Developing Collaborative Relationships with Providers

Purpose of Paper

Provide structure and guidance to support the development of positive and collaborative working relationships between Australian universities and third-party providers to:

- Support the forward-thinking growth of the Australian higher education industry;
- Inform due diligence and best-practice between provider and University.

Background

Third-party provider (TPP) best-practice is currently a critical area of consideration for both universities and providers in Australia and around the world as companies (both private and public) look to offer a range of tailored services that meet University needs. From internships to global experiences, and international recruitment services to alumni connections, third-party providers are providing services that, in an increasingly competitive marketplace, can assist universities to enhance the student experience.

This increase in third-party provider opportunity has highlighted the need for best practice guidance. This need has been acknowledged and discussed across multiple forums in Australia including the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (NAGCAS), the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), and the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN).

This guide has been developed by ACEN in collaboration with The University of Queensland as part of the short-term mobility project, and through consultation with experts in the global mobility. It builds on a variety of best-practice guidelines from the UK, USA, and Australia, including the IEAA *Guide to Working with Third Party Providers.* This guide acts as an introduction to engaging with providers, creating structures and suggesting resources that individual universities and industries can adapt to their specific requirements.

Definitions and Scope

A third-party provider is an organisation external from the university, which manages or delivers some aspect of service to the university's internal stakeholders. A university should be confident that they have exercised due diligence with the provider to ensure they are a legitimate organisation that will maintain the university's standards of due diligence. This confidence should ideally be reflected in a formal agreement with the provider to ensure all parties are aware of their responsibilities and legal requirements and share the same level of expectation.

These definitions are relatively broad and could include a wide range of providers including external consultants and suppliers. However, this document will focus on provider/university relationships where the provider services are focused on developing the student experience (be that prospective, current or alumni). These services are usually paid for by the students who are charged fees by the provider for access to the service, however sometimes these costs may be embedded into particular funding initiatives by the university. With this in mind, the budgetary implications of third-party provider engagement is considered as part the process.

Students are integral to the success of both third-party provider and university strategies, as such their quality of experience has been considered in the development of this document. Staff from universities in Australia have also been consulted, and global best-practice has been factored into the recommendations made. Consideration has also been given to system and process implementation as well as the sustainability of these experiences.

Developing Collaborative Relationships with Providers

Initial progress in this space was focused around development of key resources to be shared amongst Australian higher-education providers. However, it was quickly noted that the engagement and adaption of such resources was highly influenced by each university's specific situation and strategy. It became clear that a collaborative community of practice with a supporting working toolkit first required a structured process. This 10-step process helps to ensure that each university implements provider engagement in a sustainable and justified manner, considering their approach to third-party providers with holistic and strategic foresight. The structure aims to provide a general 10-step approach that can be adapted to a variety of work units across universities.

10 steps to developing a collaborative relationship with third-party providers:

1. Define a focused strategy;
2. Research internal needs, strengths and gaps;
3. Clarify processes and action plan;
4. Confirm specific requirements;
5. Seek out experts;
6. Assess legitimacy;
7. Pilot new initiatives;
8. Work collaboratively;
9. Formalise agreements;
10. Strive for improvement.

1. Define a focused strategy

Before engaging with providers, university staff need to identify a focused strategy specific to their work unit. This process allows for the university strategic plan to be unpacked and ensures a clear vision with the development of realistic KPI's and measurements in core areas, while considering the budgetary, system and resource requirements of that work unit, within that university (AIM Overseas 2011).

Defining a focused strategic plan, taking into consideration budgetary requirements, ensures the university is in a stable position with a clear vision before engaging with external providers. It also clarifies which teams within the university are responsible for managing the implementation of this vision and engagement with third-party providers: whether that be on a central management, faculty or academic level. By visualising the future of the specific work unit, universities can clearly identify when and how they will engage with third-party providers.

2. Research internal needs strengths and gaps:

Understanding what internal stakeholders (including students, staff, and academics) need and want will help university work units to implement their strategy. Universities can research trends, needs, expectations and wish-lists of their internal stakeholders by managing online surveys, holding focus groups and encouraging collaborative meetings. Universities can then complete a SWOT analysis in consideration of their strategic plan to understand what they can excel in (by engaging their internal experts) and where they may need support moving forward.

