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# **POLICY CONSULTATION GUIDELINE**

# **PURPOSE**

This guideline has been developed to assist University staff with stakeholder consultation during the development and/or review of University policy documents.

This document should be read in conjunction with the University’s [Policy Framework](https://policies.newcastle.edu.au/document/view-current.php?id=98).

# **DEFINITIONS**

‘Policy documents’ refers to those documents listed in the Hierarchy of University Policy documents (see [Policy Framework](https://policies.newcastle.edu.au/document/view-current.php?id=98)).

# **WHY CONSULT FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT OR REVIEW?**

Policy documents are developed to achieve a particular intent or purpose. That is, an outcome of a policy document is almost always anticipated. Essential to achieving this outcome is a policy document that is well informed, viable, and effective. Consultation is a key method to ensuring a policy document does this - consultation gathers knowledge, experience, perspectives, interpretations, understanding and opinions of stakeholders. Consultation also identifies problems and develops solutions.

Consultation provides opportunity to value add to policy documents before implementation of the document. Seeking to understand how the policy document may be interpreted and applied by a range of stakeholders will ensure that the likely impact the policy document may have on the University is fully considered and then able to be compared to the desired impact. Stakeholder consultation may contribute to the difference between achieving the intent of the policy document or creating unintended consequences.

Consultation builds knowledge and awareness. It also builds relationships, contributes to successful change management, and contributes to informed decision making.

Consultation can give credibility and legitimacy to a policy document, can increase compliance and foster cohesion and connectivity.

# **WHAT IS EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION?**

At its very core, consultation is about openly exchanging views, ideas, and information. It should be sincere and meaningful and should not be undertaken or interpreted as a “box ticking” exercise.

Consultation may bring rise to disagreements and conflicting views; however, this is not adequate justification to avoid consultation.

Consultation is not always about achieving consensus – this will depend on the stakeholder group and the purpose of consultation.

Effective consultation will be proportional, timely, accessible, focussed, transparent, flexible, responsive, and evaluated:

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| Stacked Rocks with solid fill | Proportional | Balance the effort and resources required to consult with the magnitude, complexity and nature of the policy document and its intent. |
| Stopwatch with solid fill | Timely | Give people sufficient notice and time to consider and submit their views. |
| Key with solid fill | Accessible | Ensure participation is easy.  If online for e.g. can people find an access point? The fewer “clicks” the better; is the method / platform easy to use – has it been tested?  Use plain and simple language and instructions. |
| Bullseye with solid fill | Focussed | State the objectives. State any limitations.  Use targeted open-ended questions for important matters. |
| Glasses with solid fill | Transparent | Provide clear and easy to understand information that helps participants to understand the policy intent as well as the purpose of consultation.  If releasing a draft document, ensure the policy document is written in plain and simple language and is not overly complex. |
| Gymnast: Floor routine with solid fill | Flexible | Be flexible in how you consult. Different methods might suit different consultation purposes and different stakeholder groups. |
| Transfer with solid fill | Responsive | Communicate outcomes of consultation and provide feedback.  If unable to respond, advise this at the time of inviting feedback. |
| Clipboard Mixed with solid fill | Evaluated | Consider if your consultation was effective?  Learn from your efforts and apply continuous improvement for next time. |

# **WHO SHOULD I CONSULT WITH?**

Defining the scope and audience of a policy document may assist with establishing which stakeholders should be consulted throughout the policy development or review process.

Key stakeholders, informing stakeholders and impacted stakeholders should be identified.

**Key stakeholders** are generally those persons who need to implement, supervise, or make decisions associated with the policy document.

Key stakeholders may include:

**Informing stakeholders** are those who may have related subject matter expertise, such as legal, financial, governance, human resources, equity & diversity, Indigenous or cultural expertise, etc. To identify the relevant informing stakeholders, consider the wider context of the policy by looking at the P.E.S.T.E.L. context of the subject matter:

**Impacted stakeholders** are those who are likely to experience change when the policy document is implemented. This may include:

* persons who may be impacted by decisions made in accordance with the policy document;
* staff responsible for administration of matters related to the policy document; and
* persons who need to comply with the requirements of the policy document.

# **WHY AM I CONSULTING?**

Throughout the policy development or policy review process there may be a range of reasons why consultation will be beneficial:

Different stakeholders have different needs. Therefore, consulting with the full range of stakeholders may seek to achieve differing consultation purposes. Stakeholder needs will vary based on their level of influence and level of interest.

Keep satisfied

Actively Engage

Monitor

Keep Informed

Low High

**Level of Interest**

High Low

**Level of Influence**

# **WHEN DO I CONSULT?**

**When developing a policy document**, consultation should occur throughout the development phase and the drafting phase. Depending on the subject matter this may require several consultation efforts.

