



The European Law Students' Association

STRATEGIC PLANNING HANDBOOK

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR NATIONAL AND LOCAL GROUPS

ELSA INTERNATIONAL 2025/2026

Foreword

Dear BEE Officer,

As it has often been said throughout this year, strategic planning is an essential tool for the long-term development of our Association. At the same time, it is often perceived as one of the more complex, and perhaps even one of the less exciting, aspects of our work. Yet, when approached in a practical way, it becomes a valuable guide that helps transform ideas into concrete actions and ensures that our efforts contribute to a common vision.

This handbook was created with the objective of making strategic planning more accessible to every ELSA Officer. Whether you are discovering the concept for the first time or already have experience implementing strategies within your Group, we hope that this document will provide practical guidance, useful examples and a structured approach that will help you transform ideas into concrete actions.

As with every handbook within ELSA, this document is intended to evolve together with our Association. We therefore encourage future generations of officers to continue developing and improving it so that it remains a practical and relevant resource for the entire Network.

Should you have any questions or suggestions regarding this handbook, please do not hesitate to contact the President of ELSA at president@elsa.org or the Director for Strategic Planning at director.strategicplanning@elsa.org.

We wish you an inspiring read and every success in shaping the future of your Group through strategic planning.

With warm regards,

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Acknowledgement

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1. Introduction

This handbook is designed to make strategic planning accessible, practical, and consistent across all levels of ELSA, from Local Groups to National Boards.

Whether you are completely new to the idea of strategic planning or you have already been working with one before, this handbook will help you understand why it matters, how it works, and how it can make a lasting difference in your ELSA Group.

The handbook follows the natural life cycle of a strategic plan. In the beginning, you will discover what strategic planning is and why it matters; then you will walk through creating, implementing, and evaluating a plan, and finally you will know how to hand it over to the next board so the work continues from one term to the next. Along the way, you will find checklists, templates, and ready-to-use tools that you can adapt to the reality of your own Group.

How to use this handbook

1. Read sections 2 and 3 to build a shared understanding before you begin.
2. Use sections 4 to 7 as a step-by-step guide through the full cycle of a plan.
3. Use the templates in section 8 when working with your own documents.
4. Use section 9 to anchor strategic planning in your regulations.

2. Strategic Planning

2.1 What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning is an organisational management activity; in other words, it is a process carried out to plan, coordinate, control, and improve how an organisation operates and achieves its goals. Put simply, it is the process that helps an organisation decide where it wants to go and how it is going to get there.

A good way to think about it: strategic planning is the process of documenting and establishing a direction for your organisation by assessing both where you are and where you are going. It is therefore not only about goals, but it is also about reflection. You take an honest look at your current position, your strengths and weaknesses, and then decide what future you want to create. This process creates clarity, helps with prioritising, and ensures that everyone understands the big picture.

When we go through strategic planning, we ask some key questions:

- What is our organisation?
- Who do we serve?
- What do we do?
- And why do we do it?

By answering those questions, we begin to define our direction and to set the long-term goals that guide everything we do. We then move from thinking to doing by creating specific goals, implementing actions, and evaluating the results.

Remember: all of this happens with a focus on the future. Strategic planning is not about where we are today; it is about preparing for where we want to be tomorrow.

Strategic planning in a nutshell

- It focuses energy and resources on what matters in the long term.
- It defines what the organisation is, who it serves, what it does, and why.
- It establishes direction and builds consensus around a vision and values.
- It identifies opportunities and challenges, and turns them into measurable goals.
- It helps the organisation become proactive rather than reactive.
- It stays broad: a strategic plan cannot include everything.

2.2 Why is it important?

Simply put: no strategy means no direction. Without a clear strategy, people tend to work in different directions, which leads to confusion and wasted effort. But when everyone knows the organisation's direction, the work aligns toward one common goal, and that naturally improves motivation and teamwork.