Developing Collaborative Relationships with Providers

The knowledge gleaned from this research and analysis will help to prioritise and operationalise the strategic plan by providing an insight into the strengths, gaps and expectations of key stakeholders at the university. By identifying gaps, work units within the university can begin to identify where they may need third-party provider support, while by identifying strengths, they can choose to focus on internal excellence in those areas and develop innovative opportunities. This process helps to maintain internal relationships with stakeholders and ensures their engagement with the work unit's strategic vision. It also helps to build internal confidence that third-party providers enhance and support internal provisions to improve the student experience.

3. Clarify processes and action plan

Work units must translate vision into tangible outcomes by operationalising the strategy they defined in step one through the learnings they obtained in step two. An action plan consists of goals, key milestones and operational tasks that, when combined, deliver the previously defined strategy in consideration of the strengths, gaps and priorities identified through internal research as well budgetary considerations. The action plan must, most importantly, take into consideration the processes and systems that will be implemented and used to achieve the desired outcomes and how these processes and systems can be adapted to include and collaborate with providers.

By identifying a process and action plan, universities can quickly clarify core, non-negotiable expectations of providers. They can also communicate a clear implementation of their vision to all stakeholders both internal and external. This ensures that providers are engaged at appropriate times, through appropriate means and with the relevant systems and procedures used at the university. The action plan and confirmed processes also provide transparency and vision to providers allowing for greater opportunity for collaboration and sustainable planning for the future.

4. Confirm specific requirements

Work units must clarify their requirements to third-party providers and provide transparent frameworks to communicate their needs and expectations. The initial 3-steps of this process allows university work units to internally identify their direction, their strengths and weaknesses and conceptualise how they will implement this in terms of systems, processes and action plans, but for a third-party provider/university relationship to be collaborative, positive and sustainable, universities must confirm their specific requirements in terms of what they want the provider to deliver.

These requirements relate to the content and delivery of services and can include expectations around geographical locations to delivery content and from cost of services to specific process inclusions. Universities, and work units, will have different requirements based on their internal standing which is why it can become difficult to provide a shared resource that can be easily adapted to each University. Developing a matrix template allows for university work units to adapt the matrix to incorporate their individual needs and requirements. This matrix, once adapted for each work unit's needs, clearly communicates key expectations to providers which encourages a transparent and collaborative relationship between each provider and the associated university work unit.

5. Seek out experts

The process of defining requirements allows the university work unit to clarify what they are looking for in terms of service delivery and content. Once this has been completed, the university is in a position to begin

identifying and approaching potential providers to deliver their expectations and meet internal demand. Sometimes experts might be sought out for geographical location, at other times it may be on the basis of detailed and innovative content, or it could be due the sheer volume of service that the provider can manage. To be successful in meeting their stated requirements, each university should assess a shortlist of providers to establish which provider(s) are in the best position to provide the outcomes they are seeking. Including a strategic measurement in their assessment of providers may help work units to compare between providers and ensure they are engaging with a provider that best meets their needs.

Strategic measurements could consider the following themes to help differentiate between providers;
- Content and scope of project;
- Relevant expertise and specialist areas of provider;
- Well-developed and relevant risk management plans;
- Internal relationships (school/faculty/strategic).

Specific work units across universities in Australia should work collaboratively to build a community of practice, which not only acknowledges legitimate providers in that industry, but also identifies experts in particular fields of that area. This allows for collaborative relationships to be developed with providers who share similar values or visions. By encouraging providers to focus and build excellence in specific areas, and supporting them in doing so by ensuring student interest and demand, universities and providers will be working together to establish supply and demand in the industry; ensuring sustainability and longevity.

6. Assess legitimacy

Ensuring due diligence and the legitimacy of a third-party provider is usually a primary reason that universities are hesitant to engage with providers. Before engaging with any third-party provider it is important for each university to assess and confirm provider legitimacy to ensure their duty-of-care to students.

There are core requirements for any university engagement with a provider, therefore a provider checklist can be widely implemented across specific work units within Australian universities to ensure consistency and authenticity. The provider checklist is different to the matrix templates as it communicates broad expectations of all providers regardless of service content or University.

Provider checklists should consider the following themes and areas for consultation:
- History and reputation of provider;
- Registration documents and code of practice;
- Risk management procedures;
- Relevant insurance;
- Payment and billing;
- Costs and provider fees;
- Engagement and exposure to students;
- Any specialities;
- Access services;
- Resources and business model;
- Process and systems;
- Strategic measures of comparing providers;
- Specific common themes to the particular work-unit.

Outbound mobility work units within Australian universities are encouraged to refer to the checklist developed by IEAA in their *Guide to Working with Third Party Providers* (Appendix I).

