

WRITING PAPERS FOR THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES AND OTHER COMMITTEES

This paper is a guide for staff about the content, form and style of papers for the University's Board of Trustees. It can also be used as a guide for the preparation of committee papers generally.

Key Considerations:

- a) Is the Board or Committee the appropriate body for considering or deciding on the issue? Check the relevant Charter, Delegations of Authority, and confirm the deadlines for submitting papers.
- b) What is the purpose of the paper? This will inform the pathway, context and recommendation required.
- c) What type of recommendation is required? For noting / For endorsement / For approval?
- d) Papers should adopt the template format and structure, and be no more than 2 pages. Papers ought to:
 - a. Be clear, concise and contextualised
 - b. Be written in Plain English and ensure grammar and spell checks are done
 - c. Provide key additional information in an attachment or provide supplementary information via Diligent or website links.

1. Background about the Board

The starting point for writing a good paper is to understand the role and responsibilities of the Board itself and the path that proposals take in getting to the Board.

The Board of Trustees

The Board is the governing authority of the University. Its broad functions include:

- the development of broad policies and strategic plans with respect to the University;
- generally defining the University's educational profile;
- management of the University's resources and the monitoring of the University's performance;
- representation of the University as occasion requires;
- acting for and on behalf of the University in the exercise of the University's functions; and
- the control and management of the affairs and concerns of the University.

The Board comprises 18 members of whom 6 are internal to the University and 12 are external. The Board meets six times per year.

Writers of papers intended for the Board must be aware of this context. The Board needs papers that can be the basis for informed decision making. All Board members are dedicated and work hard for the University and its governance, but the majority of members are external and do not have the day to day experience and understanding of university business. Board papers must present proposals clearly, with all relevant facts and assessments, and in a format and style that is easy to read and understand. Bear in mind that in some cases Board members will be reading about an issue for the first time and will need background, history and context. Papers for the Board must be written for the Board and not simply be management papers re-formatted.

Papers being put to the Board must deal with matters relevant to the Board’s role and appropriate for it to know or determine. Papers must be substantial in content (i.e. significant to the University) and where an issue is canvassed, clear advice and information about what is being done and/or recommended in order to deal with the matter is included. For example, a paper that outlines a new direction in government policy should contain information about how the University is affected and any action that the University may or should take in relation to it. Otherwise there is little point in reporting the policy to the Board.

General information about the Board, its members, the committees and the like is available via the Governance web page at:

https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/about_uws/leadership/board_of_trustees

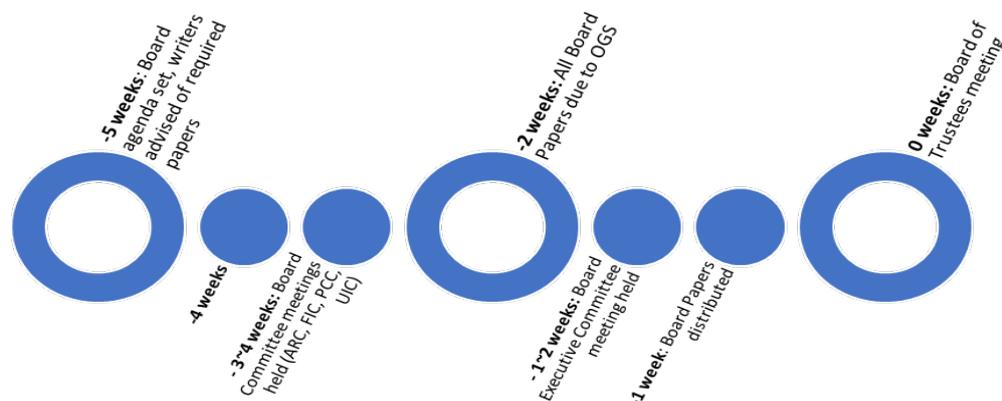
The Path to the Board

The Board meets six times each year and most of the business of the Board comes to it via its Committees or the Vice-Chancellor and the University Executive. Writers need to find out and meet the dates and timelines for the committees or meetings that a particular proposal will follow prior to going to the Board. For example a proposal that has significant resource implications for the University will go from the University Executive to the Finance and Investment Committee and then on to the Board. The governance committee structure and calendar of meeting dates is published on the Governance web page: see https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/about_uws/leadership/governance

The draft agenda for a Board meeting is approved five weeks prior to the meeting date and writers normally have approximately two to three weeks to draft their papers. New matters need to be signalled to the Board support staff as early as possible to ensure that they get on the agenda and have been through the appropriate review bodies.

