Student-led think tanks: a guide

A guide to creating, governing, and sustaining a student-led think tank that achieves meaningful impact.

Framed within the Building for the Future Initiative
By Selenge Dima

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Contents

Grantees from Cycle II of the OTT Building for the Future initiative.

1. Introduction

This guide is part of the *Building for the Future initiative*, an effort led by On Think Tanks (OTT) to support the next generation of policy entrepreneurs.

The "Student-Led Think Tanks: A guide" was created for mission-driven youth leaders who want to establish their own student-led think tanks to influence decision-making in their communities. It is also a valuable resource for universities looking to provide students with opportunities to conduct independent research on public policy. Additionally, the guide serves as a tool for existing student-led think tanks to assess their organisations and address any challenges they may be facing.

This step-by-step guide covers key topics such as governance, funding, partnerships, communications, and impact. It includes case studies, examples, and insights from thinktankers, illustrating how they structure their organisations and navigate challenges. Student-led think tanks played a crucial role in shaping this guide, as their detailed responses to OTT's questionnaire informed our analysis. This guide was inspired by the "Build a think tank guide" from OTT.

The Building for the Future initiative is part of the On Think Tanks programme, the leading global source of information, support and community for people working in, with, and funding think tanks. The programme creates a space to connect, learn and exchange knowledge, ideas and resources with activities that include the OTT Conference, School for Thinktankers, State of the Sector report, Open Think Tank Directory, Funders Circle, and the Building for the Future initiative.

Further reading:

- OTT Blog: Youth-driven change: Student-led think tanks and the future of inclusive policy, by Jessica Correa and Selenge Dima

2. What are student-led think tanks? Mission, scope and objectives

This chapter defines student-led think tanks, explores what makes them unique, and outlines key questions to consider when establishing one.

Student-led think tanks are student- and youth-led organisations that perform many of the same functions as traditional think tanks, including:

- Generating ideas and creating, maintaining and opening up spaces for debate and deliberations on current affairs and policy-related issues.
- Conducting research to explore and analyse key issues and produce in-depth policy reports and concise blog posts.

- Hosting events to engage students and foster dialogue.
- Attempting to influence the policy process by raising awareness, informing and advocating/proposing solutions
- Capacity building by designing courses open to interested audiences
- Monitoring and auditing political actors, public policy or behaviour

What makes student-led think tanks unique is that they are governed, managed, and staffed by students and recent graduates. They may be affiliated with a single or multiple universities, or operate independently of any institution. There are also student-led think tanks at the secondary education level. These organisations play a vital role in training future researchers, policymakers, and policy entrepreneurs.

OTT has compiled a [database](#) of student-led think tanks.

Key questions to ask when setting up your think tank:

- **What is your mission?**

  Your mission defines your organisation's purpose and outlines how it will contribute to achieving a broader vision. A clear mission guides your think tank's work and helps communicate its value to stakeholders.

  o Example: [The Security Distillery](#), run by postgraduate students in security and intelligence studies, aims to distil complex security issues into digestible information.

- **What issues will your think tank address?**

  In parallel to reflecting on and defining your mission, you should work on defining the issues that your student-led think tank will focus on as it will help shape research priorities and ensure clarity in your organisation's direction.

  o Example: [Epis Think Tank](#), a youth-led think tank based in Germany, conducts research on topics related to foreign and security policy.

- **What impact do you hope to achieve?**

  Impact can take various forms, from influencing the public agenda to shaping policy discussions.

  o Example: [Generation for Rights Over the World (GROW)](#) aims to influence policy discussions in France and Europe by providing evidence-based

recommendations on issues such as freedom of expression and minority rights.

> *"The primary driver of a student think tank is its ability to gather a wide community of enthusiastic and diverse young people, motivated towards the goal of the think tank. Additionally, individuating an important, timely, and niche topic of research or goal is a helpful element for the think tank to establish its impact."*
>
> Student Think Tank for Europe-Asia Relations (STEAR)

> *"We have been struggling to answer what success means to us because it's hard to measure impact but also mobilise a student-led team to have a shared vision of success. But I think success would mean building a strong network and being able to influence policy."*
>
> Warwick Think Tank

- **Who are your primary audiences?**

  A strong student-led think tank needs an engaged audience. Identifying your primary audiences—whether students, policymakers, academics, or civil society—helps refine your outreach strategy.

  o Example: Student Think Tank for Europe-Asia Relations (STEAR)'s main audiences are Asian and European students and recent graduates, civil society, and members of the general public, looking to explore the field of cross-continental collaboration and global affairs.