Stakeholders should be given sufficient opportunity to influence the development process. This may be through:

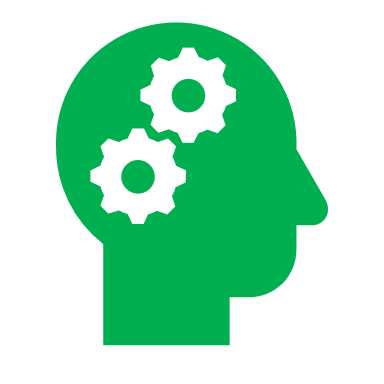
* working group meetings to identify the range of problems, risks, and opportunities;
* subject matter expert meetings to develop principles or problem solutions; or
* individual key stakeholder meetings to explore their requirements, particularly if they have a high level of influence and interest.

**When drafting a new policy document**, consultation can check interpretation and understanding of the drafted content, as well as assist to identify additional problems and solutions. Draft documents can be released to a wide unlimited audience, or a limited audience, via the [policy library bulletin board](https://policies.newcastle.edu.au/bulletin-board.php).

**When reviewing an existing policy document**, a range of consultation methods can be used. This could include working group meetings, releasing the existing document on the bulletin board for comment, targeted questions / surveys, individual stakeholder meetings or subject matter expert discussions.

The timing of consultation is also critical to ensure the desired amount of feedback. Avoiding busy periods in the calendar, ensuring that other matters are not also released for consultation at the same time, and selecting opportune times in the organisation’s growth or change timeline are things to consider.

# **HOW DO I CONSULT?**



Consider:

- what is the best mechanism for consultation given the stakeholders?

- what is my purpose of consultation?

- what is the key subject matter?

- what are the timeframes that I need to meet?

1. **Determine the objective for consultation – what are you hoping to achieve?**
2. **Pick your method or method(s) of consultation, ensuring accessibility for all stakeholders:**

* Call for written submission or feedback
* Roundtable meetings / forums
* Focus groups
* Working parties
* User testing
* Informal discussions / meetings
* On-line discussion forums
* Presentations
* Team meeting
* Policy Library Bulletin board

1. **Determine the timeframe for consultation:**

The method and time allowed for consultation should be appropriate to the complexity and sensitivity of the subject matter of the policy document. The method should also be considerate of the timelines for finalisation and approval of the document.

1. **Communicate to your stakeholders:**

Communication should be undertaken to engage with the stakeholders and to encourage their feedback:

* If consulting via a method that is not face to face, consider what might be the best way(s) to reach out to the stakeholder group to achieve the desired amount of input;
* Communicate how the consultation process can be accessed;
* Communicate the objective for consultation and the context of the policy document;
* Be transparent about the purpose of the document and the consultation process;
* Use language that encourages input and feedback;
* Be clear about timeframes and if individual responses will be provided;
* Be considerate of other people’s time pressures; and
* Devise targeted questions (if relevant).

1. **Receive and consider the feedback:**

* Take time to consider responses; pay attention to the details;
* If verbal consultation, respond honestly and openly;
* Ask further questions to clarify if necessary;
* Keep appropriate records;
* Take steps to incorporate the feedback into the policy document if it provides an improvement, solution, or best practice.

1. **Close the Loop**

* Provide feedback to those who participated (where reasonable) to advise how their feedback was dealt with;
* Include a summary of feedback received with your approval Cover Paper.
* Consider what worked and what didn’t – how can consultation be improved?

# **Strengths and Weaknesses of Consultation Methods**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Consultation Method | Strengths | Weaknesses |
| Distribution of discussion document. | * Allows in depth consideration. * Can be used to foster wide participation. | * Requires considerable lead time. * Is not interactive and can limit clarification of points raised. * If information is complex, can intimidate participants or lead to distorted answers. |
| Large Meetings / Forums | * Allows interaction between SME and stakeholders. * Transparent to all participants. | * Meeting participation levels can determine the consultation outcomes. * Individuals / smaller groups can dominate the agenda. * Discussion may be superficial and not explore complex or sensitive elements. |
| Small Group Meetings / Working Parties / Team Meetings | * Enables focussed and in-depth discussions. * Gains better understanding of key concerns. * Can target specific expertise and experience. * Selection of participants allows for diversity. | * Selection of participants may be sensitive. * Selection bias may occur, therefore, feedback received may not represent the views of all stakeholders. * Time consuming. * Lack of wider transparency. * Group dynamics may impact on level of participation. |
| Surveys and Questionnaires | * Very focussed. * Encourages wide participation. * Participants can self-elect to be involved. * Allows for data collection. | * Is not interactive. * Does not solicit in-depth responses. * Questionnaire quality can influence results. |
| Policy Library Bulletin Board | * Allows for both clause-by-clause feedback and specific questions. * Easy to extract feedback in report style. * Allows for limited audience or wide audience participation. * High level of transparency. * Requires contact information (email to be entered) which can be used to clarify feedback. | * Participation is generally limited to those who self-select and are made aware of opportunity. * Responses may be brief. * If wide audience participation is provided, it is difficult to know if respondent is a stakeholder or holds any particular level of expertise. |
| Individual stakeholder meetings | * Allows for very focussed detailed discussions. * Few interruptions from other participants. | * If used as the sole method, is not considered to be transparent. * Is dependent on skill of SME to extract information and understand responses. |