For each Board meeting a due date is set for the submission of papers. This is normally two weeks prior to the date of the meeting. This time frame is needed so that all papers can be reviewed for content and format, be collated and printed and, most importantly, made available to Board members at least a week before the meeting.

The Board also receives some papers and reports on a cyclical basis and writers of that material must ensure that they are aware of the time lines involved. For example the Board considers the end of year accounts in April (via the Audit and Risk Committee) and the budget for the following year in October (via the Finance and Investment Committee).



2. Format and Content of Papers

A standard template and consistency in style assists Board members who are faced with folders filled with dozens of papers. They soon learn how to read the papers and where to find the information they want.

The University has adopted a standard template for all Board papers. The template is very simple so that it can accommodate a range of purposes. Some papers provide information or briefings for the Board on particular issues, while others are specific proposals with recommendations. For each Board meeting a formatted word template is available to authors (contact: Christine Sharpe, c.sharpe@westernsydney.edu.au)

The template consists of the following sections:

- i. Purpose
- ii. Strategic Alignment
- iii. Background
- iv. Discussion
- v. Key Risks
- vi. Recommendation(s)
- vii. Sponsor and Contributors
- viii. Attachments

i Purpose

This section should be no more than a sentence. It is meant to convey to Board members the reason that the paper is before the Board, and should be aligned with Recommendation(s) in the paper.

Purpose Example 1	To provide the Board of Trustees with analysis of the University's performance against the strategic plan, <i>Sustaining Success 2021 – 2026</i> .
Purpose Example 2	To seek Finance and Investment Committee endorsement for approval of the Board of Trustees for the University to enter into a Retail Electricity Supply Agreement for all University facilities and campuses.
Purpose Example 3	To seek Board of Trustees approval for the Western Sydney University 2021 Modern Slavery Statement.

ii Strategic Alignment

This section identifies how the activity or thing being considered relates to the strategic priorities of the University. The Board of Trustees is responsible for the University's strategic plan, *Sustaining Success 2021 – 2026*, which outlines the University's mission and values, as well as the strategic imperatives. The writer should select one - and no more than two - key principle(s) and key enabler(s) from the pre-populated drop-down selection.

If relevant, also include the alignment to other key strategic documents, such as:

- Western Sydney University decadal plans:
 - [Optimising the Future STEM Decadal Plan 2022 – 2031](#)
 - [Sustainability and Resilience 2030 Decadal Strategy](#)
 - [Western Sydney Creative Arts and Culture Decadal Strategy 2019 - 2029](#)
 - [Flight Path – Our Strategy for Western Sydney's Airport](#)
 - [Western Health – Our Decadal Commitment to the Health of Our Region](#)

- Indigenous Strategy 2020 - 2025
- Western Growth

iv Background

This section must provide the context for the Board's consideration, that is, the framework within which a matter is analysed and determined. This section should be relatively short (up to 1/2 page). If there is a need for more detail, this should be included as attachments.

Matters to be covered may include:

- previous Board consideration of the issues;
- relevant external context that brings the issue before the Board (e.g. legislation, government policy directives, etc.);
- relevant University policies, delegations, strategic directions or precedents;
- the background and relevant history of the issues.

For papers seeking a decision on a recommendation, this section should provide Board members with enough history and context to proceed with understanding and confidence to consider the issues under the next section.