3. Governance, leadership and team structure

This chapter explores different governance models for student-led think tanks, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of being university-affiliated versus independent. It also examines leadership roles, team structures, and strategies for recruitment and retention.

Student-led think tanks are typically membership-led organisations. This reflects the nature of academic organisation (e.g. research groups, student clubs or student

unions). Membership-led organisations tend to have more complex governance and management structures which depend on frequent and robust deliberation and consensus building.

Key features of the governance and management of a student-led think tank often include:

- Elected Leadership: Student leaders, often with titles like President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, are typically elected by the think tank's members.
- Boards or Councils: Some student-led think tanks have a board or council that oversees the organisation's activities and makes important decisions. The board may be elected or appointed, and it may include students, faculty, and alumni.
- Specific Roles: Within the structure, there are often specific roles for research, communications, events, and other key functions. This ensures that all aspects of the think tank's work are managed effectively.
- Term Limits: Leadership positions often have term limits to ensure turnover and provide opportunities for new students to get involved.
- Handover Processes: As student-led think tanks change leadership, and recruit new members constantly, they need to ensure smooth leadership transitions.
- University Involvement: The level of university involvement in governance varies. Some student-led think tanks are independent, while others are closely affiliated with their university and may have faculty advisors or other university representatives on their board.

Choosing a governance model

While some student-led think tanks are affiliated to a university there are others that are independent.

- Independent student-led think tank: These organisations enjoy complete autonomy, giving them full control over their research and how they operate. This allows for flexible collaboration with various institutions and the ability to forge a distinctive identity and purpose. A key challenge is securing reliable funding, as they're reliant on external fundraising.

- University-affiliated student-led think tank: Being linked to a university provides valuable access to academic expertise and credibility. Plus, they benefit from a ready-made pool of student recruits. They may face constraints on the topics they can explore and the advocacy they can undertake, due to university regulations. However, there are university-affiliated student-led think tanks that are given complete autonomy over their research topics. These organisations are subject to the university's administrative procedures, which can be slow and bureaucratic.

The table below showcases the pros and cons of being an independent student-led think tank, and being a university-affiliated student-led think tank.

Governance Model	Pros	Cons
Independent Think Tank	Full autonomy over research and operations	Requires significant external fundraising efforts
	Ability to establish unique identity and mission	Can be challenging to maintain long-term sustainability
	Freedom to have non student team members	
	Ability to recruit members worldwide	
University-affiliated	Access to university resources (including academics) and credibility	Subject to the university's administrative processes
	Easier to secure initial funding and space	Subject to university administrative processes
	Structured oversight within the university system	
	Built-in student recruitment pool and identity	Lack of complete independence in governance

"The support provided by a university can be key in the development of a think tank (access to venues to organise events, financial support, advice from senior academics, etc). Nonetheless, our non-affiliation comes with benefits, notably we are fully independent, and we get to internally decide on the research topics on which we want to work. It also allows for more flexibility in the work, as we are not confronted with a vertical-hierarchical model that could slow down decision-making, and which affiliated think tank may have to face."

Generation for Rights over the World (GROW)

"We often work with university organisations and recruit mostly with universities, with some representing multiple members. However, given the multi-regional breadth of the organisation, we are not affiliated with specific universities. This grants the ability to still attract members worldwide, without any concerns for a university's country's political position. Student-led think tanks that are within a university may face limitations because they almost always prevent alumni from staying in the organisation. STEAR members are automatically allowed to stay on after graduating, or to interview for a different role."

Student Think Tank for Europe-Asia Relations (STEAR)

"The University provides us with support such as finances and advice but also ensure that student organisations are keeping to their commitments and staying within guidelines. Even there to mediate conflict. Provides more credibility."