Officers in ELSA are elected for just one year, and that brings a particular challenge. It takes time for new officers to settle into their roles, understand the organisation, and start making progress. If you can look at the strategic plan that the previous board created, it helps you kick-start your term and align your OYOP with the long-term goals of the organisation. In a period where everything is new, having a strategic plan already in place is a great comfort.

It is also worth remembering that some of the issues we face, especially the bigger and more complex ones, cannot be solved in a single year. A strategic plan provides continuity. It gives each new board a roadmap to follow so they can build on what has already been achieved rather than starting from scratch.

A strategic plan can also support your fundraising. Many grants require you to align your organisation's strategic goals with the aims of the funder, and a strategic plan lets you demonstrate that alignment. This was, for example, an essential element of ELSA International's application for the European Youth Foundation (EYF) Structural Grant.

To sum it all up, strategic planning:

- **Establishes a direction** and builds consensus around your vision and values;
- **Identifies opportunities and challenges**, both inside and outside the organisation;
- **Creates measurable goals**, so you can actually track your progress;
- **Makes the organisation proactive**, anticipating change rather than only responding to it.

One important thing to remember: your strategic plan cannot include everything. It should be broad and focused on the bigger picture, not overloaded with detail. The finer details belong in the implementation handbook, which is where you explain how specific goals will be achieved and who is responsible for what.

2.3 Overview of the process

Creating and working with a strategic plan follows five steps. The rest of this handbook expands on each of them.

Step	Phase	What happens
1	Build awareness	Make sure everyone involved understands what strategic planning is and why it matters.
2	SWOT analysis	Take an honest look at your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
3	S.M.A.R.T goals	Turn your analysis into specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound goals.
4	Implement	Assign goals, link them to the OYOP, and track progress throughout the term.
5	Evaluate	Assess what worked, what did not, and what to recommend to your successors.

3. Strategic Goals

Strategic goals are the heart of your plan. They translate your vision into a small number of long-term ambitions that the whole Group can work towards over several years. Good strategic goals are broad enough to remain relevant across changing boards, yet clear enough that everyone can recognise progress towards them.

The two sides of strategic planning

Every Group works with strategic planning on two levels at the same time.

- **ELSA International's Strategic Plan.** You can work on your part in implementing the goals set out in the current International Strategic Plan. These are the shared, network-wide ambitions of ELSA.
- **Your National or Local Strategic Plan.** Work on your concrete national or local goals that are relevant only to your Group, and clarify how your Group will contribute to the international goals in your own context.

A strong plan connects the two: it shows how your local reality feeds into the wider network, and how the network's direction shapes your local priorities.

Examples of strategic goals

- **Human resources:** Increase active engagement and retention of officers across the term.
- **Academic activities:** Establish a recurring flagship academic event that builds the Group's reputation.
- **Internal management:** Create lasting institutional memory through reliable documentation and transition.
- **External relations:** Build a stable base of partners and funders aligned with ELSA's mission.

ELSA International's Strategic Plan

The current International Strategic Plan is published by ELSA International, and you can find it on the Officers' Portal through this [link](#).

4. Creating a strategic plan

4.1 Building Awareness

It is essential to build awareness about strategic planning before you start the process. For a strategic plan to genuinely reflect your Local or National Group and to last over a period of several years, a great deal of work has to go into its creation. Because it requires thoughtful preparation, everyone on the board and anyone else who will be involved needs to understand what strategic planning is, so that they are motivated to take part in creating the plan.

You can build awareness by introducing the topic early and often, for example through:

- Dedicated workshops on strategic planning during open calls and board meetings.
- Short presentations at general assemblies or Local Group meetings.
- Sharing this handbook and the previous board's plan as background reading.

4.2 The process

Step 1: Prepare

Preparation is where you set yourself up to succeed. Take the time to get organised before you start writing goals.