For papers that are for information, this section may be slightly longer. Typically, committee reports that provide a range of items for the information of members, but do not contain recommendations, use this section. Many papers to the Board are progress reports, updates, or provide key data and information - the detail of which is usually in an attachment to a covering paper. Such papers require a brief summary of what the update or information is, and any key trends and performance results and progress against benchmarks or targets. Visual presentation such as colour diagrams or tables, should be used to assist the reader's comprehension of the information being provided.

v Discussion

This section provides the detailed argument in relation to any proposal being put to the Board or Committee. The content and length will vary depending on the complexity of the topic, but it should be no more than 1 page.

The following matters should always be considered for inclusion:

- a clear and detailed statement of the proposal;
- the arguments and reasons behind any proposal;
- the objective and expected outcomes;
- the costs and benefits;
- the pros and cons;
- the realistic options that might be available;
- the views of relevant stakeholders or interested parties;
- the implications of any decision;
- the alignment within budget and resourcing constraints.

There are no strict rules as to how this section is to be structured. As with the whole paper, this section must be set out in a logical sequence and structure using appropriate headings and paragraphing. Where necessary attachments can be used to provide appropriate reference material (e.g. complex data).

vi Key Risks

This section should identify the key risks for the University in making the decision and also by not making the decision. Include reference in the table to the University's risk appetite for such risks, as noted in the Risk Appetite Statement (available at: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ara/audit_and_risk_assessment/risk_management/download_material).

The identified risks should be assessed in terms of the likelihood and impact using the University's 5 point scale to determine the overall risk rating (see table below). It is important to include a brief dot point on the strategy to manage or mitigate the risk if it were to arise.

Risk Rating Matrix (Impact * Likelihood)

Impact	Likelihood				
	Rare (1) (remote)	Unlikely (2) (uncommon)	Possible (3) (occasional)	Likely (4) (probable)	Almost Certain (5) (frequent)
Catastrophic (5)	Moderate	Moderate	High	Critical	Critical
Major (4)	Low	Moderate	High	High	Critical
Moderate (3)	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High
Minor (2)	Very Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Insignificant (1)	Very Low	Very Low	Low	Low	Low

A 'nil' response for key risks should only be included in the paper if:

- (a) the paper is for noting; *and*
- (b) there is or has been no management decision or position taken in relation to the substantive issue being presented to the Board or Committee. (If a management decision or position has been taken, such decision or position ought to have considered a risk analysis and should be referenced in the key risk table).

vi Recommendation

The recommendation is the proposed resolution, or decision, of the Board. Once made, resolutions are recorded formally in the minutes and in a resolutions register.

Any recommendation must adhere to legal, compliance and policy requirements. Please check the Delegations of Authority Policy (and relevant schedules) to ensure any approval is sought from a decision maker with authority to provide that approval.

The recommendation must be simple, specific and stand alone. There should be no ambiguity nor need to refer back to other documents or papers to understand what has been decided. Recommendations must read well and be grammatically correct. For example, the Board or a committee is singular, and so it should read that "the Board approves..." or "the ABC committee endorses..."

Vague or 'self-referencing' constructions such as "the Board endorses the principles in this paper" must be avoided. Whenever possible, include the full text of what is being approved or endorsed should be contained in the recommendation.

Generally, there are three types of recommendations:

1. **For noting:** For noting is commonly used where the Board or the Committee is being updated on matters or discussion is sought without a decision being made (yet). 'For noting' includes the concept of 'for discussion' or 'for consideration' – the writer does not need to invite the Board to discuss, consider or engage in a matter.
2. **For endorsement:** Endorsement is typically used with Board Committees that consider and endorse a matter that is to go to the Board for approval. Endorsement should be used sparingly with the Board and refers to situations where the Board's broad concurrence to a particular course of action is being sought. For example the

Board has from time to time given endorsement to the release of discussion papers prepared by University management. In effect this means that the Board has given its support to the broad directions of the paper, but that specific approval of the particulars is still to be given.

3. **For approval:** An approval recommendation must enable the Board or Committee to make the required decision within its authority, which in turn enables the University management to execute that decision. It is critical the recommendation is clear and contained. Please see advice from the Office of University Secretary or Office of General Counsel if required.

