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SMU Partnership Approval, Implementation, and Monitoring (AIM) Framework 23/24 (Updated Jan 24)

**1. Introduction**

There are various models for managing partnerships across UK higher education institutions. This paper draws upon best practice in the sector, as well as SMU’s own experiences in delivering partnerships, to propose a model which covers each stage in the partnership journey. The SMU Partnership AIM Framework applies to arrangements with a partner organisation who deliver, assess, or support learning opportunities that lead or contribute to the award of academic credit or substantive award from SMU. The various types of partnership activity that this may include are outlined in Appendix 1. These activities have varying levels of risk, and so the intensity of the stages in this Framework will vary accordingly (for example, franchises carry greater risk than articulation agreements, and so will require closer scrutiny and monitoring).

SMU regards partnerships as essential for the University to achieve its growth ambitions. This includes both international and home partners, who will enable us to expand our global profile and reach diverse communities. As set out in our Vision 2030, we will seek to develop partnerships with institutions who share our goals and values. Specific criteria for establishing partnerships therefore include:

* Opportunity for significant and sustainable growth in student numbers over a prolonged period
* Financial benefit to SMU
* Offering new learning opportunities and routes into higher education for students unlikely to obtain access through other means
* Opportunity to build our reputation and position in national and international markets
* Potential for collaboration in research and enterprise activity, as well as teaching
* Opportunity for our students and staff to learn through international collaboration
* Strategic importance for our Catholic mission nationally and internationally.

SMU recognises its responsibility for the quality and academic standards of all partnership activity, in accordance with the [OfS regulatory framework](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/the-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/) and the [UK Quality Code](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/advice-and-guidance/partnerships). The University will only approve partnership activities that fall within its own subject expertise. Students enrolled on franchise partnership programmes will be subject to the regulations and policies of the University, unless otherwise agreed at the point of validation.

The Partnership AIM Framework highlights the oversight needed from academic and professional service areas in the University, in each of the three key phases of the partnership journey; approval, implementation, and monitoring. This paper also briefly considers the pre-sale stage, where potential partnerships first arise, and notes the key committees responsible for partnership activity.

**2. Key committees**

Partnership activity will be considered at both University and Faculty level committees:

**Academic Partnerships Committee (APC)**

This new Committee will combine and replace the former CPC and USPSG, in order to streamline processes. APC will be chaired by the Head of Academic Partnerships, which will be a new role from September 2023, situated in CTESS. APC will have the following membership: Head of Academic Partnerships (Chair), Dean of Faculty (Partnerships) (Deputy Chair), Chief Financial Officer (CFO) or delegate, Business Development Director (BDD), International Engagement, Student Recruitment and Admissions representative, Subject Lead Partnerships from each School, representatives from Faculty Admin, Quality Standards (QS) Office, Registry, Finance, Marketing, Legal, Employability Services (professional services colleagues may wish to alternate attendance). APC will be held every six weeks, and will report into the **University Academic Strategy, Portfolio and Student Experience Committee (SPSE).** Minutes from APC will also go to **SLT,** **Academic Board,** and **UEC.** The agenda for APC will include partnerships proposals, approvals, minutes from JMBs, reports from site visits, partner Annual Programme Reviews, and Periodic Partnership Reviews, and round table updates from Subject Lead Partnerships. APC will ensure that the Partnership Monitoring Log is kept up to date, and record the risk rating of each partnership.

**VC Advisory Group: Partnerships**

The Steering Group will meet for one hour every six weeks, to provide an update to the VC on partnership activity across the University. The membership of VC Advisory Group: Partnerships will be the VC, Provost, Dean of Faculty (Partnerships), Head of Academic Partnerships, CFO or delegate, BDD, Head of International Partnerships or delegate, and Director of Student Operations. The agenda will cover new partnership proposals and updates on current partnerships in relation to KPIs.

**Faculty Quality, Curriculum and Student Experience Committees (proposed as part of new committee structure) (QCSEs)**

QCSEs will have Partnerships as a standing item on their agenda, to ensure ownership of partnership activity at the Faculty level.