Warwick Think Tank

Leadership and recruitment

Leadership is critical in any think tank. More so when members of the think tanks are likely to rotate every few years. When setting up the think tank, its founders need to consider the following important questions:

- How will you select your leadership team?
- What are the responsibilities of each role?
- How will you recruit and retain members?

Key positions in student-led think tanks can include:

- President/Executive Director: Overall leadership and strategic direction.
- Vice President: Supports the President and may focus on internal operations.

- Secretary: Manages administrative tasks, member communications, and outreach.
- Treasurer: Oversees financial matters and budgeting.
- Research Director/Head of Research: Leads research projects and teams.
- Communications Director/Head of Communications: Manages communication strategy and channels.
- Events Coordinator: Organises and executes events.
- Specific roles based on the think tank's focus: For example, an Advocacy Director for a think tank focused on policy change.

"Our Internal Affairs division is highly active in creating social and education activities for our members, a great motivator for participants. New members are recruited through our growing visibility and usually welcome student applications from prestigious universities worldwide…Leaders' terms last one year, however, most terms can be re-confirmed for another year with the consent of the board. Selection processes are multi-phase and usually quite competitive."

Student Think Tank for Europe-Asia Relations (STEAR)

"Maintaining motivation among members is a key priority, as we rely entirely on volunteers working remotely, many of whom are students navigating pivotal stages of their lives and careers. Regular opportunities for collaboration and shared learning are provided, fostering growth and mutual support among members. Informal interactions are also encouraged to build stronger personal connections beyond work-related tasks. This supportive and inclusive environment helps us retain a motivated and dynamic team committed to its mission, although not always a success."

Generation for Rights over the World (GROW)

Grantees from Cycle I of the Building for the Future initiative during the Security Distillery's multi-regional event

CASE STUDY:

Warwick Think Tank holds elections every year in March to select leaders, with a term period of one year. The team structure of Warwick Think Tank:

- Core Leadership Team (Executive Team): Responsible for overseeing the society's strategic direction and day-to-day operations.
- President: Leads and represents the society, oversees all activities.
- Vice President: Supports the President, may handle internal operations.
- Secretary: Manages admin, member communications, welfare and global outreach.
- Treasurer: Oversees financial matters, budgeting, and expense management.
- Head of Sponsorship: Acquires sponsors, manages sponsor relationships.
- Head of Marketing: Develops and executes marketing strategies.
- Head of Events: Plans and organises society events.
- Careers Officer: Organises career-related events, manages mentorship system.
- Head of Research: Oversees research projects, supports Research Analysts.
- Lead Editor: Manages blog, podcast and editorial content, and supports Policy Analysts.
- Supporting Executive Team: Appointed Positions selected by the Core Leadership to provide additional support in various areas.
- Research and Policy Analysts: Produces research reports, blogs, and editorials.
- General Members: Student members who participate in events and activities without formal roles.

How do they recruit and manage transitions of so many positions? They reach potential new members through its Instagram page, society fairs, word of mouth, providing them exciting incentives that will help develop their personal and professional skills. Handover packs are given to each new member of the executive team and the Student Union at the University of Warwick prepares in person and virtual training courses for executive members to complete.

Further reading:

- OTT Best Practice Series. Series of 15 articles written by various experts.
- OTT Series on Think Tank Leaders. Series of 11 articles and studies written by various experts.

4. Funding and sustainability

This chapter explores different funding models for student-led think tanks and strategies to ensure their long-term sustainability. Key methods include engaging volunteers, collaborating with academics, and building relationships with supporting organisations.

Student-led think tanks employ a variety of funding models to support their operations, often in combination. Some rely on core funding obtained from various external entities such as universities, foundations, and private sector organisations. This type of funding can provide a stable financial base for their activities. Others secure project-based funding for specific research or events, which can be crucial for undertaking focused work. Additionally, some think tanks generate revenue through membership fees and event participation charges, contributing to their financial self-sufficiency. A common thread among these organisations is a strong reliance on volunteers, primarily students and recent graduates who contribute their time and skills. This voluntary engagement is a critical factor in their sustainability, allowing them to operate with limited financial resources.

