

Strategic Planning Toolkit

A toolkit supporting college
students' associations to develop
strategic priorities

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1. Introduction

Every year college students' associations in Scotland deliver projects and campaigns which have a lasting impact in improving the experience of their students, from campaigning for better mental health resources on campus and providing extracurricular recreational activities, to supporting class reps and improving quality in the curriculum - the remit of college SAs is vast.

One of the main challenges for college SAs is delivering all of this work with a relatively small team.

As member-led organisations, the expectation of Students' Associations is incredibly high, but with a limited resource and high staff and officer turnover many SA's find it challenging to plan beyond the next year and therefore often do not have the capacity to grow and build as an organisation. To overcome this and to focus on sustainability many organisations develop a strategic plan to help map out their current position, long term objectives and a plan of how to achieve them.

This toolkit aims to provide SAs with guidance and useful resources to support them through the process of developing a Strategic Plan. Currently 6 college SAs in Scotland have active strategies which have supported them to become more sustainable organisations, have increased stakeholder engagement, created better decision making and communications and increased their resource and capacity.

2. What is strategic planning?

Students' Associations are representative, student-run organisations which exist in every college and university in Scotland. The core purpose of a Students' Association is to represent the views of students within their organisation both locally and nationally, and although there are other elements to the work of SAs like community building and enrichment of the student experience, the core purpose should always be representation. The strategic planning process is a great way to help students' associations reconnect with their purpose or mission and provide focus for activity over a longer period of time.

A strategic plan is a document which maps out the medium to long-term goals of an individual organisation. The plan highlights the current position of the organisation, where it wants to be at the end of the plan and how it will achieve this. The plan helps to give the organisation long term development aims and can provide consistency and a shared vision over several years. This consistency is particularly useful in students' associations as high turnover of officers and in some cases staff, as well as changing manifesto priorities means that it can be hard for college SAs to plan further than a year at a time. Having a plan in place which outlives officer terms and staffing changes can help to remedy this.

There are many other benefits to developing a strategic plan. It can be a great way to boost student engagement and accountability in a students' association as it helps the SA to map out how it plans to engage with its members over a long period of time and monitor progress year on year. This can be a great way to engage the wider student community in shaping their SA, which also provides

legitimacy in the direction of activity if it is influenced by the student body itself. Strategic plans more generally can be a great way to help give a Students' Association legitimacy within the college senior management and board. It demonstrates the ability of an SA to plan ahead and it's ambition to grow and develop further to better serve its members and improve the student experience. This professionalism is a great starting point for an SA to thoughtfully push for additional resource with the bonus of an evidenced, co-created plan that clearly sets out the proposed benefits for learners.

3. Students' association positioning

The first step of the strategic planning process is analysing where a students' association is currently, this allows the SA to identify its strengths but more importantly areas for development, ensuring the plan is relevant to the needs of the SA.

There are several methods of evaluating the current position of an SA but the most relevant would be [the self-evaluation tool](#) within the [Framework for the Development of Strong & Effective College Students' Associations](#). The framework maps out what a model college SA would look like and was created by experts and SAs across the sector and had endorsement from Scottish Government, so using this tool is a great way for students' associations to align their aims with the national standard for college SA's. NUS Charity can support SAs to facilitate a self-evaluation, more information can be found by contacting dcsa@nus.org.uk.

Other frequently used tools used in the strategic planning process are SWOT and PESTLE analyses. A SWOT analysis is an internal review of an organisation which identifies the strengths and weaknesses while also looking at the opportunities and threats that it is faced with. A PESTLE analysis helps organisations to identify the external factors which may influence them under the headings Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal & Environmental.

It's easy for an SA to carry out a SWOT or PESTLE analysis with just some paper, pens and the Students' Association team or by using NUS Charity's [SWOT](#) and [PESTLE](#) templates. This is a great way for SAs to really focus the information they've gathered in the self-evaluation, identify strategic priorities using the weaknesses & opportunities and use the PESTLE to keep the plan relevant to the changing external environment.