7. Pilot new initiatives

Pilots are small-scale project focused initiatives that allow for a new process or practice to be trialled before it is widely implemented. When engaging with a new provider for the first time it is recommended that a pilot approach is undertaken. This allows for both provider and university to build a collaborative understanding of how they work together and what their expectations are. A pilot encourages reflection and continuous improvement as mistakes and errors can be flushed out on a small-scale and with genuine engagement, while also providing an easy route of exit if required.

Successful pilots can also help to increase internal engagement and interest with an initiative helping to improve internal relations and engagement with strategy: usually stakeholders will be far more inclined and positive about engaging with an opportunity if they can see evidence of its success in the past.

8. Work collaboratively

It is important for the university to liaise closely with the provider during the pilot to re-emphasise their expectations and desired outcomes as well as to communicate any concerns promptly. Relationships with providers should not merely be viewed as an outsourcing of expectations and work but as a cyclical, supportive collaboration that allows for improvement, review and student management.

A collaborative provider/university relationship will result in clear, concise and consistent communication, supportive and swift resolutions to problems, innovative opportunities and a sustainable future for both university and provider by fostering a system of supply and demand resulting in mutual benefit for both provider and university. The relationship will be managed at an institutional rather than personal level to ensure it can be sustained should resource and roles change.

To work in collaboration, the university needs to be open to receiving feedback from providers, and approaching each provider with flexibility and a forward-thinking attitude. Ongoing collaboration can be maintained by keeping communication avenues open, sharing strategic initiatives and ideas, and maintaining timely reporting to ensure all students and changes in process are captured.

Collaboration and communication is not only required between provider and University but must also be actively encouraged internally to ensure third-party provider relationships are successful and sustainable. University work units should ensure they communicate a list of preferred providers across the university and encourage collaboration with providers through a nominated university contact point, to continue to action their strategy and support their internal stakeholders.

9. Formalise agreements

Developing a formal agreement between university and provider should be the result of a successful pilot initiative that recognises the potential longevity and mutual benefits to an ongoing relationship. These agreements formalise any prior commitments between provider and university and require an official legal framework that protects the university, the students and the provider.

Formal agreements ensure all stakeholders are protected and supported moving forward by providing governance to the relationship. These agreements also help to encourage future planning by recognising a sustainable supply and demand. Basic agreement templates can be shared across universities, but each individual university will require input from legal to ensure specific clauses and requirements are met.

10. Strive for improvement

The relationship with providers doesn't end with a formal agreement, to ensure the relationship maintains momentum and positive influence it is important for both university and provider to seek out opportunities for continuous improvement. Working together provider and university can continue to develop innovative and engaging opportunities for students that reflect the strategy and vision defined in step one, and help to re-define and continue this strategy into the future. Australian universities should also consider how they can work in collaboration with one another and providers to create additional opportunities for students and a national network of experiences and services.

Once relationships with providers have been formally established, the university can strive for improvement internally by educating and supporting their internal stakeholders around third-party provider best-practice and guidance, tailoring this advice specifically to the learning's they obtained in step two.

This continuous commitment to pursuing and furthering the strategy harbours collaborative relationships between provider and the University. Allowing for open communication and creativity and ensuring the longevity of both provider and University.

Implementing a process for interested providers and/or providers that student's or staff identify is important in order to support open access and continuous improvement. This process should clearly identify the university requirements and expectations around provider best-practice with a systemised process for the interested party to submit relevant information for assessment. This encouragement allows for healthy competition in the industry, encouraging providers to remain fresh, innovative and service orientated.

Desired Resources

The structured process has provided structure to the development of positive and collaborative working relationships between universities and third-party providers. This structure can be further supported by the following supporting resources that will act as a working toolkit: experts within specific university work units are encouraged to work together to create a community of practice to develop and maintain these tangible resources.

1. **Community of practice**

Building a community of practice in Australia is paramount to the success of this working toolkit and for ensuring best-practice amongst universities and third-party providers. A community of practice should include experts from university work units across Australia to help provide best-practice examples and collaboration in the ongoing development on resources and advice in this space. Discussions around the development, maintenance and location for this community-of-practice will need to be addressed.

Resources managed by the community of practice should include:
- provider checklist;
- provider shortlist (including examples of good and bad providers and specialist areas);
- matrix of services and requirements template;
- reporting templates;
- preliminary agreement templates;

- formal agreement templates.