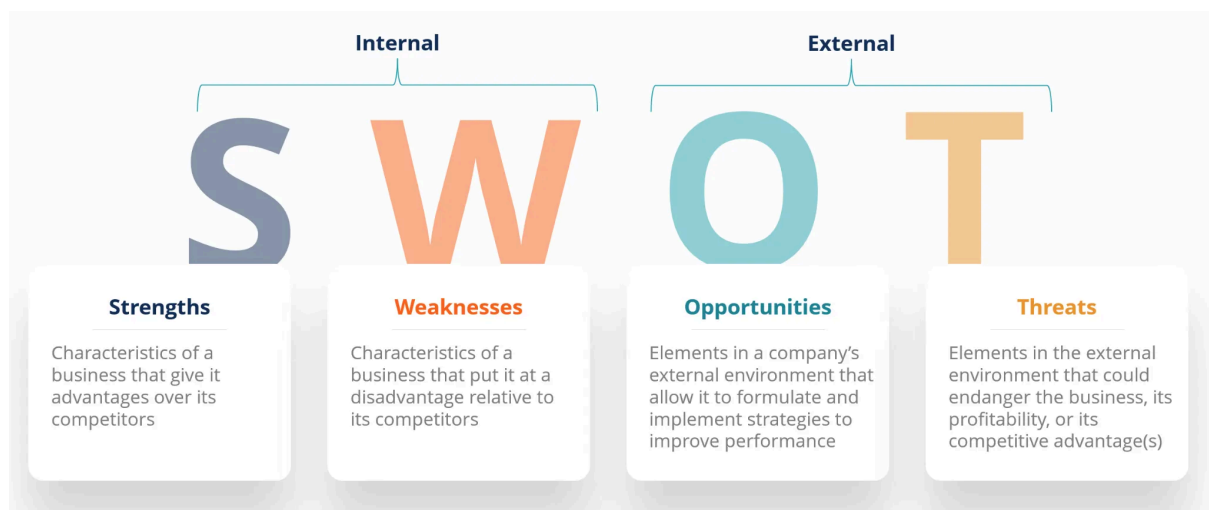
- **Decide who coordinates.** The President usually coordinates the strategic planning process, but it should be a collaborative effort involving the entire Board, and perhaps even a wider group of people. The main point is that every Board Member should feel accountable for the process. At the beginning, agree on how the work will be organised, including who is responsible for each task and the relevant deadlines.
- **Start at the right moment.** If you feel ready, start the process as early as possible. If you need more time to develop a solid strategy, prepare a first draft and use the transition period to refine, discuss and finalise it.
- **Determine the plan's duration.** A period of three to five years is generally recommended: long enough to focus on strategic development, yet short enough to remain realistic and adaptable.
- **Get inspired by your OYOP.** Your operational plan is a valuable starting point for identifying recurring priorities. Reviewing the previous OYOPs of your National Group can help you identify recurring priorities, ongoing challenges, and areas where longer-term planning is needed.

- **Make the time.** Strategic planning takes time and structure. Create it deliberately: gather your team, set up meetings, and build a reasonable timeline.
- **Gather and analyse information.** Start by understanding the current position of your Group and the factors that influence it. Consider how your environment may change in the coming years and carry out an honest assessment of your Group's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. Then identify the key strategic issues that your strategy should address.
- **Identify and involve stakeholders.** Consider who has an interest in your Group's work and who is affected by it. This will help you determine who should contribute to developing the strategy. Whenever possible, involve your Local Officers and other relevant stakeholders, as people are generally more committed to achieving goals they have helped to shape.

When you have gathered and analysed your information, you are ready to use a SWOT analysis to structure what you have learned.

Using a SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis looks at four areas. The first two are internal to your Group; the last two come from the environment around it.



Once your SWOT analysis is complete, create goals based on what it reveals, and consider breaking them down into thematic areas (for example, human resources, academic activities, or external relations).

Step 2: Create

It is now the moment to turn your analysis into goals.

- Create goals based on your SWOT analysis, and consider breaking them down into areas.
- Again, include your local officers. Shared ownership leads to shared commitment.
- Break the goals down into achievable chunks so progress feels possible.