Examples of the different types of recommendations are below.

Recommendation Example #	Recommendation type	Example text
Example 1	For noting	For noting.
Example 2	For endorsement	That the Audit and Risk Committee endorses for approval of the Board of Trustees the Western Sydney University 2021 Modern Slavery Statement.
Example 3	For approval	That Board of Trustees approves the Western Sydney University 2021 Annual Report.
Example 4	For endorsement	That the Finance and Investment Committee endorses and recommends that the Board of Trustees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) approves the University entering into an agreement with XYZ for the supply of ABC; and (b) authorises the Vice-Chancellor and President and Vice-President, Finance and Resources to settle terms of the agreement and execute the contract and any ancillary documents reasonably required to give effect to the contract and the transaction.

vii Sponsor and Contributors

All Board papers must be under the name of a Committee chair, the Vice-Chancellor, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor or a Vice-President, and include their role. This is the sponsor of the paper and who will usually speak to the paper at the Board meeting.

The sponsor of the paper may not be the person who prepared, authored, reviewed etc the paper. Whilst not required, contributors can be acknowledged below the name of the person submitting the paper in the format: “Contributor(s):”.

viii Attachments

Consider whether attachments are necessary or whether links to external information can be provided, or whether additional information might be available on request, such as being included in the meeting paper database.

Where attachments are required, they should be referenced within the body of the paper, in numerical order, and clearly labelled so that the reader knows what the document is and how it fits in to the paper. For example, in the body of the paper it may state “A copy of the draft ABC Policy / Statement on XYZ is attached (see Attachment

1)”. An index of attachments should also be included at the bottom of the paper, in numerical order and providing the full titles of each attachment.

3. The Style of Board Papers

Board papers should be written in Plain English. A useful summary of the concept of Plain English is:

“Despite the name, Plain English is only partly about language. It also emphasises the importance of document design. Any document needs a clear layout, in sections or paragraphs that express the structure of the information, and with effective headings and subheadings to identify local content. Adequate white space between sections and in lists also makes information more accessible. 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

There are some basic style rules that apply to University papers. These are:

- Avoid the use of personal pronouns – ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘you’ etc. Reference should be made to the position or body being referred to.
- Acronyms – apart from the most self evident acronyms that will be readily known by Board members, the standard practice of providing the full text and acronym in brackets in the first instance and thereafter the acronym, should be used.
- Personal names – generally the provision of names of individuals within papers should be accompanied by the relevant title – e.g. Dr, Professor, Ms, Mr etc.
- Font – Georgia 11 point is used for all text including headings in the body of the paper and 14 point for the paper title. A formatted and updated template is available to writers on the Governance website.
- Use the active voice (e.g. ‘Academic Senate decided’ rather than ‘it was decided’) and put statements in positive form as it makes the meaning clearer (e.g. ‘it was possible’ rather than ‘it would not have been impossible’).
- Use simple concrete language and fewer words – for example ‘the reason why is that’ can be replaced by ‘because’.
- Stick to the same tense and keep it simple – avoid forms like ‘it would have been’ if ‘it was’ can be used.
- Use shorter sentences and avoid joining sentences together with ands and buts.

Appendix 1 to this paper provides a listing of plain English resources and style guides that writers can consult. Assistance with the preparation of Board papers is available from the support staff to the Board. Contact details are provided in Appendix 2.

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

APPENDIX 1

References

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

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

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

Guide to Better Business Writing - Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation 2005.

Plain English at Work – a guide to help organisations develop plain English documents (DEST, 2004).

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/profiles/Plain_English_at_work.htm

The Plain English Campaign.

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

APPENDIX 2

Board Support Staff

For any assistance with the development of Board papers contact can be made with the support staff to the Board.

Christine Sharpe (x 1375) – Executive Governance Officer

Sophie Buck (x 1415) – Director, Governance Services

Jane Hutchison (x 8199), University Secretary

Board paper templates, the annual calendar of Board and other committee meeting dates and other relevant information can be downloaded at:

https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/about_uws/leadership/governance