**3. Pre-sale**

Potential partners may come to the attention of SMU through many routes, and as well as responding to opportunities it is also desirable that we should be proactive in identifying partners that support the Vision 2030 Partnership Strategy. The initial viability of any potential partnership should be discussed by the BDD (if domestic partnerships with private providers) or by an International Engagement, Student Recruitment, and Admissions team member (if further education or international partnerships) with relevant Faculty members, e.g. the School Partnership Subject Lead, Course Lead, Head of School, and Dean of Faculty. If these key stakeholders agree that the partnership is worth pursuing, bearing in mind the guiding principles of partnerships, then the School Partnership Subject Lead(s) will prepare an Academic Partnership Proposal, with support from professional services colleagues, to go forward to the approval phase. If the partnership will cross more than one School, then the Partnership Subject Leads should work together on preparing the Proposal. A risk assessment will be undertaken and due diligence carried out, in accordance with the level of risk that the partnership poses. Due diligence will be carried out by the Partnership Subject Lead in conjunction with the QS Office, Legal, and Finance Services, including seeking references, site visits, and confirming that the SMU infrastructure, capacity, systems, and expertise exist to support the partnership. The CFO will be responsible for the financial due diligence. The Proposal should also include comment from an external examiner within the Faculty (or other suitable external academic), on the appropriateness of the partnership from an academic quality perspective.

**4. Approval phase**

The steps in the approval process for a new partnership are detailed below and summarised in Figure 1.

**Step 1 - Faculty Quality, Curriculum and Student Experience Committees (QCSEs) scrutinise the Academic Partnership Proposal.** If QCSE recommend that the Proposal is approved, the Proposal will then be passed to APC. Any recommendations from QCSE, including for further due diligence to be carried out, should be undertaken before the Proposal is presented to APC.

**Step 2 - Academic Partnerships Committee (APC) scrutinise the Proposal,** including the due diligence documents. APC may request further information or evidence before the partnership is approved. Validations of a partner course (rather than an SMU course delivered wholly or partly by a partner) will also require the course to go through the SMU validation process for new courses, including an approval event with external scrutiny.

**Step 3 - Senior Leadership approvals** – once approval is recommended by APC, the Academic Partnership Proposal will be presented by the Head of Academic Partnerships to the VC Advisory Group: Partnerships for Senior Leadership approval (e.g. Provost/CFO/VC). The VC Advisory Group: Partnerships will advise if the proposal also needs to be presented to the Board of Governors (via relevant Committees/Sub-committees) for final approval, in the case of high-risk partnership activity. Approvals will be recorded by the Head of Academic Partnerships and reported to APC.

**Step 4 - Contracting** – once the partnership is approved, the Legal Services team will liaise with the Partnership Subject Lead and the BDD/GE team to produce a legal contract for the partnership. The resource demand for partnerships means there will need to be a dedicated person for partnerships within the Legal team. The contract will be based on the standard SMU partnership terms and conditions and, for franchise partnerships, will follow the standard offer set out in the Operations Manual for Franchise Partnerships (including provision of resources, support, and responsibilities between SMU and the partner). Any requests to deviate from this standard offer would require agreement with the relevant SMU teams and adjustments to pricing in the partnership terms. The contract will also include the required student recruitment figures for the partnership, as agreed between the Faculty and partner. Draft and final versions of the contract will be shared with APC, who will record the issuing and signing of the contract.

**5. Implementation phase**

Once the contract has been signed, the partnership enters the implementation phase. This phase is led by the Faculty, with the support of professional services. Implementation activities will vary depending on the type of partnership, with franchise agreements in particular requiring close collaboration between SMU and the Partner. The Operations Manual for Franchise Partnerships (attached) has been produced to guide Franchise Partners in the implementation and operation of the partnership. The Operations Manual sets out standard expectations regarding recruitment and admissions, resources, student matters, assessment processes, student awards, and student feedback and representation. The majority of the content of the Operations Manual will not be repeated here, but the key operational meetings (Partnership Implementation Meetings - PIMs) and the resource requirements for implementing partnerships are noted below. The description of these meetings and resource requirements focuses on franchise agreements, as SMU has an increasing number of these arrangements, and they require input from both academics and professional services staff across the University. Other types of partnership activity, such as articulations, may have less frequent PIMs, with a smaller number of staff required, to successfully implement the partnership.

**Partnership Implementation Meetings (PIMs)**

The Head of Academic Partnerships will chair PIMs, which will take place from the approval of the partnership through the set-up, launch, and delivery of the partnership arrangement. PIMs will be attended by Subject Lead Partnerships, Link Tutors, and by the Professional Services Lead/s. Other colleagues may be invited to individual meetings as required. For franchise partnerships, meetings will likely be held fortnightly during the set-up, and may reduce to monthly once the partnership is established. Other types of partnership may require less frequent meetings. PIMs will focus on student recruitment and quality, to ensure that admissions requirements are met, that the expected teaching and student support resources and facilities are in place, and that the student experience and outcomes meet the expected standards.

