PPOL 6100X: Crisis Management and Public Policy

Semester: Spring 2024-25
Credits: 3 credits
Prerequisites: None (MPP/MPM students)

Class time: Thursday evenings, 6:30 – 9:20 PM
Class venue: Room 2503 (near lifts 25/26)
Instructor: **Dr Alvin Li**
                           Division of Public Policy, HKUST
                           Email: lia@ust.hk
Office hours: By email appointment
Teaching assistant: Shichang ZHANG (szhangfi@connect.ust.hk)

Course description

This course explores the complex intersection of crisis management and public policy. Through intensive case discussions and analysis, you will examine how different levels of governments, types of organisations, expert advisors, and policy implementers navigate context-specific challenges while developing and implementing effective policy responses. The course bridges theoretical foundations with real-world applications, focusing on the unique dynamics of policymaking under pressure, strategic decision-making processes, and institutional responses to various types of crises under contextual constraints.

Using carefully selected cases that span public health emergencies, natural disasters, economic upheavals, and political crises from all over the world, each session will centre on in-depth case discussions, requiring you to assume the role of decision-makers and critically analyse the challenges, constraints, and strategic choices faced by policymakers during crisis situations. Using the case method as the primary pedagogical approach, this course emphasises active learning through case preparation, group discussions, and real-time decision-making exercises. This approach is complemented by foundational background readings that provide frameworks for understanding crisis management in the public policy domain.

The course adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from public policy, management and leadership, behaviour science, and communication studies. Special attention is given to emerging challenges in crisis management, including the impact of social media/A.I., low levels of trust in government, and the use of innovative technologies on crisis response capabilities.

Course learning outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:
- Demonstrate comprehensive understanding of crisis management theory, including crisis definitions, typologies, characteristics, and the crisis management cycle
- Analyse complex crisis situations using theoretical frameworks and practical analytical tools
- Evaluate decision-making processes and policy choices during crisis conditions
- Develop evidence-based crisis response strategies and policy recommendations
- Formulate effective crisis communication strategies
- Assess institutional and policy responses to various types of crises

Course expectations

Active participation and engagement are the cornerstone of this course's learning environment. You are expected to thoroughly prepare for each session by completing assigned readings and actively contributing to discussions and simulations. The classroom serves as a forum for sharing our diverse perspectives and experiences, where we engage respectfully with our peers' viewpoints and contribute meaningfully to collective learning.

This course emphasises a collaborative and interactive learning environment with minimal technological distractions. Laptops, tablets, and smartphones are generally discouraged and not allowed during class time – trust me, you'll learn much more and have a lot more fun without them! Mobile phones should remain silenced and stored away during class sessions to maintain attention and foster meaningful discussions.

Core and supplementary readings

The course is anchored by two seminal texts that provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding crisis management in the public sector. **Boin et al.'s "The Politics of Crisis Management"** offers a sophisticated analysis of how strategic leaders navigate the challenges and political dimensions of crisis situations. This text is particularly valuable for its examination of the five key tasks of crisis leadership: sense-making, decision-making and coordination, meaning-making, accounting, and learning. Through extensive case studies spanning North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, and Oceania, the book provides

practical insights into the political dynamics and strategic competencies required for effective crisis management.

Complementing this political perspective, **Drennan et al.**'s newly revised **"Risk and Crisis Management in the Public Sector" (2024)** provides cutting-edge scholarship on contemporary challenges in crisis management. This text is especially relevant as it incorporates recent case studies including COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and global cyber-crime crises, offering fresh insights into transboundary and multi-agency dimensions of crisis response. The book systematically explores risk identification, assessment, response, and communication, while emphasising the development of organisational resilience.

You should approach these texts as complementary resources that bridge theoretical understanding with practical application. While Boin et al. focuses on the political and leadership dimensions of crisis management, Drennan et al. provides the operational and institutional frameworks necessary for comprehensive crisis response. Weekly supplementary readings and media pieces (news articles, op-eds, YouTube videos, podcasts etc) will be assigned that align with our session topics, and you are encouraged to draw from these during class discussions to illustrate theoretical concepts with real-world applications.

Assessments

This course uses a diverse assessment strategy designed to evaluate different levels of learning outcomes and practical competencies:

Written analysis of a specific crisis:	10%
COVID-19 crisis response analysis:	15%
Video recording of crisis communication speech:	15%
Group project: Crisis timeline document:	15%
Group project: Contextual factors analysis:	15%
Class active participation:	15%
Online discussion participation:	15%

Academic integrity and AI policy

Academic integrity is fundamental to the learning process and professional development in this course. While AI tools are increasingly prevalent in academic and professional settings, their use in this course must be thoughtful and limited. Students may, under special circumstances, utilise AI tools for general search purposes, fact-checking, and reference verification, but these tools must not generate the substantial portion of any assignment. When AI assistance is used, students must explicitly acknowledge its use and demonstrate critical evaluation

of AI-generated information, including providing your prompt history and conducting self-fact-checking to verify its truthfulness. The focus remains on developing original thinking, analytical capabilities, and independent judgment. Students must verify all AI-generated information against reliable academic sources and scientific journal evidence. Personal reflection and original analysis should form the core of all submitted work. This policy aims to foster responsible AI use while maintaining the course's educational objectives and academic standards. All work submitted must adhere to university guidelines regarding plagiarism, proper citation, and academic honesty.

