

GUIDELINES WHEN CONSIDERING FORMALISING INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS (INCL. THE USE OF MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING AGREEMENT (MOU))

PURPOSE

This document is a guideline to assist academics to define the objectives and intended outcomes of proposed relationships and identify a suitable structure for formalising international collaborations.

BACKGROUND

VU Research aims to be world renowned in its Areas of Research Focus. The Research Plan 2017-2020 recognises that, to increase the University's international standing, profile and impact of its research, it must build on the relationships established by researchers and strengthen international alliances and partnerships.

Research institutional linkages are a key means of providing opportunities to build the University's research reputation and capability for staff collaboration and for recruiting future HDR students. This makes international linkages vitally important in strategic and operational terms.

OPTIONS FOR PROGRESSING INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)

Frequently, academics request a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to **commence** a relationship with an international partner. These are whole-of-organisation agreements which often do not suit individual researcher needs.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is a formal agreement between two or more parties to start an official relationship. It commits organisations to work together to achieve clear and agreed goals. It is important to note that an MOU commits partners to developing and maintaining the relationship following the MOU signing.

MOUs will only be used where there is a clear strategic benefit for VU Research as a whole or if local conditions genuinely require an MOU as a pre-condition for collaboration.

*Please refer to **Appendix 1** for common types of collaboration between research organisations as part of an MOU.*

LETTER OF INTENT

A letter of intent is an alternative to an MOU and is often a more fitting document for a relationship which is either at a very early stage or where not much activity has occurred. This document can be much simpler and quicker to finalise. The letter of intent option should be discussed with and endorsed by the **Flagship Research Institute Director**. Provided that this is endorsed, the following step is to contact Research Services within VU Research to development and signatures.

AGREEMENTS COVERING RESEARCH PROJECTS

Collaborative Research Agreements can be prepared to cover individual research projects or collaborative programs involving multiple projects. These agreements enable collaborative work with international partners at a project or program level and are considered more effective than MOUs for this type of collaboration.

CHECK LIST FOR DETERMINING SUITABILITY OF AN MOU

In thinking about the steps to building or formalising the relationship with another university or research partner, academics should use this triage process to determine the suitability of an MOU:

Potential – Find a path forward

- 1) Contact your Flagship Research Institute Director to discuss your plans.
- 2) What do you want to achieve through this relationship? What does the prospective partner want to achieve?
- 3) Who in your area of the University is already collaborating with this institution? Ideally it should be more than one person to make it feasible.
- 4) How effective is the existing relationship or activity and how will an MOU help advance the relationship.
- 5) Is there a viable pathway to wider ranging collaboration.
- 6) Is an MOU the only means of effecting the relationship? Would a letter of intent achieve the same outcome?
- 7) How will you measure and review the outcomes of the relationship?
- 8) Does your area have the financial means to support the MOU?
- 9) Confirm endorsement from the Flagship Institute Director This is a key element for formalizing a relationship.
- 10) Who will drive the relationship? There is a need for an Academic Champion, appointed by the Flagship Research Institute Director, to support the management of the relationship (see details about expectations of this role below).

Alignment

- 1) Background of institutions. Consider the profile of the institution. How does it fit with the overall research needs and **focus areas** of VU Research?
- 2) What are the expected short- medium- and long-term outcomes of the proposed relationship? (Outcomes may relate to research, teaching and learning or engagement. They may have multiple characteristics, for example, direct academic outcomes, public good outcomes, financial outcomes, reputational outcomes, research higher degree student outcomes.)

Resourcing considerations

There will be financial and resource implications when entering particular collaborations. It is important to identify the costs and sources of funding required. Ensure you consult with your Flagship Research Institute Director through as this support will be required for any agreement.

VU Research encourages researchers to consider seed funding and other sources of funding to support the relationship/agreement.

Where resources required are significant, there should be a thorough analysis of the costs and benefits, and, where applicable, the risk exposure. Other cost comparisons should be used if necessary, together with an estimate of where cost impact may be felt.

A substantial cost can be the time of the Academic Champion who will lead the governance and management of the agreement or relationship.

Common costs include:

- Hosting visitors
- Joint conferences/workshops
- Initiation of seed funding

Risk management

To discuss your aims and learn how these fit with existing activity and priorities, please contact the relevant areas as follows:

Flagship Research Institute Director: To confirm alignment with Flagship international priorities and consider resource implications level of interest. Endorsement from the FRI Director is compulsory.

VU International: to learn more about VU’s activity in the country and insight into the operating environment.

Office for Researcher Training, Quality and Integrity: When HDR students or programs will be included in the proposed partnership.

Research Services: To discuss the best strategy for progressing the relationship based on what has been learnt from other sources.