**Resource requirements:**

* Head of Academic Partnerships – will provide strategic and operational leadership of partnerships activity, and will be involved in the approval, implementation, and monitoring of partnerships, and chair the APC and PIMs. The role will report into the Dean of CTESS, but also have a dotted line to the Provost.
* **Dean of Faculty (Partnerships)** – will have senior responsibility for partnerships across the University. They will act as Deputy Chair of the APC, and represent partnerships at key University committees, including UEC, Academic Board, and the Risk Management Group.
* **Subject Lead Partnerships** – will oversee all partnerships and Partnership Link Tutors (PLT) within the School and liaise with the Head of Academic Partnerships. They will be the first point of escalation for any queries or issues which cannot be resolved between the PLT and the Partner. The role will attract a workload allowance of 150-500 hours per year. Subject Lead Partnerships will report into APC with an update on the status of each partnership, focusing on numbers against target (fees paid), withdrawals/continuation, and student achievement.
* **Partnership Link Tutor (PLT)[[1]](#footnote-2)** – Partners will be assigned an academic Partnership Link Tutor (PLT) from within each School where the partnership takes place. The Subject Lead Partnerships or the Course Lead may also be the PLT for smaller partnerships. PLTs will be the first point of contact for academic matters in the course delivery. They will be responsible for approving Partner academic staff teaching on the course, and ensuring that agreed admissions standards are applied (including checking a sample of applications), and that appropriate academic, administrative, pastoral, and employability support is in place. They will also liaise between the Partner and SMU Course Leaders/Module Convenors, including ensuring that SMU staff are aware of the timescales for partner module deliveries and assessments, and that Partner staff are provided with module outlines, assessment briefs, and marking criteria. During assessment periods, PLTs will work with the partner and SMU Module Convenors to ensure that marks are submitted by the partner and moderated (internally and externally) in preparation for Boards. PLTs will receive a workload allowance between 25-300 hours per year depending on the nature of the partnerships (e.g. franchises will attract higher allocations of usually at least 100 hours), size (e.g. student recruitment numbers per semester) and complexity (e.g. number of courses delivered, number of intake points) of the partnership, determined by the Subject Lead Partnerships.
* **Professional Services Lead –** the Professional Services Lead will be the first point of contact for non-academic matters, such as those related to IT, Registry, the Quality Office, Admissions, Finance, Marketing, Legal, and Employability Services, and will liaise between the Partner and the relevant professional services team, to facilitate ease of communication for the Partner and SMU staff.
* **Module Convenors** – will provide Partners with the module outline, assessment briefs, and marking criteria (teaching delivery materials are not provided to Partners). They will check and agree any modifications to assessment briefs where required by the local context. They (or their delegate) will moderate a sample of Partner assessments before these are moderated by the External Examiner. They will also be able to brief Partner module teams on the module delivery, assessment, and feedback

# Partnerships Administrator – an administrator within the Faculty will support the PLT and address queries around issues such as student registration and enrolment, assessments, and results. They will communicate deadlines for marking and moderation to the Partner and SMU staff and liaise with External Examiners to complete external moderation. They will support the Exam Boards within the Faculty and approve marks in advance of the University Exam Boards. They will also administer partner meetings, including PIMs and Joint Management Boards, to produce agendas and record discussions and actions.

# Employability Service – will review the employability provision at Partners, to ensure that students are provided with (as required by the particular programme); the arrangement of sandwich years, work placement modules, internships, mentoring and a general careers service (including Careers Consultants or similar).

# Marketing – will review all promotional materials from the Partner, and provide comment/approval before these are published or circulated.

# HR – will hold copies of Partner Staff Forms to record Partner staff access to SMU systems, and conduct bi-annual checks with Partners to confirm that access is still required.

# IT – will provide Partner staff access to necessary SMU systems, e.g. SITS for mark entry, and restricted access to Moodle (note that access to library resources will only be provided if requested by the partner pre-approval, subject to an additional fee payable by the Partner per student and to third party permissions).

# Admissions – will received lists of accepted applicants and their documents from the Partner, liaise with the Link Tutor to review samples of applicants, create applicant records on SITs (our student information system), email applicants with their SMU ID number and offer, and create enrolment records for applicants.

# Registry – will email applicants with information on completing online enrolment, and check the Student Finance details. Partners must adhere to the SMU Student Finance England (SFE) confirmation points for Registration and Attendance. Registry will offer a training session for Partner staff in using SITS for mark entry. They will also oversee the University Exam Boards, including inviting Partner representatives.