The examples below highlight how the SWOT & PESTLE analyses might look.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong class rep system with actively engaged reps• Highly visible among students	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of resources making further development of the SA challenging• Poor engagement with certain groups in the college eg. Construction, ESOL & supported learning students
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small college population with 1 campus means there's opportunity to increase SA awareness and presence on campus.	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Potential cuts to college funding across the sector• Lack of staff awareness of the purpose of the SA may have an impact on engagement

PESTLE Analysis

Political: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding cuts within the college sector Scottish Parliament election or potential independence referendum may have a bearing on college 	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost of living crisis impacting on students Limited opportunities for external SA funding Cost of living crisis impacting on students Limited opportunities for external SA funding 	Social: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills gaps and the effect of the pandemic on young people now transitioning into college More diverse student population
Technological: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased use of online learning and meeting platforms 	Legal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in legislation having a knock on effect for Students' Associations 	Environmental: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impacts of climate change on SA's eg. Requirements to use more sustainable suppliers Importance of sustainability issues among students

4. Mission, vision and values

Using the information gathered, the Students' Association can now develop its vision, mission & values. These three headings will appear at the start of any strategy and they give context to an organisations purpose, ambitions and how it conducts itself.

Mission

A vision statement outlines an organisation's reason for existing and its core activity. In the case of a students' association, it's core purpose is to represent the views of students in its institution - this is why most students' association or students' union mission statements from across the UK mention representation.

Vision

The vision statement highlights the aspirations of the students' association. This statement is an opportunity for SAs to be ambitious and highlight what they hope to achieve or be as an organisation, beyond the life of the strategy. This statement helps to align the overall goals of the SA.

Values

The values are the guiding principles of the students' association. These values highlight how the SA will conduct themselves and shape how decisions are made within the students' association. These values help stakeholders understand the culture within the students' association and the kind of organisation it aspires to be.

[To develop a mission vision and values, an SA can access a list of activities to run with stakeholders as well as examples of other institutions mission vision and values.](#)

Here are some examples of the mission, vision and values in other organisations:



SAMH

Mission

Our vision: is of a society where people are able to live their lives fully regardless of present or past circumstances.

Vision

Our vision: is of a society where people are able to live their lives fully regardless of present or past circumstances.

Values

Dignity, Respect, Equality, Hope, Choice



Scottish SPCA

Mission

Our mission is to champion kindness to all animals and challenge cruelty, to protect and celebrate the human-animal bond and to give a second chance to animals who need it.

Vision

Our vision is a Scotland where good animal welfare is the norm and where every animal has a life worth living.

Values

Animal welfare, Adaptability, Collaboration, Sustainability

5. Aims, objectives & outcomes

The next stage in the strategic planning process is to look at what specifically the SA are going to do and change. The Students' Association should consider what steps they need to take to achieve their vision and set targets to work towards this. It's important for SAs to also consider their mission as part of this process to ensure that they are working towards their core purpose.

Often expectations within institutions, stakeholders or from members themselves can cause the students' association to stray from their core representative purpose (called 'mission drift'), so using the mission statement is a great way to stay focused on this.

The plan will be organised into different sections, called areas of work. This should reflect the different areas of work that the SA needs to focus on to ensure it is working towards its mission and vision. This may look similar to the areas of work that the SA currently delivers on, or may look quite different if the SA needs to refocus on its core purpose.

To agree areas of work, the SA could use the themes from the Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations. This is a great way to align the strategy and the work within the plan with a sector-agreed vision for students' associations. The work of an SA will naturally fit within these themes. [There is also an alternative activity for agreeing areas of work here.](#)

The SA should now look at developing aims, outcomes and objectives within each area of work but what do these mean?

Aims

Within each area of work there will be a strategic aim. These aims will be broad in scope and highlight what the SA hopes to achieve by the end of the plan within that specific area.

For example, if an SA was looking at an area of work on Aware & Active Students, they might have an aim which says "The students' association will be accessible to all modes of students no matter how they study". This may have several elements, like more engagement with part-time or evening students or developing a plan for digital engagement with students studying remotely. There is an activity for developing strategic aims in the [NUS Charity aims & objectives activity](#).

