any concerns with the strategic or operational content of the proposed agreement and accompanying supporting documentation will be reported back to the School for consideration and action where required.

It is expected that the process of approval should take 3-4 weeks providing all of the documentation is complete.

Formal approval is a yes/no decision and should not involve a long set of questions and negotiation during the process. All negotiation and assessment processes should have taken place in Stages 1-4.

The details of all the documents required for this stage can be found in the relevant Approval Summary which can be found at [https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/external-partnerships.htm](https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/external-partnerships.htm)

In all cases the Final Approval Summary will be signed off by:

1. Legal Services Manager, Research and Enterprise Services
2. Director of Governance and Legal Services
3. Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching)
4. Secretary of the University

Each of the signatories above confirms that:

- The agreement contributes to the University’s strategic plan and will generate academic benefits in the future, and will not place any other partnership or activity at risk.
Guide to External Academic Partnerships

- The Academic Partner is a suitable and fit partner to do business with, has the facilities and resources to deliver the programme or programmes, and has the management structure and processes that will give the University confidence that this will continue in the future.

- The School and the University can support the Academic placement and has the capacity to support the placement, the students and to work with the partner to ensure the delivery of high quality education and learning experience within the Academic placement and that the risks have been adequately identified and are monitored and managed.

In addition to the above the relevant Approval Summary shall also be signed off by the Chief Operating Officer and Registrar and the Chief Executive Officer for HWUM agreements and the Head of Dubai Campus/Director of Administration & Registrar (as appropriate) for Dubai agreements.

**Important:** Only the Secretary of the University or nominated deputy has the authority to commit the University to any Academic agreement.

The above mentioned signatories will consider the outcome of the due diligence exercise and visit report and risk assessment and will proceed to sign the agreement. It should be noted that the University may not approve the Academic Partnership where there are concerns relating to significant financial or reputational risk.

Once signed by all of the above, the signed agreement will be sent by the Quality and External Partnerships service in the Academic Registry to the Academic partner for countersignature and the return of one copy for the Academic Registry files. A scanned copy of the signed agreement will then be sent to the appropriate School(s) for their records.

The Quality and External Partnerships service will advise the Academic Lead and Head of School that the Academic Partner agreement has been signed by both parties to enable the partnership to be marketed to students and developed.

**Reviewing Academic Agreements**

The Academic Lead is responsible for monitoring and revising the risks relating to the Academic partnership. The Academic Lead will review the Academic Partner Visit risk assessment at least annually or more frequently where issues affecting the student experience have been identified or when other political, economic, or environment risks arise that may impact the partners ability to continue to deliver the agreement.

Annual Academic Partner monitoring and Review Reports are required from Schools and are returned each September for the end of the academic year. These Reports are reviewed by the relevant School, the Dean of the University, Quality and Standards Committee and Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching).

These Reports include a summary of student feedback and staff feedback on the programme. Schools also obtain information on the quality of student attainment through examination performance information, which is reviewed by Examination Boards. Information on student attainment is included in the Annual Partner Monitoring and Review Report which each School prepares for each programme.
Renewal and Quality Assurance Visits

Each Academic agreement must be renewed on a three to five year basis. The Academic Lead shall ensure that the renewal of an Academic Partner takes place well ahead of the expiry of the agreement to ensure the agreement remains valid. All stages as stated above apply to the renewal of each and every External Academic Agreement. The Academic Lead must complete the Visit Report Template in each and every case (template available from https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/partnerships/partnership-agreements.htm).

Pastoral and Interim Visits

In the event issues arise during the External Academic Agreement that indicate there are issues affecting the students learning and/or experience that are giving cause for concern a pastoral visit can be undertaken. The Academic Lead should consider using skype, email etc. to communicate with the partner and/or the students to ascertain if the issues can be resolved remotely.

In the event that the issues cannot be resolved remotely the Academic Lead will advise the Head of School and Director for Learning and Teaching and provide details of the reason and evidence for the visit and include details of all additional costs involved. The Head of School will only authorise additional expenditure where there is evidence that a pastoral visit is necessary.

There may also be a requirement to undertake an interim visit to a partner for a number of different reasons e.g. business development, academic discussions, programme development and/or a visit by a lecturer to assist local tutors. In each and every case an Interim Visit report must be completed (template is available from https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/academic-registry/quality/external-partnerships.htm) and submitted to Quality and External Partnerships/Go Global team as appropriate.

All Interim Visit reports will be reviewed by Quality and External Partnerships/Go Global teams and the Deputy Principal (Learning & Teaching), as appropriate, with a summary of key themes/issues arising from visits reported to the Quality and Standards Committee annually. Where a partner is a multi-School partner, the interim visit report will be shared amongst the participating Schools.

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