Make your goals S.M.A.R.T.:

- Specific: detailed and action-oriented.
- Measurable: define how you will measure success and evaluate the process.
- Achievable: strike a balance between challenging and realistic.
- Relevant: show how the goal advances your overall objectives.
- Time-bound: set specific dates for milestones and for the goals themselves.

4.3 Checklist

Before moving on to implementation, check that you have covered the essentials of the creation phase.

Subject	Yes!	Not yet
Is there awareness of strategic planning in your LG/NG?		
Is the whole board engaged in the process?		
Have you made a timeline for the creation phase?		
Have you involved your Local Groups and different stakeholders in the process?		
Have you gathered information?		
Have you identified key strategic issues for your LG/NG?		
Have you made a stakeholder analysis?		
Have you made a SWOT analysis?		
Have you formulated S.M.A.R.T strategic goals?		

Please note that you can also find this checklist in the document *Strategic Planning Checklists*, available on the Officer's Portal or by clicking on this [link](#).

5. Implementing a strategic plan

You have now created your strategic plan, congratulations! But for the plan to achieve its purpose, it needs to be a living document, with which each board actively works, term after term.

5.1 Implementation framework

A strategic plan is deliberately broad, and avoids containing very specific goals. Implementation is how you bridge the gap between that broad direction and the concrete work of a single term.

From broad goals to concrete action

- **Use an implementation handbook.** This is where the details live: how you envision the way each goal is being achieved, and the practical steps behind it. The strategic plan says where you are going; the implementation handbook says how. As an example, you can find ELSA International's Implementation Handbook [here](#).
- **Translate goals to the local level.** For Local Groups, explain each goal clearly and break it into smaller, more concrete sub-goals. The more tangible the goal, the easier it is to act on.
- **Anchor it in your OYOP.** The most effective way to work with a strategic plan is to base your OYOP on its goals and link the two explicitly. In practice, the OYOP is a yearly implementation handbook: it turns the long-term plan into this year's concrete actions.

Three questions to agree on as a board

1. **Who is responsible?** Everyone is, but responsibility should be clearly and fairly distributed. Assign each goal to a board member so nothing falls through the cracks.
2. **How often do we follow up?** Agree on a regular rhythm, for example at every board meeting or once a month, and stick to it.
3. **How do we track progress?** Decide on a simple, shared way to record status and notes so the whole board can see where things stand at a glance.

A simple tracking framework

For each goal, record:

- **Responsible:** the board member who owns the goal.
- **Status:** Not started / In progress / Done.
- **Notes:** updates, issues, and next steps.

5.2 Checklist

Subject	Yes!	Not yet
Has each goal been assigned to a responsible Board Member?		
Have you broken broad goals into concrete, local-level actions?		
Is your OYOP linked to the strategic goals?		
Have you agreed how often you will follow up on progress?		
Have you agreed how progress will be tracked and recorded?		
Does everyone on the board understand their responsibilities?		
Is there an implementation handbook (or OYOP) capturing the detail?		

Please note that you can also find this checklist in the document *Strategic Planning Checklists*, available on the Officer's Portal or by clicking on this [link](#).

6. Evaluation of a strategic plan

Evaluation of the strategic plan normally takes place at the end of the term. It is your chance to step back and ask one simple but important question: **did we actually move the network in the direction we wanted?**

6.1 Why is evaluation important?

1. Tracking progress towards long-term goals

Strategic planning is about long-term goals, not one-year activities. Regular evaluation helps you measure progress and see whether your initiatives are actually moving you closer to those goals. It answers a very basic question: are we getting closer, or not?

2. Identifying what is working and what is not

Evaluation lets you spot challenges early, adjust strategies that are not effective, and replicate the actions that work. Without it, you risk repeating the same mistakes. It also protects your efficiency: without evaluation, you may keep investing time, energy, and people into projects that bring no results. This matters especially when budgets are tight, because it ensures resources are used wisely. In short, evaluation helps you stop doing things simply because you have always done them.