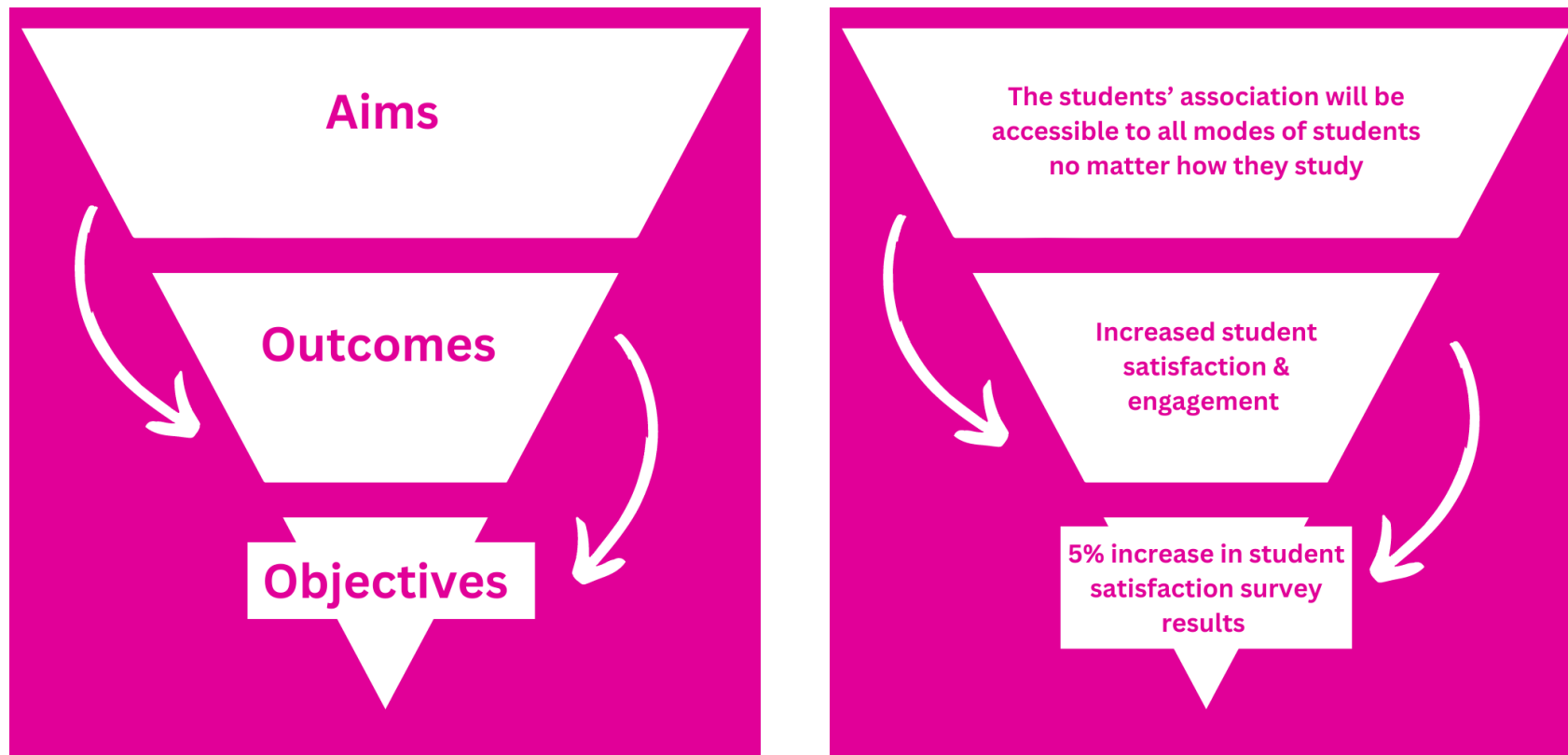
Outcomes

Within each aim, students' associations will create outcomes and objectives. Outcomes highlight the impact that the SA will have or the outcome of the strategy. When developing outcomes, SAs should consider what they see changing as a result of the plan being successful, for example "an increase in student satisfaction or students accessing advice and guidance support within their SA". These outcomes will be included in the plan.

