



# Handbook on Strategic Planning

An introduction to strategic planning in ELSA

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***elsa***

The European Law Students' Association



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## INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this Handbook on Strategic Planning ELSA has recently adopted a new strategic plan of 5 years. As the strategic plan lasting from 2008 to 2013 got closer to its end date the work with creating our current strategic plan began. During this process many lessons were learned by the ELSA officers involved, lessons they thought they should have been educated about before starting the paramount task of creating a strategic plan.

It is because of this that a working group was formed in the spring of 2014 to write this handbook. The reason for writing this handbook is not to give a detailed explanation of how ELSA's international strategic planning process was executed. It is rather to provide a document that can be valuable for any team in our organisation that wants to create and assume a strategic plan in their group. The goal is that this document will serve as a useful handbook locally, nationally and internationally.

The intended reader of this handbook is every ELSA officer with an interest in strategic planning. Many will think that the responsibility for strategic planning within a board lies on the president. It is true that the president has the role of always knowing what is happening in all parts of the organisation and also to see the big lines. The responsibility of strategic planning does not solely lie on the president, though, but on the whole board. Each board member is specialized in his or her field and without the knowledge each board member brings to the table in a strategic planning process it will be difficult to create a strategic plan of quality.

At the time of writing this handbook the national president is responsible for including the strategic plan, which can be found in the Decision Book, in the National Board's One Year Operational Plan. It is an impossible task without the aid of the other board members. This shows the importance of all officers understanding why and how strategic planning works as a tool for improving and strengthening the network.

In essence, it is important that all officers learn the main lines of strategic planning. A written strategic plan is just the end result of a longer process and this process is really the core of strategic planning. A lot of the key to understanding the field of strategy is to understand how to think. This way of thinking will serve every officer in their ELSA work and in their future endeavours as lawyers.

We hope this document will be of good use to the reader and hope it can serve well for ELSA's future strategic plans.

ELSA fully yours,

Ola Linder – President ELSA Sweden 2013/2014

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## WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING AND WHAT IS IT NOT?

To be able to productively work with strategic planning you must begin to understand what a strategic plan is. By approaching this matter together with your co-creators, you are likely to begin to reach a common definition or at least an idea of what a strategic planning process should yield. Without this, you are likely to become confused and frustrated and end up with goals you are not satisfied with.

A strategic plan, like any plan, is a roadmap to get from point A to point B. It is a plan on how to take your organisation from where you are now to where you want to be in the future. A strategic plan differs from just any plan. It is generally concerned with the broad lines of an organisation, the big questions. It is also meant to last long, often several years.

A strategic plan is supposed to draw up a general long term plan about the strategic direction of your organisation. So questions like: what kind of activities do we offer? Do these activities correspond with what we set out to do? Do these activities correspond with our vision? Is our organisation structured in an effective way? Are there other organisations that are performing activities in the same way as we are? What sets us apart? And so on. These kind of questions really examine all sides of your organisation and prompts a critical view of every part of your activities and structure. From answering questions like these you will be able to pinpoint your strengths and weaknesses. You will be able to see your organisation in a meta state and then draw conclusions about how you want it to develop in the future.

The conclusions you draw is the basis of a strategic plan. To get your long term goals down on paper and then figuring out how to reach them is in short what strategic planning is all about.

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN WORKING WITH STRATEGIC PLANNING

### 1 - VISION & MISSION

When working with creating a strategic plan it is important to know and understand the values of your organisation. Many businesses and organisations have something called a vision and a mission, or similar concepts. A vision is often an idealized state of the organisation itself or of the world in which it operates. A mission states the purpose of the organisation within its field of work, supplementing the vision.

ELSA's philosophy statement, which can be found in article 3.2 of the statutes, reads as follows:

#### Vision

A just world in which there is respect for human dignity and cultural diversity.

#### Purpose

To contribute to legal education, to foster mutual understanding and to promote social responsibility of law students and young lawyers.

#### Means



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To provide opportunities for law students and young lawyers to learn about other cultures and legal systems in a spirit of critical dialogue and scientific co-operation.

To assist law students and young lawyers to be internationally minded and professionally skilled.

To encourage law students and young lawyers to act for the good of society.

When analysing your organisation and when setting future goals it is important to always bear ELSA's philosophy statement in mind. The philosophy statement is the foundational idea we all subscribe to in our association and it is therefore important that it is reflected in all our activities and organisational reality.

## 2 - WHO TO INVOLVE IN THE PROCESS

It is important to involve people from all parts of your organisation in the process of strategic planning. This means involving different officers from both the supporting areas and key areas and people in different levels of the organisation.

For example when ELSA International was making its strategic plan it involved officers from the international, national and local level. This ensures that all perspectives are taken into account. For example all officers don't understand the amount of work a member of the International Board has and without involving members from this organ a strategic plan might be made that doesn't take this into account. This way the International Board might be given even more tasks and the overall quality of their work might suffer.