# Quality and Standards (QS) Office – will set up students’ programme of study, diet (modules available for study) and award and progression rules on SITs. During the proposal stage, they will ensure that due diligence and SMU's quality requirements are completed, and will guide and support the process and completion of paperwork. They will maintain the QAE Handbook, including the section on Partnerships. The Collaborative Partnership Quality and Standards Manager (QSM) will support the Head of Academic Partnerships in the routine review of Partnerships, as well as in identifying and implementing actions where SMU have concerns about a partnership.

# Finance – will invoice students for tuition fees and send notifications to students regarding non-payment of fees. They will provide weekly enrolment reports to the Partner to monitor SLC status and provide a basis for reconciliation, and provide monthly reports to SMU and the Partner with detail on receipt of tuition fees. Finance will also arrange payments to Partners upon receipt of invoices.

# Legal – will advise on any contractual queries/issues.

* **Centre for Teaching Excellence & Student Success (CTESS)** – will provide training and guidance on academic staff development opportunities available to academic staff in Partner organisations (e.g. Epigeum, Academic Integrity), and on key university strategies (e.g. the undergraduate Curriculum Framework, Learning and Teaching Strategy, and Student Retention Strategy). They will also input into the Access and Widening Participation requirements for Partners, including reporting on relevant metrics and developing action plans where needed.

**6. Monitoring phase**

Once the partnership is underway, the monitoring phase begins (although there will be aspects of the implementation phase which are ongoing). The Quality Standards (QS) Office maintain the Academic Partnerships Register and institutional oversight of the academic monitoring and quality assurance activity of partnership, in conjunction with Subject Partnership Leads and Partnership Link Tutors, including External Examiner Reports and Programme Reviews. Details of the quality assurance procedures related to partnerships are also set out in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook . There are several layers of monitoring, to ensure oversight at the Faculty and University level.

* **Assessment moderation and Exam Boards** – Module Convenors will moderate a sample of Partner assessments (Partners should conduct their own first marking and moderation), and assessments will then be provided to External Examiners for moderation. The External Examiner should usually be the same as for the core SMU delivery of the module (where applicable and possible e.g. if the External Examiner is willing and has capacity), to ensure parity across the deliveries. Partner marks should usually go to existing Exam Boards within the Faculty, for the Partner module deliveries to be considered alongside other module deliveries wherever possible, to enable comparison of student achievement. There may be some instances where it is necessary to hold a separate Board within the Faculty for Partner modules, for example where Partner term dates don’t fit with the SMU academic calendar. Marks will then go to the University Exam Board. Partner representatives will be invited to attend both the Faculty and University Exam Boards. Commentary on the Partner provision would be expected as a section within the main External Examiner Report.
* **Joint Management Board (JMB**) – a JMB will be held a minimum of twice per year (at the discretion of SMU) to review the operation of the partnership and agree recruitment targets for the subsequent intake. JMBs will be chaired by the Head of Academic Partnerships and will be attended by the Subject Lead Partnerships/Head of School/Dean, Link Tutors, and professional services colleagues involved in the implementation and monitoring of the partnership, and by senior and operational staff from the partner. Minutes from the JMB will be sent to the APC.
* **Site visits** – a Partner site visit will be held at least once per year (at the discretion of SMU), attended by one or more SMU staff e.g. the Head of Academic Partnerships/Dean/Head of School/Subject Lead Partnerships/Link Tutor/Head of International Partnerships or delegate, and other staff from SMU involved in the implementation and monitoring of the partnership as appropriate. Site visits will be conducted with sufficient rigor to ensure that teaching, resources, and student support are being provided as expected. A report from each site visit will be provided to the APC.
* **Annual Programme Review** - the Partner will be expected to undertake an Annual Programme Review, in line with SMU’s quality assurance timelines. The partnership delivery will also be considered in the core SMU Programme Review. Reports will be expected to consider withdrawals, continuation, student achievement and outcomes. Annual Programme Reviews will be considered at the subsequent JMB, to enable discussion between SMU and the Partner regarding key actions from the Report.
* **Periodic Partnership Review** – a formal review of the partnership will be undertaken periodically, usually every three years but dependent on the duration of the contract and level of risk in the partnership. This will include both a review of the contractual arrangements and academic revalidation, led by the Head of Academic Partnerships and supported by Academic Registry, and GE (for international/further education partnerships). The contract review should include input from the CFO (or delegate) and legal adviser.

### **Annual due diligence –** Partners are required to submit upon request updated documentation such as insurance certificates and annual audited accounts, on an annual basis, to ensure they continue to conform to University expectations in respect of financial probity and legality.