Objectives

Unlike outcomes, objectives are not written down in the strategic plan and are for use of the students' association's workplan year on year. Aims indicate the priorities of the SA and outcomes highlight the desired impact of the plan but objectives are specific targets to help ensure the plan has been successful. Objectives will be included and monitored within the SAs operational plan and are specific measurable targets for the SA to achieve throughout the life of the plan for example, increasing class rep participation by 20%. Below is an example of how all of this might come together.

Another tool to use when considering objectives is SMART. NUS Charity has [developed a smart objectives template](#) to use along with some guidance to support its implementation.



6. Monitoring the Strategy

After the plan has been written it's important that the students' association is able to monitor the progress of the plan. Building strategic objectives into existing operational plans can be a great way of ensuring that the day-to-day work of the SA is feeding into the overall strategic plan. Objectives can be broken down into more achievable goals that could be worked towards within a year, or even within a term. If students' associations are looking to develop an annual operational planning system or fine tune their existing process then NUS Charity can support with this, contact dcsa@nus.org.uk for more information.

Other factors to consider are developing a timeline for the plan – SA's would benefit from mapping out the deadlines and milestones within their plan, this will help to give a visual representation of where progress should be throughout the life of the plan. This will also help the Students' Association to ensure that deadlines don't fall in particularly difficult time periods e.g. During elections, freshers or welcome week.

Developing progress reports or evaluations throughout the life of the plan is beneficial to both the SA and its stakeholders. From a Students' Association point of view, it's a great way to celebrate or make changes depending on the progress that has been made, and from a stakeholder point of view it's a great way to demonstrate the value and impact the plan is having. SAs could present these reports at the college board of management or at class rep or democracy events. [SAs can access the NUS Charity toolkit on impact & value on the DCSA website.](#)

Because the plan is in place for a number of years, it's important to engage with members to make sure what the SA is hoping to achieve is still relevant to them. As mentioned before an SA could use class rep or democracy events to gather feedback on the plan or try to facilitate focus groups to gather this information.

7. Reviewing the Strategy

Strategic planning is a continuous process and many plans last for 3-5 years, so it should be scheduled in advance to go through the process again when you know the life of a strategy is coming to an end. Below are some things for SAs to consider when reviewing their strategy;

Measure, review and report on impact

The first stage of implementing a new strategy is reviewing how successful the previous plan was. Students' Associations should consider the objectives they set before and whether these have been achieved or not. Some objectives may not have been achieved - and that's not necessarily an issue if the SA needed to change or adapt to different circumstances - what's important is to reflect on why it didn't work and carry that learning into the new plan. A report or infographics for stakeholders like students, the college board of management

or college senior managers is a great way to demonstrate the impact the plan has made, SAs should include the objectives they set and what the outcomes of these were.

Mission, Vision & Values

Many organisations retain their mission, vision and values over a long period of time. In the case of a students' association, because the core purpose of the organisation doesn't change, the mission may well stay the same, however given the ever-changing nature of college SAs priorities there may be some changes in the students' association's vision and values. SAs should review all three but keep in mind that a consistent approach brings continuity to each strategic plan and the 'brand' of the SA.

Review aims objectives and outcomes

After reviewing the objectives and outcomes from the previous plan, the SA could look to carry over strategic aims which they didn't achieve in their previous plan if they're still relevant and realistic. The process for developing new aims, objectives and outcomes remains the same. SAs should look at completing the framework's self-evaluation and new SWOT & PESTLE analyses as contexts change all the time. This will help the SA to reflect on its current position and update its aims accordingly.

Conclusion

The Framework states that effective and strong SAs are "able to make long term plans for the future. Student officers are able to leave a legacy, and incoming officers are able to build on the achievements of previous years".

Developing a strategic plan is a great way to ensure that there is sustainability and continuity in the students' association. This means that SAs aren't focused on starting over each year but can build progress over a longer period of time. Given the current political climate and increasingly limited resources available to college SAs, strategic planning is a highly effective way to ensure that SA work is relevant to students and is having a measurable impact. This in turn will demonstrate the benefits of the SA to its institution, legitimising its work.

It's important for SAs to remember that the development of a strategic plan is just the beginning of a process, and the plan should be used to influence operational activity and planning throughout its life. Following that process and setting realistic objectives will allow the SA to continue to grow.