

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY



A GUIDE TO DEVELOPING POLICIES AT WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

What Are Western Sydney University Policies?

Western Sydney University policy framework consists of rules, policies, procedures and guidelines that are approved in accordance with the Delegations (Administrative) Policy. There are three bodies, or approving authorities, that have the delegation to approve policy documents at the University. The approving authorities are the Board of Trustees, the Academic Senate and the Vice-Chancellor. Rules, policies, procedures and guidelines are defined in the Policy Framework Policy but in essence they are:

Rule – an absolute requirement

Policy – what must be done and/or what we adhere to

Procedure – how this is to be achieved

Guideline – how to do it well

These documents are written in a common format and the template is available from the Policy and Governance Unit. A standardised template ensures consistency across the University's policy documentation as well as assisting policy authors to order their information and present it in a logical sequence. This also benefits end users/readers in terms of being able to more readily find and understand policy information.

The University's policies are by and large directed at employees and students. In the case of employees the policies are extensions of the contract of employment in that staff are required to meet the terms of their employment including adherence to the University's policies. In the case of students while the relationship is not as precisely defined in a legal sense as is the case with employment, the relationship is certainly becoming more contractual in nature.

In this kind of legal framework it is important to understand that compliance with policies is just as much an issue for the organisation/employer as it is for the student or staff member. In this context it is important that our policies are:

- Consistent with each other and use common terminology
- Clear and reflect actual requirements
- Applied consistently in the University
- Up to date and reviewed regularly
- Reasonable and sensible
- Able to be implemented, communicated and complied with

- Available to all staff and students
- Compliant with relevant external statutory and regulatory requirements
- Clear in the explaining any breach provisions and their consequences

The three approval authorities for University policies are as follows:

- Board of Trustees – high level policies and particularly policies that delegate major functions to the Academic Senate or the Vice-Chancellor
- Academic Senate – the academic policies of the University
- Vice-Chancellor – all other policies including those dealing with core management issues such as human resources, finance etc.

The DVC/VPs are delegated to approve University procedures and guidelines.

The Policy DDS

The University operates an online policy development, approval and publication site – the Policy DDS, short for Policy Document Development System. The Policy DDS provides access to University policy documents and associated information such as links to other websites, forms, diagrams etc. The Policy DDS also assists policy authors and owners develop and review policy documents through its interactive consultation interface and an automated approval process. Other key features of the Policy DDS are:

- Flexible, intuitive search options
- Cross references, contact information, and access to related information
- Access to historic and future versions

When Do We Need a Policy?

The University has in place a clear set of delegations related to policies and procedures and these documents are approved and published under a formal process. As a consequence if a policy-type document is created and applied within the University, but it has not gone through the formal process, it may be open to challenge. There is case law where universities have failed in legal disputes simply on the basis that so called policies were not approved according to the university's established processes (see [Victoria University of Technology –v- Wilson \[2004\] VSC 33](#)).

As a general rule the following matters should be promulgated by way of approved University-wide policies and procedures:

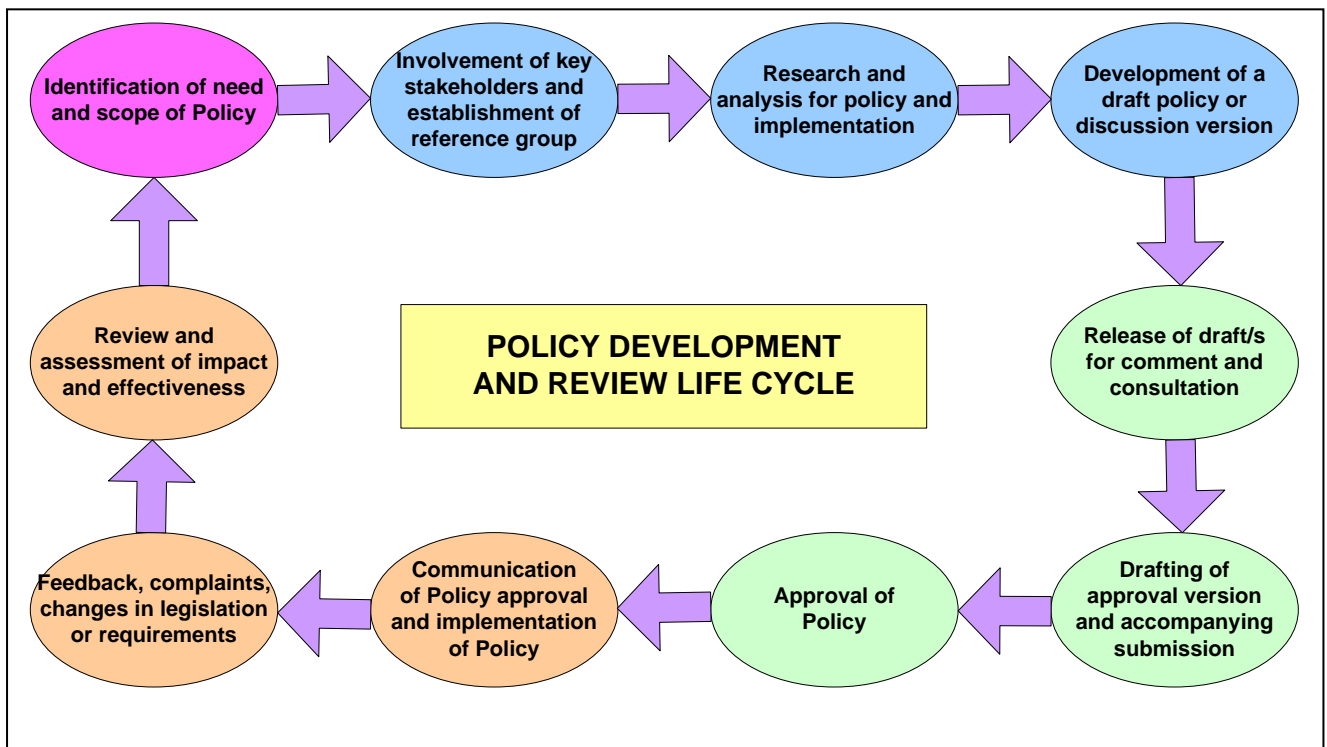
- where there is a need to prescribe matters that will affect individuals, staff and students, particularly in a potentially adverse manner; or
- where significant requirements are placed on individuals; or
- the expression of principles that must be adhered to.

Beyond this policies should be in place to regularise the handling of matters so that the University can operate in an efficient and effective manner. Consideration of whether a policy is needed or not can have regard to factors such as the need to:

- Manage and minimise risk
- Operationalise strategic initiatives
- Avoid confusion about how to deal with a matter
- Provide a structure to process matters
- Comply with statutory requirements
- Manage compliance
- Establish equitable standards and processes
- Provide rights and protections to individuals
- Protect health and safety.

The Policy Development Process

There are many resources that can assist in the development of policies. The Policy and Governance Unit recommends the Policy Development and Review Life Cycle to help in planning and scoping the development, approval, implementation and review of University policy type documents.



Western Sydney University uses a review cycle called PIRI – Plan, Implement, Review, Improve – in its strategic and corporate review processes. That process can also provide assistance in undertaking a policy review.

Step 1 – Preliminary Considerations

The need for a policy can be identified at any level within the University. Each policy must have a policy owner who takes responsibility for the development, implementation, compliance to and review of the policy. This is usually the unit head with prime functional

responsibility for the subject matter of the policy to be developed (also known as the responsible officer). Where the need for a policy is established it is critical that preliminary investigation and analysis is undertaken before any consideration is given to drafting. The purpose of this is to understand the basis of the need for the policy, the context within and outside the University that relate to the issue under consideration, and the interrelationships with other policies and with other functions and units within the University.

Hence the first stage is one of scoping the coverage of the policy, the issues that will need to be addressed, and the nature of the implementation. Flowing from this is the identification of a small but targeted reference group that will assist in the development of the policy and ensure that it addresses the needs of the University and can be implemented effectively. While all policies are published in draft form for general comment it is critically important to be proactive at this preliminary stage in canvassing issues with key staff and units to ensure that the policy meets the needs of the organisation as a whole.

In this phase, sourcing and analysing evidence to support the need for the development of the policy is essential. Evidence may include organisational or institutional data, student related data, and financial or other relevant data and statistics.