3. Accountability and transparency

Evaluating the strategic plan keeps you accountable. When you evaluate, you show that you take your commitments seriously, and that decisions are results-based rather than merely aspirational. This builds trust and credibility across the Network: with Local Groups, with officers, and with future Boards.

Key takeaway

Evaluation keeps the focus on impact over activity, ensuring that what you do contributes meaningfully to your goals.

6.2 What should the evaluation look like?

Evaluation does not look the same for everyone. How you evaluate depends on where you are in your strategic plan; a plan in its first year is assessed differently from one in its final year.

A good evaluation is not done all at once; it is a process. It usually involves the following steps.

Track progress regularly

Use reports (status, annual, and final) to compare where you started with where you are now. These reports are your memory as a board, and without them, evaluation becomes guesswork. Ask yourselves: what was the situation at the beginning of the term? What problems were we trying to solve? What has actually changed? If you do not know your starting point, you cannot measure progress.

Gather feedback

Evaluation is not something you do alone as a board. You need feedback from your Network, through surveys, open-floor discussions, and feedback sessions with Local Groups and officers.

Assess impact

Do not ask 'Did we organise activities?' but 'Did these activities create meaningful change?' For example: is information easier to access? Do officers feel more supported? Is the Network more aligned with the strategic goals?

Reflect and adjust

Ask yourselves honestly what worked, what did not, and, most importantly, why. This reflection should be documented and not just discussed, because undocumented reflection disappears.

Communicate findings

Share the results of your evaluation with your network, your Local Groups, and the relevant officers. Transparency builds trust and helps others learn from your experience. Then make clear recommendations to your successors as part of transition.

Recommendations to your successors

Evaluation is part of your transition responsibility. Your successors should not start from zero. Make clear recommendations on three points:

- What should be continued?
- What should be changed?
- What should not be repeated?

This is how strategic planning becomes continuous, so you do not have to reinvent it every year.

6.3 How to evaluate

When the term comes to an end, work through the following questions as a board.

1. **What did you do under strategic planning this term?** Consider your national strategic goals, your alignment with the International Strategic Plan, and any concrete initiatives or changes in practice.
2. **How did you evaluate your work so far?** Did you use surveys, reports, KPIs, or data, or mostly informal feedback and impressions?
3. **What showed progress and what did not?** What made you feel that something worked, and where did you realise that evaluation was missing or unclear?
4. **What is still missing to properly close the year?** For example: data not yet collected, no written evaluation, or no clear handover note.

As you answer, be concrete about what exactly you will measure, when, and how. Reporting underpins all of this, through status reports, annual reports, and a final report that feeds into transition.

Evaluation questions for each goal

- Did we achieve the goal? (Yes / No / Partially)
- Why?
- What should be continued next year?

Everyone is responsible for evaluating how the board has worked with the strategic plan throughout the year. These discussions should be captured in an evaluation report, such as an annual or final report. You will find an annual report template in [section 8](#).

6.4 Checklist

Subject	Yes!	Not yet
Have you compared your starting point with where you are now?		
Have you tracked progress using status, annual, and/or final reports?		
Have you gathered feedback from your Network and Local Groups?		
Have you assessed the real impact of your activities, not just the activity itself?		

Have you reflected on what worked, what did not, and why, in writing?		
Have you communicated your findings to the network?		
Have you written clear recommendations for your successors?		

Please note that you can also find this checklist in the document *Strategic Planning Checklists*, available on the Officer's Portal or by clicking on this [link](#).

7. Transition

So far this handbook has covered what strategic planning is and why it matters, and how to create, implement, and evaluate a strategic plan. The final piece is transition.

To ensure the continuity of your strategic plan and that the incoming board actively works to achieve the goals you have set, it is essential to include strategic planning in your transition. The plan is only as strong as the handover that carries it forward.

To make sure no steps are missed along the way, work through the checklist below with your successors.