* **Faculty Quality, Curriculum and Student Experience Committees (QCSEC)**

– will receive updates from each Subject Lead Partnerships/Link Tutor on the partnerships in the Faculty, as part of the standing item on partnerships. They will also receive Annual Programme Reviews from partners.

* **Academic Partnerships Committee (APC)** – will have a standing agenda to include new partnerships proposals, approvals, minutes from the QCSEs and JMBs, reports from site visits, partner Annual Programme Reviews, and Periodic Reviews
* **VC Advisory Group: Partnerships –** will advise the VC on partnerships activity, covering new partnership proposals and updates on current partnerships in relation to KPIs.
* **University Academic Strategy, Portfolio and Student Experience Committee (SPSE)** – will receive minutes from APC, and Annual Programme Review reports from partners, reported from QCSECs.
* **Academic Board and University Executive Committee (UEC)** – will receive minutes from APC, for the purpose of University oversight of partnerships.
* **Risk management** – APC will maintain the Partnership Monitoring Log, including the risk rating of each partnership (from low to very high risk). The risk rating is dependent on whether the partnership is progressing according to the contractual terms and KPIs, including admissions quality standards, student recruitment targets, continuation, assessment quality, student achievement. Concerns in one or more of these areas would result in an amber rating (medium risk), and then red (high risk) and purple (very high risk), depending on the number and severity of concerns. Red and purple ratings would need to be reported to the VC Advisory Group: Partnerships. A purple rating indicates the need for a remedial action plan, with the potential for the need to review the partnership at the VC Advisory Group: Partnerships if issues continue. The Dean of Faculty (Partnerships) will be part of the University Risk Management Group, to contribute to the consideration of partnerships on the Risk Registers.

**7. Partnership strategic planning**

This framework focuses on the journey for each individual Partner relationship. There also needs to be consideration of partnership work in relation to the size and shape of the University, for example determining how the percentage of domestic/international franchise students should be balanced with the percentage of core SMU students. An International Engagement Strategy will be developed by GE to guide the approach to international partnerships, and there should also be a strategic approach to home partnerships, based on understanding of the demand for our offer in various markets.

Partnerships will be part of the University strategic planning round, in order to maintain a holistic view of partnership activity across the institution. Data on tuition fee income, student numbers (FTE), and key metrics (continuation, completion, and outcomes) for each partner will be provided to the Head of Academic Partnerships at the start of the planning round. This will enable review and discussion of these aspects of partnership activity, and for objectives to be set for the following year(s), which will guide action plans at the Faculty level.

**8. Partnership Termination**

Once a decision is taken to terminate a collaborative partnership, or a programme within a partnership, a Partnership Termination Form (PTF) should be completed by the Partnership Link Tutor in the Faculty in question, liaising with the relevant Quality & Standards Manager to ensure that all actions required are expedited by the target dates. A copy of the PTF should be reported to the Academic Partnerships Committee (APC) which makes the recommendation to terminate (or not) to the VC Advisory Group: Partnerships. The latter body makes the final decision to terminate, and reports the basis of the decision to the Board of Governors. A copy of the Partnership Termination Form should be forwarded by the secretary of Academic Partnerships Committee to the Deputy Registrar (Quality) in Registry for archival.

** Figure 1: Partnership AIM Framework**

**Pre-sale**

**Appendix 1: Types of partnership activity**

The below list illustrates common types of partnership activity relevant to the AIM framework:

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| Franchised programmes delivered by delivery organisations through a variety of models. |
| Validated programmes delivered by delivery organisations. |
| Joint, dual/double or multiple awards granted by one or more other awarding bodies. |
| Provision by 'embedded colleges' of study preparatory to undergraduate or postgraduate higher education programmes. |
| Articulation arrangements, whereby all students who satisfy academic criteria on one programme are automatically entitled on academic grounds to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent stage of a programme of a degree-awarding body. |
| A range of work-based learning that may involve delivering full programmes, individual modules or elements of programmes for a specific employer, or otherwise using the workplace as a site of learning. |
| Branch campuses, educational villages and 'flying faculty' arrangements, which include aspects of collaboration (such as provision of resources, including teaching space, or employment of local administrative/clerical staff through arrangements with another organisation). |
| Distance learning and online delivery/massive open online courses (MOOCs) involving work with delivery organisations or support providers. |

1. It should be noted that Partnership Link Tutors have a different role scope to Link Tutors within the Initial Teacher Training provision in the School of Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)