2. **Process guide**

The best-practice process guide aims to provide substantial best-practice advice on a range of procedural concerns that influence specific work unit areas and their engagement with third-party providers. A callout for feedback and contribution to this guide will need to be managed by the community of practice to help create an advanced working toolkit for that work unit.

3. **Internal guides**

These internal best-practice guides provide a formal indication from specific work units to their internal stakeholders regarding engagement with third-party providers, they help to ensure consistency across the university and ensure internal stakeholders remain engaged and informed.

Next Phase: Required Steps

1. Key divisional bodies and chapters (eg IEAA and NAGCAS) to encourage members to provide feedback to the content and structure and suggest opportunities for application to their areas.
2. Key divisional bodies to work with ACEN to develop community-of-practice to produce desired resources and build a working toolkit for distribution and engagement.
3. ACEN to organise engagement of these community's to share national learnings and resources.

Supporting Papers

AIM Overseas (2011) *Outbound Mobility: Best Practice Guide for Australian Universities*:
http://www.studyoverseas.gov.au/sites/studyoverseas/resources/Documents/ombpgau/OMBPG.pdf

British Council (2013) *Shape of things to come: The evolution of transnational education: data, definitions, opportunities and impacts analysis*,
http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/the_shape_of_things_to_come_2.pdf

International Education Association of Australia (2015): *A guide to working with third-party providers*:
http://www.ieaa.org.au/documents/item/593

NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2014) *Developing International Internship Programs*

(WEF) World Economic Forum (2013) *Conducting Third Party Due Diligence Guidelines*,
http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_PACI_ConductingThirdPartyDueDiligence_Guidelines_2013.pdf

(FEA) The Forum on Education Abroad (2010) *Standards of Good Practice for Short-Term Education Abroad Programs* (Dickinson College)

Work, Internships and Volunteering Abroad (2010) *Best Practices on Vetting Partners and Developing Opportunities for Work, Internships and Volunteering Abroad* (NAFSA: Internships, Service Learning, and Volunteering Abroad: Successful Models and Best Practices)

(TEQSA) Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2013) *Quality Assessment: Third Party Arrangements*, *http://teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/Third%20Party%20Arrangements%20-%20Terms%20of%20Reference.pdf*

Developed by the Australian Collaborative Education Network in collaboration with The University of Queensland

Developing Collaborative Relationships with Providers

Theme	Details	TPP response
History	- How long have you been in business? Where have you led trips? Any specialties? - Are there limits (min and max participants) to what you can do? - Any country or are their specific places you can support? - How many trips have you conducted for universities? - How many students? Ages? Length of trips? Details of past trips? - What is your experience in developing faculty-led custom programs?	
Housing/ accommodation	- What are accommodations like? - How many students share an accommodation? - Are they sharing with students on other programs? - What amenities are included (internet, electricity, phone, kitchen, etc.)? - What are the costs and deposits? - Are refunds available? - What type of security is in place overnight?	
Application	- What is your process? - How do you advise students regarding their university processes?	
Payment/billing	- How does payment work? - How does billing work (cost), when are payments due (this is important because if payments are due before the student numbers are in we don't want to have to give them a deposit before we know we will have the student participation)? - What is refund policy? - Can you accept individual payments from students directly or bulk payments from universities?	
Insurance	- Do you have general liability and professional liability insurance? - What insurance do you carry for your organisation? Your employees/volunteers? Our students? - Does the organisation hold current and adequate domestic and foreign liability insurance?	

Customer/in-country support	▪ What is your customer support like? ▪ Will there be an assigned rep that answers student/faculty questions? ▪ How available are they? Will they be available on-site? ▪ What in-country support is available on your programs?	
Emergency/safety	▪ What is your process for handling emergencies? ▪ How do you communicate with students while there? In emergencies? With parents? ▪ What relationships do you have on the ground with emergency responders and/or medical providers? ▪ Ever had to evacuate from a location? If so, how did you do it? If not, how would you do it? ▪ Does the organisation have an operating manual and universal crisis management plan that is available to all staff?	
Access Services	▪ How do you accommodate students with disabilities?	
References	▪ Can you provide us with client references?	
Resources	▪ How many full-time staff members do you employ? With how many of these people will I come into contact during my program?	
Internships/ placements	▪ How are the companies selected? ▪ How are the internships positions reviewed before, during and after the placement? ▪ What supervision is available to students on campus?	
Student preparation	▪ What support and information do you provide the students before the program to prepare them for the program? ▪ Do you run pre-departure programs?	