On the local level it is a good idea to include freshers in the process, but also a national board member. A national board member has experience and probably an international perspective the members of the Local Group don't have. At the same time a fresher has a view of the organisation which is not yet formed by the organisational culture and can contribute a perspective which experienced officers cannot.

Involving officers from many different positions also makes a lot of sense. Just as in politics the result of policy are often times better when the people affected by the change are part of the decision making process. Making a group of presidents deciding what changes are to be made to the key areas not only often result in goals which do not correspond to reality, but also a lot of frustration with the key areas because they will not have confidence in a plan they did not take part in developing themselves.

## 3 – USING THE SAME METHODOLOGY

One of the mistakes when making the current strategic plan was that not all officers involved in the process had a clear understanding of what the process of strategic planning involved. Due to this many different ideas existed about how the final document should look like. This resulted in frustration as people were thinking completely differently about what kind of goals should be included.

It is therefore very important that these issues are addressed at the start of the process. Undoubtedly, you will learn many things during the course of a strategic planning process, but already being aware of these issues might save you a lot of time and cause you less frustration and anger. This will be the fundamental



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common ground you may come back to during the process. Hopefully, the following sections will give you a better idea on what you need to clarify with your co-creators when creating your strategic plan.

## THE STRUCTURE AND PROCESS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

### STRUCTURE OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

A strategic plan can be structured in many ways. When looking at strategic plans of other organisations and businesses you will see that their plans may look quite unlike each other. This can partly be attributed to differences in types of activities carried out as a natural result of different organisational structures and purposes of existence. But the differences between strategic plans can also be attributed to different methodological approaches. In this handbook we will explain and promote the methodology which was used during the creation of ELSA's current strategic plan lasting until 2018.

This structural method used divides the structure of a strategic plan into three main parts namely *focus areas*, *strategic goals* and *operational goals*.

#### **Focus areas:**

The whole strategic plan, Strategic Goals 2018, is structured into "Focus areas". There are six of them in total and they define a certain area under which there are several strategic and operational goals.

#### **Strategic goals:**

A strategic goal is supposed to be a broadly defined objective. It is created on the background of a analysis of the organisation and the conclusions that are drawn from it. In the current strategic plan, strategic goals often reflect a desired state which is meant to be reached by implementing the operational goals.

#### **Operational goals:**

Operational goals are objectives that are meant to more specifically state how you want to reach your strategic goals. When creating the operational goals, they should not be considered end goals in themselves, but steps towards achieving the strategic goals.

Taken from the 3<sup>rd</sup> focus area of ELSA's current strategic plan, an example illustrates the structure

### **3. Internationality**

ELSA shall bring the international aspect of the association closer to the national and local level

- ELSA shall focus on regional events as a means of making internationality accessible to more ELSA members
- ELSA shall focus on the promotion of international exchanges between ELSA groups in the Network and the improvement of the structure and the organisation of such activities
- ELSA shall promote legal English trainings within the Network.
- ELSA shall include international exchange students in its activities

- ELSA shall increase the number of international events on both a national and local level

## THE PROCESS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

The process of strategic planning can be divided into three parts:

1. Where are we?
2. Where do we want to go?
3. What do we have to do to get there?

### 1 – WHERE ARE WE? DUE DILIGENCE.

As mentioned before, to start the process of strategic planning you first have to put your organisation under the microscope and understand who you are and what you are doing. Also you have to figure out how your organisation is structured. There are therefore two main things one has to focus on in this process: your organisation's activities, and your organisation's structure. Structure means the way an association has organized itself. For example in ELSA we have 7 main areas within a board, 4 supporting areas and 3 key areas, also we are organized on three levels: local, national and international. These examples deal with how the organisation has chosen to structure itself. What kind of routines are implemented are also a part of the structure. Sometimes an organisation's structure is not effective potentially causing problems in multiple areas like recruitment, marketing, knowledge management and your general activities.

There are many tools that are used in this step, the most famous being a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Also, a good way of learning more about your organisation is organizing a session where the people involved in the strategic planning process can express the good and bad things in the organisation. Making people writing their thoughts down on a piece of paper and then discussing them together is a good way of doing this.

There is also a possibility of conducting market research amongst students, both members and non-members with relevant questions about your organisation. This will give you a more accurate view of how people view you association and what students want from you. If you have one or several partners, involving them in the process can be very helpful. Ask them to fill out a form about how they view your organisation. Being professionals, partners may give you an insight students cannot.

Another good idea is to compare your association to other similar organisations. ELSA often compares itself to organisations like AIESEC, BEST, AIGEE and several more. Such a comparative perspective is often very useful in learning more about you own organisation.

Other tools that you may work with are Balanced Score Cards and a PEST analysis (Political, Economic, Social and Technological analysis) even though in the formation of the current Strategic Plan it was not found particularly useful.

### 2 – WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO? STRATEGIC GOALS.

The aim of a strategic plan is to define goals and operationalising them to get you closer to your vision or



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mission within the set time frame. This stage is where you define these goals.