The table below summarises the different categories of funding and support available to student-led think tanks, and their implications for the organisation's long-term sustainability.

Category of funding and support	Implications for sustainability	Examples
Core funding	Provides a stable financial base, enabling consistent operations and long-term planning.	Warwick Think Tank previously has received core funding from the Insititute of Economic Affairs (IEA), a UK based think tank.
Project-based funding	Allows for focused work on particular topics, but may require continuous effort to secure new projects.	Warwick Think Tank has collaborated with London Politica, a risk advisory company, on a report analysing TikTok's surveillance practices.
Membership and event revenue	Can contribute to financial self-sufficiency and create a sense of community ownership.	Epis Think Tank runs 90 % on membership fees, with the rest coming from other sponsors.
Volunteer contributions	Essential for operational capacity given limited financial resources;	GROW is entirely volunteer-run, with everyone, including co-

	requires effective engagement and motivation strategies	presidents, working without pay. GROW's members also pay a yearly membership fee, contributing to the overall financial sustainability of the organisation.
Engagement with supporting organisations	Can lead to partnerships, funding opportunities, mentorship, and increased reach and influence, enhancing long-term sustainability	GROW receives in-kind support from a former university where leaders attended, experts and mentors they connected with during their careers, and from peers who have founded similar organisations.

"Our Board collaborates on funding efforts, mainly undertaken by the Co-Presidents and the VP for Organizational Development and Growth. Our positions are voluntary and unpaid. Most members are students or have other jobs, as such we retain a flexible policy and working-hours expectations are agreed upon in advance. "

Student Think Tank for Europe-Asia Relations (STEAR)

"As an independent think tank run by volunteers, our capacity to develop competitive fundraising proposals for private institutions, foundations, or governmental bodies is limited due to both time and expertise constraints".

Generation for Rights over the World (GROW)

Further reading:

- OTT Talks: Engaging with volunteers in times of crisis with Wailea Zülch, Engagement manager at Foraus.
- OTT Blog: Foraus global: The Tinder for foreign policy enthusiasts, by Luca Brunner, Co-Head of the international strategy of Foraus.

5. Research and credibility

This chapter explores key questions about conducting research within student-led think tanks and includes case studies of successful approaches to research output and credibility.

How to decide what research topics to focus on?

Student-led think tanks often identify their research focus by recognising unmet needs or gaps within the existing policy landscape. Their missions, which define their purpose, also significantly guide the selection of research topics. The perceived relevance of issues in the near future can also drive the choice of broad thematic areas. Furthermore, the interests of the organisation's members can play a crucial role, with individual members sometimes proposing and pursuing research topics within the broader scope of the student-led think tank.

Who does the research?

The primary actors in conducting research within student-led think tanks are the student members themselves. Some student-led think tanks have students that produce research outputs independently, while others have research leads that work with the support of team members. Their research activities typically involve producing various outputs such as blog posts, policy reports, and editorials.

How to ensure credibility?

To ensure the credibility of their research, student-led think tanks frequently employ internal review processes to check the quality of their work. Peer review is another common method, often involving feedback from team members with relevant expertise. Some think tanks have dedicated editorial bodies that conduct thorough evaluations of submissions, focusing on clarity, quality, and relevance.

"We prioritise the well-being and interests of our members by fostering an inclusive and participatory research environment. Members, as well as external contributors, are encouraged to submit research proposals and write articles on topics of their choice, providing them with an opportunity to explore issues they are passionate about. To maintain the quality and credibility of its work, we employ a collaborative peer-review process that incorporates feedback from team members with relevant expertise, ensuring thoroughness and accuracy in every output."

Generation for Rights over the World (GROW)

Further reading:

- [OTT Series: Supporting policymakers to use evidence](). Series of five articles written by various experts.
- [OTT Series: Peer review for think tanks](). Series of eight articles written by various experts.

6. Partnerships and collaboration

This chapter explores the importance of different types of partners for student-led think tanks. Establishing strong partnerships can enhance credibility, expand reach, and create opportunities for greater impact. The following table outlines the different types of partners student-led think tanks can collaborate with, and their key benefits.

