

Glossary of Governance Terms



Student
Resource

Please note these are general definitions and there might be variations to the language used in whatever decision-making group you are part of. If you are unsure of the specific meaning of a word, you can ask the Chair to clarify.

Abstention: When a person elects not to vote on a particular decision, despite having voting rights. An abstention does not count for a vote in favour nor a vote against. An abstention is usually recorded in the minutes.

Agenda: A list of items to be discussed at a meeting. An agenda is sometimes also referred to as the "order of business", as it is usually followed in the order that it is written out. You should expect to receive an agenda and, where appropriate, supporting documentation prior to the meeting taking place.

Apology: Notice in advance that a person will not be present in a meeting. If someone says "I will be an apology for next month's meeting" it means they will not be attending. You should always provide an apology in advance if you know you cannot attend.

Chair: The person who presides over a meeting. They conduct the formalities of a meeting (such as declaring it open and closed), follow the order of business set out in the agenda, and facilitate discussion. The process of running a meeting can also be called chairing.

Committee Secretary: A member of the committee whose role it is to record the Minutes of the meeting and send out the agenda and papers.

Consensus: When everyone generally agrees on a certain topic.

Delegation: When a group or individual assigns its decision-making power to someone else. Groups with higher authority will often delegate power to sub-committees to carry out specific duties on their behalf. Delegation is commonly used to share responsibility and workload in governance processes; however, the delegating group remains ultimately responsible for any outcomes.

Ex-Officio: An individual who is a member of a committee because of their job role, not because they specifically nominated to be a member. For example, the Vice Chancellor is an ex-officio member of the Governance and Nominations Committee because the policy states that the Vice Chancellor will be a member. If the Vice Chancellor were to leave the position the new Vice Chancellor automatically becomes a member of the Committee and doesn't have to nominate for the position.

Governance: This term describes the way that something is governed, as well as the range of processes that cause governance to be enacted. These may include the principles, values, and rules of organisation that cause it to achieve its goals, mission, and business. At UniSA, governance is achieved through the setting of policy, procedures, and guidelines, as well as through a hierarchical network of decision-making Boards and Committees that ultimately report to the University Council.

Handover: A handover is when someone who is leaving a role passes information that is relevant to the role to their successor. For example, if there is a student representative working on a special project of the University who graduates, they might prepare a written handover or meet with their successor to pass on the knowledge and information needed to take over the role. Handovers are not always possible, but they can ensure that progress is not lost when personnel changes. However, a handover is rarely an adequate substitute for comprehensive induction processes and mentorship from senior group members.



Minutes: A written document outlining the details of a meeting. As a rule, minutes include the time, date, and location of a meeting, who was in attendance or absent, and a summary of the discussions and decisions made in that meeting. Minutes are usually recorded by the person acting as the Committee Secretary, and they are distributed to committee members after each meeting. It is also customary to approve the previous meeting's minutes at the next meeting to give members the opportunity to correct or affirm anything attributed to them.

Motion: A formal proposal of decision put before a meeting. This might include a proposal of an action to take, but it might also indicate a formal declaration affirming a position or opinion by that committee. Motions occur in formal decision-making settings, and usually require a "mover" to make the proposal, and a "seconder" to demonstrate wider support.

Policy: "Policy" may refer to the range of rules that govern the internal conduct of an organisation's affairs, but it may also refer to a specific type of governance instrument. Policies are often accompanied by written "procedures", which outline how the policy must be enacted.

Proxy: When a member of a decision-making group nominates another person to fill their role on a temporary basis. This can include casting votes on their behalf. Not all decision-making groups recognise proxies, and this should be clarified through the Terms of Reference of that group if you are unsure.

Quorum: The minimum number of members present for a meeting to be considered valid. This is a common consideration in governance bodies because it ensures that decisions and discussions made by a committee have received enough input from members of that group in order to consider it a decision of that committee. It is also a check and balance to ensure that proceedings do not go ahead if particular people are not present.

Standing Orders: The rules that govern the conduct of meetings. Not all decision-making groups have official standing orders, but if you are a member of a group that has them you should become familiar with them so you understand the expected processes and what rules you need to follow during meetings.

Starring: When meeting agendas are very long and contain numerous written supporting documents (such as reports for noting or papers outlining some decisions), the chair may elect not to verbally discuss each agenda item. If an item is "starred", it will be discussed during the meeting.

Terms of Reference: A document that sets out the scope, structure, and limitations of a decision-making/ advisory group as established by a higher authority. The newly established committee is bound to follow the directions of the Terms of Reference and the higher authority has the power to amend them or disestablish the group. The Terms of Reference will usually set out the roles of members and will be your first port of call when examining the purpose of a committee. All members should be familiar with the Terms of Reference to ensure they are acting within its powers and intended spirit.