After conducting a thorough analysis of your status quo, many things about what works and doesn't should be more clear. You should see if you are actually fulfilling the vision of the organisation, working towards it or if you have strayed off in some ways. If you are a bit off track, a strategic plan is a good tool in making sure you get back to what you originally set out to do.

It is important to not spread out too thin. If you create a strategic plan which is too comprehensive then it is very likely that less of it will be followed up and implemented than if you create a shorter plan and include the most important topics.

### 3 – WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO TO GET THERE? OPERATIONAL GOALS.

The operational goals should be goals on how to achieve the strategic goals. Sometimes a goal might be to implement an already existing concept within the organisation, but that hasn't been implemented before, or it can be completely new ideas which you think can help achieve the strategic goals.

Looking at other ELSA groups and learning from their activities and structure can be very helpful in finding new and interesting activities and mechanisms to implement in your own network.

## EVALUATION

After a strategic plan is implemented it is important to evaluate the work which has been done on a regular basis. Not only does this yield information about the development of your organisation, but also reminds future generations that there is a strategic plan in place which needs to be followed if it is to be successful.

Depending on the specific strategic plan and the size of the group making the strategic plan, having evaluation sessions every ½ year or every year is recommended.

## VARIOUS

### 1 - LENGTH AND SCOPE OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

As mentioned earlier one should be careful of making a strategic plan too long. What will often happen is that you will spread yourself too thin and you will not have the human resources to follow up on a lengthy plan. Choose a few focus areas and make the whole organisation work towards those goals. That doesn't mean all other activity should be put on hold or not done, but this way the strategic plan will contain a list of the most important changes which have to be achieved in the organisation.

### 2 - QUANTITY VS. QUALITY

The words quantity and quality encompass two very different approaches and mindsets.

Qualitative strategies are excellent to work with if you wish to draw your organisation in a specific direction described by you. You are given the opportunity to describe what you want the organisation to



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be and to perform. This way you can really influence the development of the organisation in a creative and dynamic way. The negative side of qualitative goals is the difficulty in measuring the level of achievement.

With quantitative goals it's easy to measure the degree of implementation and figures are easy to write. Also it is much easier to measure the progress of your group with quantitative goals. Even though quantitative goals can be appropriate to use one has to be critical when using them. In essence they state the organizations' preference to do more, or less, of a given activity. It can turn the focus away from analysing why things are as they are and the appropriate measures to deal with these situations to discussions about how much of a certain activity you should do.

In conclusion, it is about figuring out what works for your group given your specific circumstances.

### 3 – SIZE MATTERS

Some things examined in this document will not fit all ELSA groups. When deciding how to carry out the planning process you should take into consideration how big your group is, who the stakeholders are and what is really needed. Making a strategic plan in a Local Group can for example take a weekend of work while making a strategic plan on the international level often takes up to a year.

This is quite natural as the number of people who have to be involved in such a process on the international level is much more numerous than what is the case on a local or national level.

### 4 – MAKE THE PLAN UNDERSTANDABLE

When drafting a plan you should strive to make it understandable to people who have not participated in the creation of the plan themselves. Being lawyers, we love to interpret the written word. Making sure the goals are as clear as possible will ensure that the next generation of officers will be able to continue the work which was initially intended.

### 5 – OFFICERS ARE WORKING UNPAID

ELSA officers slave away working unpaid as officers for the good of the association. Even though that is a good thing for ELSA it also brings about challenges. When working on a voluntary basis there is no longer any means of force that can be deployed to make sure things are done with good quality and on time. This is a fact that has to be remembered not only when making a strategic plan which might put some work responsibilities on different officers, but also generally in ELSA.

### 6 – PERIOD OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

On average an ELSA officer does not spend many years active in the organisation. This means that a lot of knowledge has to be transferred on a yearly basis to new officers. For strategic planning this means that at the end of an implementation period the officers working with the plan often were not part of the drafting. Naturally, the motivation to actually follow the plan and implement the goals is considerably less than if they had taken part in the process themselves.

Also, making a plan too long will not take into consideration that reality might have changed during the course of its implementation. Following a strategic plan when the reality no longer needs the specific goals it stakes out is not only demotivating for the officers involved, but counterproductive to making a better association.

## 7 – ONE YEAR OPERATIONAL PLAN (OYOP)

The OYOP is a well-established tool in ELSA. This tool is excellent when implementing your strategic plan. As a strategic plan is meant to envisage the long term development of your organization the OYOP can be a tool to implement specific parts of the plan during a term in office.

## CLOSING WORDS

This handbook has meant to be an introduction to strategic planning and not to cover the whole subject. For the reader the authors of this handbook have three last recommendations:

### 1. **Adapt the process**

Adapt the process described in this handbook to your specific circumstances. Don't be afraid of "breaking" any rules. There are none and you know better what is best for your group than this handbook does.

### 2. **Add other tools**

Add other tools YOU find helpful in your process of strategic planning. There are many tools used in the professional world which might be helpful or you might even come up with methods yourself which are useful.

### 3. **Think for yourself**

As with life in general, think for yourself. It is when one questions the status quo and what is presented as the truth that one really makes progress.