



Building and sustaining successful validation partnerships

For higher education in further education

Introduction

This learning digest brings together a series of learning points for further education (FE) colleges and higher education (HE) providers responsible for validation (validating partners).

The digest is intended as a tool for sharing evaluation findings and learning. It has been compiled by Ecorys, informed by an independent evaluation of the HE in FE (validation) pilot project commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS) (see Background). The learning digest does not necessarily reflect the OfS's views or position.

With special thanks to the OfS, the Open University (OU) and to the FE colleges who took part in the evaluation.

Background

The HE in FE (validation) project set out to test how commissioned validation arrangements (see *What is validation?*) could support high-quality HE delivery in new settings, strengthening partnerships between FE colleges and HE validating partners. For the first time, this project led to the OfS using powers under section 50 of the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) to commission the OU to work with colleges as the validating partner, building capability and confidence in colleges to design, approve and deliver new Level 4 and 5 programmes.¹ In doing so, the project sought to establish new and sustainable HE courses and to widen access to HE in cold spot areas, meeting local skills needs.

What is validation?

Validation is when an established HE provider (the validating partner) approves courses developed and delivered by another provider. It allows institutions without degree awarding powers or specialist resources to offer HE courses, often through partnerships with universities. This can be especially valuable for FE colleges that want to develop and deliver their own higher-level courses.

This differs from **franchising (or subcontractual arrangements)**, where the HE provider (the lead partner) provides a course to another (delivery) provider (e.g. a college) to teach under its name. Students are registered with the lead provider, who is responsible for returning student data.

Under both arrangements the lead/validating partner retains overall responsibility for standards.

Source: [Validation – Office for Students](#)

¹ Level 4 and Level 5 courses are HE qualifications that act as a bridge between, for example, A-Levels (Level 3) and a full bachelors' degree (Level 6).

This learning digest summarises learning gathered about building and sustaining successful partnerships that lead to new HE courses being delivered by colleges. It draws on data from interviews with key project stakeholders, and case studies with participating colleges as part of Ecorys' 2025-26 evaluation of the OU HE in FE (validation) project.

Evaluation findings presented in this learning digest reflect wider recognition of the value of partnership working within the regional contexts in which institutions operate.

[2 The OfS strategy roadmap – Office for Students](#) [3 Post-16 education and skills white paper – GOV.UK](#)



Key considerations for validating partners

Regular and ongoing communication between the validating partner and colleges

- Allocate a single point of contact for colleges at the validating partner and a named individual with clear responsibility for HE within each college. This accountable individual would lead the validation process end-to-end, acting as the main point of contact for the validating partner and coordinating college teams.
- Establish communication channels between named contacts, creating a streamlined approach to communication. Scheduling regular (e.g. weekly) meetings, especially early on in a partnership, provides more intensive support to colleges.
- Share intelligence and have ongoing open discussions around emerging issues and risks to support joint problem solving and enable colleges to make better informed decisions.
- Acknowledge colleges' workload/resource constraints in communications and adapt timelines to avoid particularly busy periods in the college calendar.
- Tailor communications (as far as possible) to work in an FE context, for example recognising differences in terminology and the academic calendar.

Structured and tailored support for colleges

- Provide continuous and practical support to help colleges navigate the (sometimes) complex requirements of delivering HE and to upskill staff.

The OfS strategy roadmap 2025 to 2030 expresses its expectation that institutions 'leverage regional partnerships' to offer more students a range of high quality HE options.² Additionally, the aims set out in the 2025 post-16 education and skills white paper³ emphasise the importance of collaboration between FE and HE. This includes collaborative relationships that expand Level 4 and 5 provision and where HE and FE providers work together to meet local skills needs and support economic growth.

- Adapt the level of support and coaching to suit the needs of the college, recognising that some colleges have limited prior experience and capacity in delivering HE.
- Hold multi-day face-to-face discovery visits with colleges early in the partnership to meet staff, build relationships and develop a clear understanding of the level of support they need.
- Take a responsive approach to supporting colleges with curriculum development and assessments, adjusting the level of support provided based on need.