Types of partners	Key benefits	Examples
Think Tank and research institution partnerships	These collaborations can enhance credibility and expand reach	STEAR has collaborated with Brussels based think tank European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS). They aim to expand their partners to other leading European and Asian organisations and think tanks, such as the East Asia Institute, Chatham House, and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA).
NGOs and civil society partnerships	These partnerships often align on shared goals and can amplify the impact of joint initiatives	GROW has partnered with NGOs and lawyers on advocacy campaigns, events, and policy recommendations. It is also part of civil society-led coalitions advocating for policy changes at the Council of Europe and the European Union.
International organisations and institutions	These collaborations allow student-led think tanks to contribute to broader policy discussions and initiatives	[European Student Think Tank]() has partnered with the European Youth Forum, a platform of youth organisations funded by the Council of

		Europe, and Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.
Private sector	This type of collaboration allows student-led think tanks to diversify their funding, and reach new audiences	Warwick Think Tank has partnered with Bright Network, a recruitment platform, and a UK based consultancy firm ekosgen. Epis Think Tank partners with EsperoTech, a technology consulting agency based in Munich, Germany.
Other student-led organisations	These partnerships can have a lower barrier to entry compared to other types of partners, allowing less established student-led think tanks an opportunity to expand their networks	Warwick Think Tank collaborates with other student organisations at the University of Warwick, such as the Warwick Politics Society and the Warwick Environmental Social Governance Society.

"In addition to in-person networking, we leverage our active presence on social media to engage with a broader audience and share its work. This digital outreach not only raises awareness about the organization's activities but also serves as a platform to attract potential partners who share its goals. Alongside social media efforts, we conduct extensive desk research to identify organisations and individuals whose objectives align with our mission. This research informs targeted outreach efforts, including mailing campaigns and direct communications, ensuring that partnerships are intentional and impactful".

Generation for Rights over the World (GROW)

"Our President and Board members conduct outreach to a variety of organisations and partners."

Student Think Tank for Europe-Asia Relations (STEAR)

Further reading:

- Article: [An insider's perspective into equitable think tank partnerships: time for a real change by Enrique Mendizabal.](#)
- Video: [Partnerships for change in a complex world](#). Discussion hosted by Cast from Clay during the OTT Conference 2022

7. Communications and outreach

This chapter explores the various communication outputs produced by student-led think tanks to ensure their work reaches their key audiences.

A strong communications and outreach strategy ensures your student-led think tank's work reaches your target audience, and attracts new members as well as potential funders. Some student-led think tanks have dedicated communications teams that develop strategies to ensure their work is reaching the target audiences.

Communications outputs from student-led think tanks include:

- Regular newsletters: [GROW](#) distributes newsletters to its audience, providing timely insights on key issues. Recent topics include gender bias in AI and pop culture moments such as *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie*, and their relevance to public policy.
- Social media channels: Student-led think tanks actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn. [Warwick Think Tank](#) and [STEAR](#), for instance, have over 1,400 followers on Instagram, where they share updates on their publications, recruitment opportunities, and events. GROW posts actively on different social media platforms, including [LinkedIn](#), sharing their work in both English and French.
- Podcasts: Warwick Think Tank has a podcast titled [Fulcrum](#), where they bring in guests to further expand on their research topics.

< Grantee from Cycle I of the Building for the Future initiative, York Student Think Tank's multi-regional event.

Grantee from Cycle I of the Building for the Future initiative, the Wilberforce Society's multi-regional. >

- Forums/seminars/open events: STEAR organises events on Europe-Asia relations using various formats, including speaker panels, Q&A sessions, and town halls.
- Policy briefs: STEAR regularly publishes policy briefs on its website. Recent topics include Pakistan's smog crisis, Italy's youth unemployment challenge, and South Korea's declining birth rate. GROW also produces policy briefs, with recent outputs about pre-trial custody in France, and the freedom of press in France.
- Publications (books, research outputs, essays): Warwick Think Tank regularly publishes articles on topics such as foreign affairs, healthcare, education, technology, and the environment. "Epis Magazine" is a quarterly publication by EPIS Thinktank, featuring academic articles from experts and students in politics and international relations.
- Personal meetings/closed events: Student-led think tanks also engage with stakeholders through online and in-person meetings and closed events.