It is particularly **important that academics do not make any firm commitments** to potential partner institutions without first having the support of the Vice-President (Research). Staff should indicate that opportunities will be referred for further discussion with the Vice President (Research).

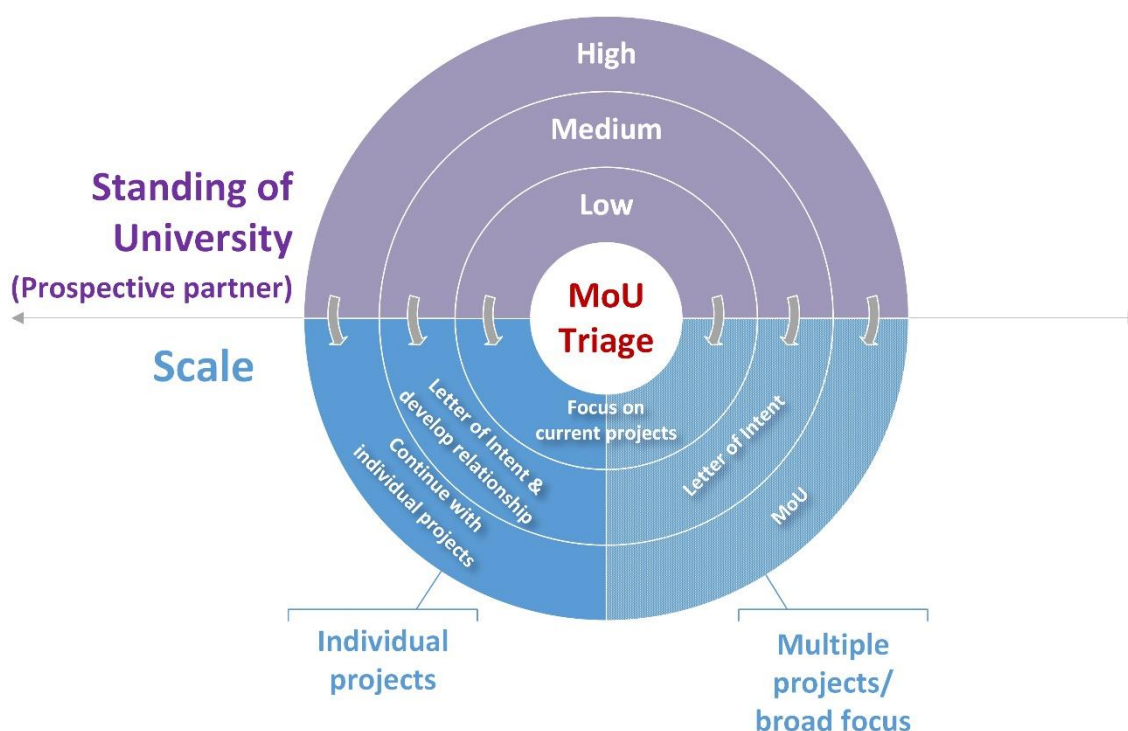
Decision

There are four options to consider:

- OPTION 1: Continue working on activities and document them
- OPTION 2: Letter of Intent
- OPTION 3: MOU
- OPTION 4: Collaborative Research Agreement