At this stage referral to the University Executive can be important in ensuring that the policy direction being considered aligns with the strategic directions of the University.

All policy development should be reported to the Policy and Governance Unit early in the development process. The Unit can provide advice and assistance:

- in relation to the existing policy context
- in facilitating reference groups
- on key stakeholders and how to incorporate them into the policy development
- on how to maximise consultation
- on the process for Executive or other approval

For some policies for instance, it will be essential that Legal Counsel is involved in the development of the policy content.

Academic policies that are approved by the Academic Senate are usually developed using a committee process. Standing committees of the Academic Senate or working groups reporting to Senate standing committees can act as reference groups. Policies generated in this way should still follow a process that includes all the major steps of policy development, as outlined in this document.

Step 2 – Research and Analysis

This is about analysing the basis behind the policy, the issues that need to be addressed and the information or research that will be needed. Issues for consideration at this stage include:

- Compliance with external regulations and statutes

- Scoping the coverage and content of the policy
- Scoping the likely implementation needs - resources, training, communication, impact on other areas and associated procedural issues – e.g. recordkeeping
- Consideration of the risks of not having a policy in place
- Identification of best practice guides and standards (e.g. Standards Australia documents)
- Identification of implications for other policies, inter-relationships and boundaries
- Consideration to the issue of a discussion paper rather than a draft policy
- Examination of any particular policy or implementation issues that may need addressing before the full Policy can be developed – i.e. some matters may require specific consideration and approval beforehand

Step 3 – Preparation of a Draft

In general a draft should be prepared and discussed among the reference group first and this should be followed by a period of broad exposure to the wider University community.

Information should be organised in a logical sequence and groupings to assist the reader. It is recommended that writers use the five section structure of the template to provide the overall structure of the document. The various parts and sub-headings within those sections can be developed gradually as the draft progresses. A process mapping exercise can be helpful at this point to assist in ensuring that all components required are included and placed in a sensible order. This includes where delegated approval points occur within a process. Version control is also essential at this stage and it can be managed within Policy DDS using a version and draft numbering system. Initial drafts can be circulated via Policy DDS to a restricted group prior to wider dissemination. The Policy DDS also allows for a questionnaire to accompany the draft document, which can facilitate specific feedback, for example does the group prefer one clause over another.

Drafts should follow the Policy Template and be written using plain English. When preparing the draft, authors should give consideration to the target audience – a policy directed to students may be quite different to a policy directed to finance staff.

A Note on Writing

Policies are largely prescriptive in nature. Because they are owned by relevant operational units, the approach to writing and presentation is often ‘unit-centric’ in style and content. The emphasis can often be on what the operational area requires rather than what the reader needs.

A well written policy must balance the needs of both sides. So in the case of travel, a policy must on one hand clearly outline the institutional requirements, but on the other, enable the traveller to get from A to B without fuss.

It is important to bear in mind that readers are not experts on the subject matter – that is why they are reading the policy – and it may be that they are accessing the document for the

first and only time. The need is for policies and associated documents to be clear and simple and written in Plain English.

A useful summary of the concept of Plain English is:

“Despite the name, Plain English is only partly about language... Where language comes in, it’s broadly a matter of seeking simple, everyday words whenever possible, and speaking more directly to the reader. Sentences need to be shorter and less intricate, with punctuation that ensures reliable reading. An average of 20 words is recommended, though individual sentences will of course vary around that. The most important principle of Plain English is to keep the reader in mind as you write. Think of yourself as communicating to someone across the table, and of how each sentence sounds. Your writer’s ‘ear’ should react whenever sentences leave the reader gasping for breath.”¹

Some of the key considerations when writing Western Sydney University policies are:

- Use the template and the heading styles to organise and structure the document
- Clauses can be paragraphs or single sentences
- In regard to acronyms the standard practice is to provide the full text with the acronym in brackets in the first instance and thereafter the acronym is used;
- Use active voice and put statements in positive form as it makes the meaning clearer;
- Use simple language and fewer words;
- Use short sentences. Avoid joining sentences together with ands and buts;
- Avoid ambiguity of terms like ‘may’ or ‘could’ – if flexibility is to be provided make that clear, if not make that clear as well; and
- Stick to the same tense
- Definitions should be consistently applied throughout the document