"The think tank is present on various social media: Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, X and Threads. Nevertheless, we are mainly using Instagram and LinkedIn, on which people are the most receptive....Regarding policy briefs and recommendations that are addressed to a specific audience, we are directly sharing the content with them via email, and trying to organise personal meetings with them to discuss the result of our research."

Generation for Rights over the World (GROW)

CASE STUDY:

STEAR has a dedicated Communications team that promotes the think tank's activities, events, and publications across several media platforms to reach the targeted interested groups. It also monitors communication performance and researches new ways of interacting with our audiences. It publishes research and policy pieces on its website, sends monthly email newsletters, promotes its events and publications on social media (Instagram, X, LinkedIn), hosts online speaker events open to the public, and publishes the STEAR Journal with longer research pieces on its website.

Further reading:

- Think Tank Communications Health Check - a tool designed to help think tanks and research institutes refine and improve their communications.

- [OTT Series: Think tanks and communications](#). A series of 26 articles written by various experts around the world.

8. Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)

This chapter explores the different methods student-led think tanks can utilise to monitor their progress and impact.

Some student-led think tanks face challenges in monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL), often lacking dedicated strategies and struggling with the difficulty of measuring impact and defining success. This is sometimes compounded by the turnover of members.

However, there are different ways for them to monitor progress according to their resources:

- Set clear goals and strategies
- Regularly evaluate research outputs
- Use feedback to refine your approach
- Use stakeholder surveys

> *"It's a bit hard to monitor progress considering that the team changes every year. There are people who stay on (if they've not graduated or done a year abroad). But it's a bit hard to ensure because different leaders have different agendas, styles and capacities."*
>
> *Warwick Think Tank*

CASE STUDY:

At EPIS Think Tank, team leaders oversee the publications. The team leaders review each draft and checks it on the basis of basic academic criteria, i.e. checking sources, reviewing the texts. The Board oversees the conduct of the team leader. The EPIS Guideline provides detailed accounts what/how/when/by whom the work is conducted. They monitor every publication by their engagement rates on different platforms.

Further reading:

- [OTT Resources on MEL](). Webinars and short courses.
- [OTT Series on MEL for Think Tanks](). A series of 6 articles written by various experts.

9. Challenges

The biggest and most common challenges student-led think tanks face include:

- Fundraising and Financial sustainability due to limited resources and lack of expertise.
- Maintaining motivation and long-term engagement of members who are unpaid volunteers.
- Measuring impact and defining success due to the nature of their work.
- Building a strong network and recognition to amplify their influence.

Student-led think tanks are resourceful and dynamic organisations, led by passionate students and recent graduates looking to contribute to public policy discussions, and impact public policy in their communities. They manage financial difficulties by collecting small fees from members, and event participants, seeking in-kind support from organisations and experts, and building their teams with volunteers. They attract new members, and motivate existing members by building capacity building and networking opportunities.

Measuring impact and defining success pose challenges for student-led think tanks as they have high turnover rates for leaders, and team members, however they can begin to tackle these by strengthening their institutional memory.

Building a strong network of partners is essential in amplifying student-led think tanks' influence. Many student-led think tanks have partners in NGOs, civil society, think tanks and research institutions, and the private sector. If you are creating a student-led think tank, collaborating with different, well-established student-led think tanks in the beginning can help you access potential partners in different sectors.

10. Checklist: Steps to establish a student-led think tank

Starting and operating a student-led think tank requires careful planning and creating a clear vision. Drawing from what we have learned from student-led think tanks in previous chapters, below is a list of steps to follow when establishing your student-led

think tank. By following these steps, student-led think tanks can build their foundation, and strengthen their organisations to start creating meaningful impact in their communities.

- Define your mission and focus areas
- Assemble and sustain a committed leadership team
- Choose a governance model
- Secure funding and resources
- Develop a research strategy
- Build partnerships
- Communicate effectively
- Monitor and evaluate impact

Acknowledgements

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