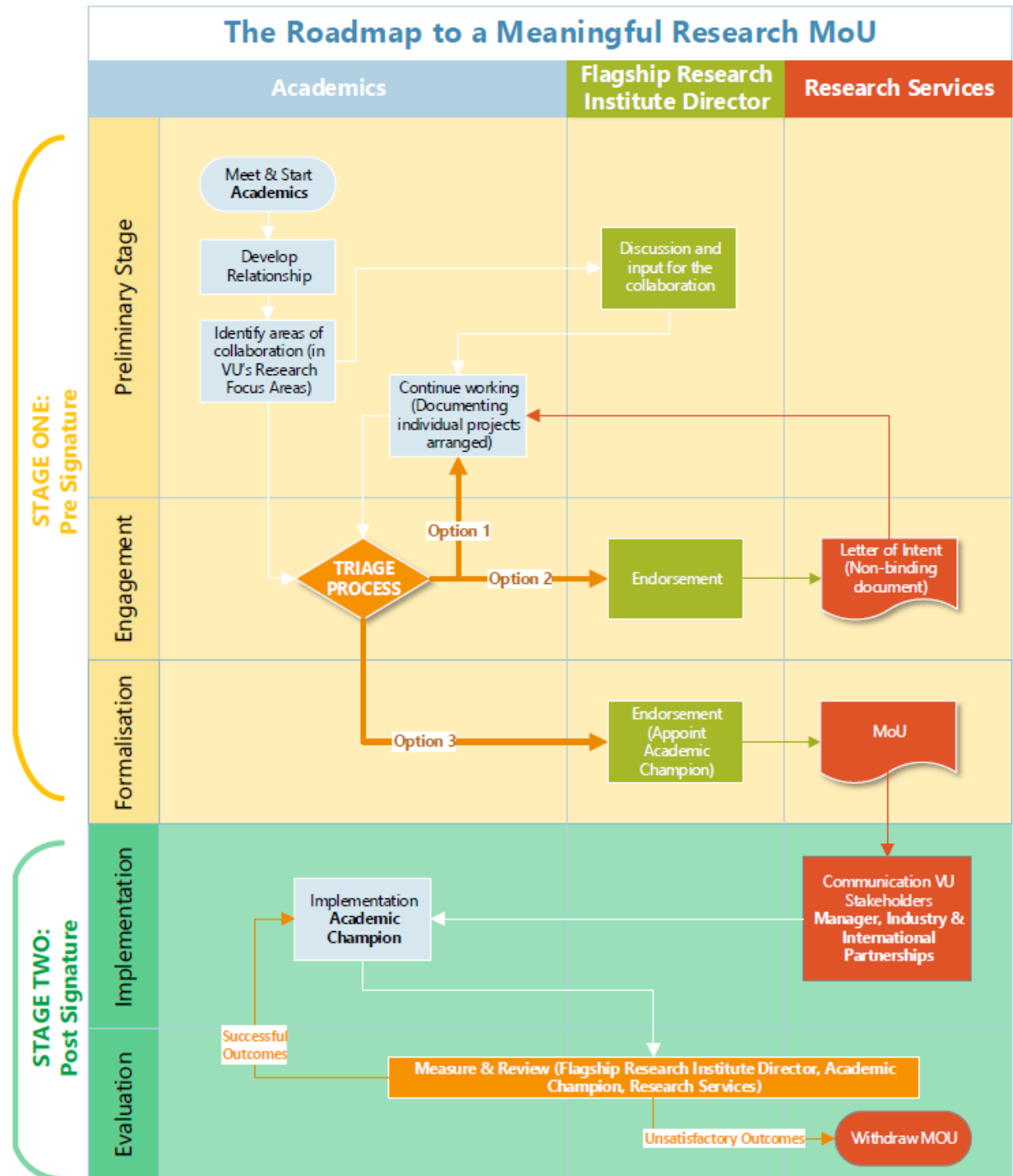
FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING OPTIONS

Based on the information learnt from the checklist, a likely triage process for an MOU is shown in the diagram below.



STAGES OF THE MOU

There are two stages to the MOU, the pre-signature and post-signature stages. These are visualised in the charts below:



An MOU or Letter of Intent is a commitment to work together to achieve a shared goal. At this stage, the Academic Champion is the leader of the relationship.

POST SIGNATURE: ROLES AND RESPONSABILITIES

IMPORTANT NOTE: An Academic Champion will be appointed by the Flagship Institute Director prior to the signing of an MOU to lead the management and development of the relationship throughout the life of the MOU.

| ACTIVITY | RESPONSIBILITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|--|---|
| MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING | | |
| Execution and notification | Manager Industry and International Partnerships, Research Services | Development of the MOU, signatures, records and notifications. NOTE: This position plays a more important role in the pre signature stage. At the post signature stage, the academic leader takes over. |
| Implementation | Academic Champion | This is when the real work begins. The Academic Champion is the principal leader of the relationship and leads VU’s participation; Co-chairs and attends meetings related to the partnership; manages the related projects to achieve goals; communicates partnership activity and milestones to VU Research Management and Governance for awareness and engagement. |
| Reporting | Academic Champion | Report on activities and project progress to: Flagship Institute Director and VP (Research) annually. Research and Research Training Committee and VU Research quarterly. Flagship Institute Director – Monthly. |
| Monitor | Academic Champion | Regular “pulse check”. |
| Review | Flagship Research Institute Director, Academic Champion, Research Services | Evaluation of the relationship to ascertain effectiveness. Upon completion of the review, a recommendation is made to renew or withdraw from the partnership. |
| LETTER OF INTENT | | |
| Execution and notification | Manager Industry and International Partnerships, Research Services | Development of the letter, signatures, records and notifications. NOTE: This position plays a more important role in the pre signature stage. At the post signature stage the academic leader takes over. |
| Implement | Academic Champion | Continue work to strengthen the relationship to next level (MOU or Research Collaborative Agreement). |
| RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE AGREEMENT | | |
| Relationship Development | Academic Champion Chief Investigator | Deepen the relationship according to the agreement. |
| Implementation | Chief Investigator | Implement project covered by the agreement. |