Step 4 – Consultation

All draft policies should be released for consultation via the Bulletin Board on Policy DDS. The length of time for consultation will depend on the complexity of the policy, its audience, and the time of the year, but generally it ranges between two and four weeks. In addition, authors should send targeted notifications to individuals or groups that will have a particular interest in the draft drawing their attention to the availability of the draft for comment. Authors should use other strategies such as workshops, placing the draft on the agendas of relevant meetings, and one to one meetings, so that the policy reflects the needs of the University and that it can and will be implemented. Consultation is part of the communication process in that it raises awareness of the proposed policy (or policy changes). Allowing the opportunity for input from users helps in the implementation of the policy.

¹ The Cambridge Guide to English Usage, Pam Peters, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 425

All comment should be assessed as to whether it is appropriate to include in the draft. Sometimes it may be best to hold off a suggested change until the next version. All comment provided through the Policy DDS should be acknowledged and the person providing the comment should be told as to whether their feedback has been incorporated or not and why.

If necessary, more than one draft version can be released for comment.

The author of the policy will receive an email from the Policy DDS with the responses of each commentator. At the end of the consultation period a consolidated report that groups all comments according to clauses, sections etc., is emailed to the author.

Step 5 – Development of Approval Draft

Following analysis of comments received and any amendment to the policy document a final draft for approval should be prepared. If the next draft is significantly different to the first, it can be posted on the Bulletin Board for further comment. The final draft may be referred back to the core reference group or to a senior manager or unit head for final perusal.

Step 6 – Approval

The path for approval will vary according to the approval authority. Academic policies will be processed through the Senate structure by the Academic Secretariat. All other policies whether being approved by the Board of Trustees or the Vice-Chancellor will normally be considered beforehand by the University Executive.

Policies are submitted for approval via the Policy. A submission (or covering memo is completed online by the policy author. The covering memo explains to the endorsing and approval authorities the rationale for the policy, its intended outcomes and the implementation issues associated with it. The emphasis will vary according to the subject matter but the core matters covered in the approval submission are:

- Purpose of the Policy
- The nature of the changes being made (where it is a revised policy)
- Consultation undertaken
- Issues identified during consultation
- Resource implications – Training/Financial/Staffing/Compliance
- Communication strategy and implementation responsibility

Step 7 – Communication and Implementation

A Policy Bulletin is published on E-update and Yammer every week (if required) to advise staff of all approvals to new policies, amendments to existing policies and the availability of draft policies for comment. In addition, policies that impact on students are posted on vUWS as an alert. Units that have functional responsibility for the Policy are responsible for managing in depth communication, training and implementation as necessary.

Step 8 – Review

All policies are subject to a cycle of review and the Policy and Governance Unit determines a review date for all policies in consultation with the Policy owner. Depending on the nature of their content policy review dates are set between one and five years.

Policy review should cover the following:

- Any issues or concerns that have been identified in the operation of the policy
- An evaluation of the level of compliance with the policy and evidence that it is having the intended effect
- Whether the information is up to date and remains consistent with any external or other regulatory requirements
- The effectiveness of any training associated with the operation of the Policy

Policy DDS generates automated notices to policy owners when review dates arise. However, policies can and should be amended as and when changes occur that affect the relevance and application of the policy.

A short review should be undertaken within the first year for all new policies (and policies that have been subject to substantial amendment) in order to ensure that the policy is operating and being implemented in the way that was intended.

MORE INFORMATION

For a copy of the Policy Template, go to the [Policy Development and Review Resources](#) web page.

USEFUL REFERENCES

Some useful references that may assist in the writing of policy documentation

The Association of College and University Policy Administrators (ACUPA)
<http://process.umn.edu/acupa/>

The Cambridge Guide to English Usage – ed. Pam Peters, Cambridge University Press 2004

The Plain English Campaign
<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

Policy Without (Much) Pain – 2013 – Association of Tertiary Education Managers
Institutional Policy Network

Style Manual – Sixth Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2002

Write Mark – New Zealand’s Plain English Standard
<http://www.writemark.co.nz/mainsite/Home.html>

Writing at Work – Neil James, Allen & Unwin, 2007