7.1 Checklist

Subject	Check	To be done	A pro already
What is “Strategic Planning”			
The purpose of Strategic Planning			
Your Group’s Strategic Plan			
How you have worked with the goals during the term			
Writing the annual/final Strategic Goals Final Report			
Your recommendations for the incoming board			

Please note that you can also find this checklist in the document *Strategic Planning Checklists*, available on the Officer’s Portal or by clicking on this [link](#).

8. Templates and Tools

To make it as smooth as possible to kick-start your strategic planning, here are tools you can copy and adapt at each stage of the process. These templates, including an editable version, are also available on the Officers' Portal or by clicking [here](#).

Creation tools

Goal-setting template

Priority area	
Goal title	
Description	
Responsible person	
Supporting team	
Deadline	
Success indicator	What does success look like, in numbers or outcomes?

Make every goal S.M.A.R.T. by checking it against these prompts:

- Specific: what exactly will be done?
- Measurable: how will success be measured?
- Achievable: why is this realistic?
- Relevant: how does this support the strategy?
- Time-bound: what is the deadline?

Key actions

Break each goal into the concrete actions needed to reach it, for example:

- Action 1
- Action 2
- Action 3

Evaluation tools

Progress tracking template

Goal	Responsible	Status	Notes
Goal 1	VP AA	Not started/in progress/done	Updates
Goal 2	VP MKT	In progress	Issues/progress

Annual report template

Goal title	
Responsible area(s)	
Results	Was the goal achieved? ☐ Yes ☐ Partially ☐ No
Outcome	Description of what actually happened.
Analysis	What worked well? What did not work? Why?
Lessons learned	What should be repeated? What should be improved?
Recommendation for next board	Continue / Adapt / Stop

Example: Strategic Plan

You can use this skeleton as the structure for your own full strategic plan. You can also see the structure of ELSA International's Strategic Plan [here](#).

ELSA (Group Name) – Strategic Plan (Year-Year)

Vision

Describe what you want your Group to become in the long term.

Example: “To be the leading law student organisation at our university, known for high-quality academic activities and strong member engagement.”

Strategic Goals

Goal 1: e.g. Human Resources. Increase active engagement from officers.

- Operative goal A: ...
- Operative goal B: ...
- Operative goal C: ...

Goal 2: (area). (Description of the goal.)

- Operative goal A: ...
- Operative goal B: ...

Add as many strategic goals as your Group needs, each with its own operative goals underneath. Keep the plan broad; the detail belongs in your implementation handbook and OYOP.

9. Regulations

It is highly recommended to adopt regulations on strategic planning for your local or national Group, to ensure continuity and to ensure clarity about who is responsible for actively working towards the strategic goals. For inspiration, see how ELSA International has regulated strategic planning in its [Decision Book](#).

Here are suggestions of what your regulations could include:

- The board shall create a long-term strategic plan for the organisation's activities.
- The strategic plan shall apply for X years, and the board shall create a new plan before the end of the previous period.
- The board is responsible for actively working with the strategic plan.
- The board shall produce an Implementation Handbook for the strategic goals.
- The board shall produce regular status reports on progress towards the strategic goals.
- ELSA International's long-term goals shall be considered when creating the plan.
- Local Groups shall be given the opportunity to express their views when a strategic plan is created.
- Strategic planning shall be included in every transition between boards.

10. Final remarks

You have made it this far, and we hope you feel inspired to start the process of creating a strategic plan.

As this handbook has shown, there are many rewards in having a strategic plan. It helps new officers kick-start their term, it helps officers direct their energy and resources efficiently, it is an advantage when you apply for grants, and, when implemented continuously, it helps your Group achieve the vision it has set and become a stronger organisation.

If you have further questions about strategic planning, please do not hesitate to reach out to either the Director for Strategic Planning (director.strategicplanning@elsa.org) or the President of ELSA International (president@elsa.org).

Best of luck!



The European Law Students' Association