Participation and assignment policy

The classroom environment in this course is designed as a collaborative learning space where knowledge and insights emerge through dynamic interaction. Our sessions will follow a flipped classroom approach, emphasising mutual knowledge generation and collective wisdom-building. My teaching philosophy emphasises inquiry-based learning through open-ended questions that explore your unique insights, perspectives, and critical thinking rather than seeking predetermined answers. Our classroom serves as a safe space for constructive dialogue, where students are encouraged to build upon each other's contributions, whether in agreement or respectful disagreement.

I completely welcome spontaneous questions during lectures to ensure clarity and deeper understanding. Active participation extends beyond mere attendance - it involves engaging with case materials, contributing to discussions, and sharing your unique perspectives drawn from your diverse backgrounds and experiences. This approach is particularly vital in crisis management, where multiple viewpoints often illuminate different aspects of complex situations.

Regarding assignments, the assessment structure is carefully crafted to develop crucial knowledge and competencies relevant to crisis management in public policy. While high standards and full effort are expected, I acknowledge the demands of your MPP/MPM studies and other commitments. If you experience any genuine difficulties meeting deadlines, you should not hesitate to email me and the TA to arrange reasonable extensions. My goal is to create a supportive learning environment that prioritises meaningful learning and skill development over rigid deadlines. This flexible approach is for you to produce your absolute best work while maintaining a healthy balance with other academic and personal commitments during your MPP/MPM learning journey.

Weekly course outline

This course is broadly structured in three segments to build comprehensive understanding of crisis management in public policy. The first six weeks establish crucial theoretical foundations, examining the unique characteristics of crisis-driven policymaking, including decision-making under extreme pressure, resource allocation challenges, stakeholder dynamics, and strategic crisis communication principles. Halfway through the course, spanning weeks 7 through 11, provides deep analysis of specific crisis types, from natural disasters and public health emergencies to political upheavals and socioeconomic crises, with particular emphasis on how different crisis contexts demand tailored policy responses and institutional mechanisms. The rest address contemporary and emerging challenges in crisis management focused on policy learning and system resilience, while synthesising course concepts through real-world applications. Below are some of the key questions we will address in each week's class.

Week 1: Crisis Management vs. Conventional Public Policy
- How does crisis management fundamentally differ from traditional policymaking?
- How do we make effective decisions under extreme pressure and uncertainty?
- How do power structures, stakeholder relationships, and accountability standards change during crisis situations?

Week 2: Defining Risk, Crisis, and the Characteristics and Types of Crisis
- How do we define risk and crisis in the public policy context?
- What are the different characteristics of crises?
- What are the different types of crises?

Week 3: The Crisis Management Cycle, Sense-making, Decision-making, and Crisis Response
- What are the key stages of the crisis management cycle, and how do they interact?
- What is sense-making, and why is it an important initial stage?
- How can organizations effectively detect and make sense of emerging threats and unfolding crisis situations?
- How should decisions be made during crises and what leadership approaches are most effective?

Week 4: Meaning-making and Crisis Communication
- What is meaning-making and how does it function in crisis communication?
- Who gets to frame crises in your society and which voices tend to be amplified or silenced in the framing process?
- How has digital and social media transformed crisis communication practices?

Week 5: Evaluation, Learning, and Preparation
- How/when do crises end?
- What are the ways we can learn from past or other crises to prepare for the next one?
- How can institutional memory be preserved and utilised?
- What makes systems more resilient to future crises?

Week 6: Technologies and Innovations in Crisis Management
- Who benefits and who bears the risks of crisis technologies?
- What happens when they fail or are misused?
- What values are embedded in their design and operation?

Week 7: Natural Disasters and the Climate Crisis
- What are the unique characteristics and management challenges of different types of natural disasters?
- What features distinguish natural disasters from other crisis types in terms of governance, response, and recovery requirements?
- How can disaster response be systematically analysed across dimensions of governance coordination, cascading effects, community response, and disproportionate impacts?

Week 8: Public Health Crises
- What are the different types and characteristics of public health crises?
- What unique challenges do public health crises present compared to other types of emergencies?
- How can we develop effective strategies for crisis management and response?

Week 9: Policy Instruments for Crises (COVID-19 Case Deep Dive)
- What are the different types of policy instruments available to governments when confronting crises?
- How effective were different COVID-19 policy instruments in practice?
- What contextual factors affect the success or failure of COVID-19 crisis response policies?

Weeks 10+11: Political, Economic, and Social Crises

- What are the defining characteristics and management challenges of political, economic, and social crises?
- How do crises intersect across multiple dimensions (political-social, social-economic, social-economic-political) creating complex governance challenges?
- What crisis management strategies and frameworks are most effective for addressing these multidimensional challenges?

Weeks 12+13: Emerging Risks and Future Crises

- What emerging risks and "polycrisis" challenges are facing society in 2025 and beyond?
- Why are current institutional frameworks and governance systems failing to address these interconnected crises?
- How can crisis management approaches be improved to handle complex, future crises more effectively?

Final word

In our complex and interconnected world, the ability to handle crises through smart public policy isn't just an academic exercise - it's a vital skill that can make a real difference in people's lives. I'm genuinely excited about the journey we're about to embark on together! Through our Thursday evening discussions, we'll tackle fascinating cases, engage in hands-on simulations, and learn from each other's unique perspectives and experiences. Whether you're passionate about public health, environmental challenges, humanitarian work, or economic stability, the tools and insights you'll gain here will be invaluable throughout your career and your life. The world needs thoughtful, skilled crisis managers now more than ever, and I'm looking forward to helping you develop these capabilities in an engaging, collaborative environment. Let's make this semester a meaningful experience where we not only master crisis management principles but also discover how we can contribute to building more resilient communities. See you in class!