Creating ongoing learning and development opportunities for colleges

- Facilitate regular, structured peer learning opportunities (created, but not necessarily led, by validating partners). These might go beyond annual conferences, enabling colleges to share practical insights with one another, for example as part of a community of practice forum.
- Offer networking and training opportunities, particularly for colleges with limited HE experience, to help build staff confidence, HE sector knowledge and skills.
- Provide a toolkit (i.e. a suite of policy documents for adaptation) alongside document templates needed for programme design. This reduces duplication of effort and supports faster, more coherent HE course development. This might helpfully include a 'college onboarding' pack with an end-to-end overview of the validation process and mapping out roles and responsibilities.
- Recognise constraints in colleges' capacity by aligning timelines, with the FE calendar (including workload cycles). This could help to maximise engagement across the college.

Case study



The context

- › **Tameside College**, an OfS-registered provider, worked closely with the OU as part of the validation partnership to develop HE provision, receiving sustained, hands-on support throughout the process from the OU.
- › Before joining the validation project, the college's HE provision was delivered through franchise (subcontractual) arrangements with universities located in the North West. The college was experienced in delivering HE within a franchise framework but had not previously designed a programme independently or been through a validation process.
- › The college worked with the OU as part of an enabled validation model (a new model developed to support colleges with little or no previous experience of validation), with the level of OU support tailored to the college's needs.
- › The partnership allowed Tameside College to move quickly to embed new HE-specific policies (many of which had to be created for the project), develop a new course and establish governance structures to move away from sustained support from the validator.

Facilitating factors – governance and capacity building

- › Dedicated support from the OU around developing fit-for-purpose governance arrangements helped Tameside College to establish the documentation processes and decision-making pathways needed to manage HE provision autonomously.
- › The Tameside College team included a named HE lead overseeing and coordinating the validation process, which helped to steer the college through the requirements and challenges of validation.
- › Active engagement from senior leaders (Assistant Principals) with the project provided decision-making authority and an institutional commitment to HE.
- › Consequently, Tameside College has better institutional capability and confidence to sustain HE delivery beyond the lifespan of the project.



Facilitating factors – support and guidance from the validating partner

- › Practical and hands-on guidance from the OU (for example, workshops with the compliance team) enabled Tameside College to understand what changes needed to be made to college policies and the rationale behind them. This included policies for extenuating circumstances, Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) compliance, health and safety, and research ethics.
- › A collaborative, proactive relationship with the OU helped Tameside College test ideas, receive rapid feedback and refine materials linked to internal policies, quality assurance processes and programme management documentation, as the validation process progressed.
- › Tameside College was able to draw on a breadth of expertise in its partnership with the OU (the validating partner), including IT, marketing, web design, and legal support, something the college did not have access to in-house.
- › Detailed feedback on HE policies, provided by the OU at an early stage of drafting, helped shape documents collaboratively and created a suite of HE-compliant policies for future use.
- › Effective collaboration between the college tutors responsible for developing the new HE course and OU advisers created an exceptional opportunity for teaching staff at the college to expand their curriculum expertise.

4 CMA compliance refers to a provider's obligations under UK consumer protection law to ensure students receive clear, accurate and timely information, are subject to fair terms and conditions, and have access to transparent complaints and redress processes.



Lessons for practice

What success looks like in strong validation partnerships

- **Partnerships operate through open and honest communication**, where partners are viewed as co-producers of HE, routinely sharing information, raising issues early, managing risk collaboratively, and maintaining a constructive dialogue that supports effective decision making and joint problem solving.
- **Strong, supportive peer learning is in place**, with regular, structured opportunities for college staff to share experience, exchange good practice, hear from expert HE partners and build sector knowledge.
- **Partnerships are responsive**, with clarity around roles and responsibilities, predictable communication channels, timely turnaround times for feedback, realistic expectations, transparency around capacity constraints and recognition of partners' workload pressures. This helps build positive working relationships, sustained momentum, and reduces stress for college teams.
- **Toolkits, document templates and accessible guidance are in place** to help streamline workloads and reduce duplication. Standardised tools help colleges to meet HE approval requirements more efficiently and reduce uncertainty, while also simplifying the review and approval process for validating partners.
- **Formal HE governance and oversight structures at the college and strong partnership governance** (with named contacts at the validating partner and college) facilitate the effective review of development plans, effective monitoring of college progress and adjusting support when circumstances change.
- **Strong partnerships and improved HE capacity among colleges** create a foundation for building local/ regional collaboration in the post-16 sector, offering expanded Level 4 and 5 provision that is accessible to students and aligned with local skills needs.
- **Colleges have the capability and confidence to deliver HE sustainably**, with embedded processes for curriculum design, CMA compliance, governance, programme management and quality assurance that continue to operate effectively.

