

PPOL 5110 / SOSC 5780: Foundation in Public Policy

Semester:	Fall 2026-27
Class time:	Thursdays: 3:30 — 6:20 PM
Class venue:	Room 5, 30/F, Millennity Kwun Tong
Instructor:	Dr Alvin Li Division of Public Policy, HKUST Email: lia@ust.hk
Office hours:	By email appointment
Teaching associate:	Dr Holvert Hung (hholvert@ust.hk)

Course description

This course offers a comprehensive introduction to the study of public policy, exploring key theories and analytical frameworks to address contemporary issues. It is structured into two main parts: first, understanding the fundamental building blocks of policy systems, and second, examining the key stages of the policy process.

The initial part delves into the diverse elements shaping public policy. Students will explore various ideational approaches, including neoclassical economics, public choice theory, Marxist class theory, and institutionalism, understanding their implications for policy. It thoroughly examines core values and ethics such as efficiency, equity, liberty, and security, and the inherent trade-offs involved, alongside principles of good governance like participation and transparency. The course identifies key policy actors, ranging from government branches (legislators, executive, bureaucracy) and political parties to interest groups, business, media, think-tanks, and international organisations. It also covers various policy instruments governments employ, including regulation, economic incentives, information provision, and direct public or private provisions, and analyses the broad policy context, comprising political, institutional, economic, social, sectoral, and technological factors that constrain or enable policy choices.

The second part systematically navigates the policy cycle framework. This includes agenda setting, focusing on how problems gain or lose attention through mechanisms like focusing events, issue framing, causal stories, the Multiple Streams Framework, and the role of policy entrepreneurs. It then moves to policy formulation, where plausible alternatives and appropriate policy tools are generated, followed by decision making, examining various models such as rational choice, incrementalism, punctuated equilibrium, and garbage can models, along with decision criteria and trade-offs. Subsequently, policy implementation addresses the complexities of putting policies into practice,

including the political nature of the process, technical challenges, the role of street-level bureaucrats, and factors influencing success or failure. Finally, policy evaluation equips students with methods to assess policy effectiveness and efficiency, distinguishing between process and impact assessment, and utilizing experimental or quasi-experimental designs to measure outcomes.

Upon completion, students will be familiar with public policy concepts, describe system interactions, understand policy process theories, and enhance their analytical, writing, group work, and presentation skills.

Course objectives

This comprehensive foundation course aims to establish essential competencies in public policy analysis and understanding among students, providing robust preparation for advanced policy studies and professional practice. The course systematically develops your familiarity with key terminology, conceptual frameworks, analytical approaches, and theoretical perspectives that form the intellectual foundation of contemporary public policy scholarship.

Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- **Master fundamental policy concepts:** Demonstrate comprehensive understanding of key terms, concepts, approaches, and frameworks concerning public policy, enabling you to engage effectively with advanced policy literature and discourse.
- **Analyse policy system components:** Describe and analyse important structures and interactions among key components of policy systems, including policy actors, policy environments, and policy instruments, understanding how these elements influence policy outcomes.
- **Apply theoretical frameworks:** Understand and apply key theories and frameworks of the policy process, developing the analytical capability to identify areas of potential improvement within given policy contexts and propose evidence-based recommendations.
- **Develop professional competencies:** Enhance analytical, writing, group work, and presentation skills essential for effective policy practice, preparing you for professional roles in public sector organisations, consulting firms, think tanks, and international organisations.
- **Cultivate critical thinking:** Develop sophisticated analytical capabilities that enable you to evaluate policy proposals, assess implementation challenges, and contribute meaningfully to policy debates in various professional and academic contexts.

Course expectations

Given that this is a graduate-level course, you are expected to demonstrate a high level of responsibility and independence in your learning approach. While the subject matter may be new to many, the course structure demands consistent engagement through mandatory attendance and thorough preparation of assigned readings before each class. The success of our learning environment depends heavily on your preparedness and willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue.

As a core course for MPP/MPhil/PhD students, 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 debates. 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.

Academic integrity and AI policy

Academic integrity lies at the heart of our learning community and your professional development in this course. Your unique perspectives, critical thinking, and original analysis are what make our classroom discussions rich and meaningful. When you engage with others' ideas, proper crediting through citation (e.g. using APA format) enriches our academic discourse and acknowledges the collaborative nature of knowledge creation.

To nurture your intellectual growth and analytical capabilities, this course emphasises the development of your original thinking and independent judgment. While artificial intelligence tools have become commonplace in many settings, this course provides a valuable opportunity to cultivate and demonstrate your own analytical skills. Therefore, we strongly **discourage the substantial use of generative AI in all assessments**, including essays, presentations, and reports, unless explicitly allowed. This policy remains in effect during the semester and for one year afterwards.

Your success in this course comes from your personal engagement with the material, your unique analysis, and your individual growth as a policy analyst. We encourage you to take pride in developing and expressing your own ideas while respecting academic integrity principles. This includes using proper quotation marks when quoting, giving credit when paraphrasing, and ensuring all submitted work represents your original effort.

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 public policy analysis, 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 public policy analysis. While high standards and full effort are expected, I acknowledge the demands of your postgraduate 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. For medical-related absences or extensions, please provide appropriate documentation such as a certificate of sickness obtainable from your doctor. 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 postgraduate learning journey.

Core readings

1. **Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018).** *The Public Policy Primer: Managing the Policy Process*. London: Routledge.

This comprehensive primer provides systematic exploration of policy processes, offering practical insights into how policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated in contemporary governance contexts. The text excels in its clear presentation of complex policy concepts and its integration of theoretical frameworks with real-world applications, making it an ideal foundation for understanding policy management.

2. **Hassel, A., and Wegrich, K. (2022).** *How to Do Public Policy?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This contemporary text offers practical guidance on conducting public policy analysis and implementation, emphasising hands-on approaches to policy challenges. The authors provide valuable insights into the craft of policy work, combining theoretical rigour with practical wisdom drawn from policy experience.

Essential supplementary readings:

- **Howlett, Ramesh, Perl (2009).** *Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems* (3rd edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- **Heywood (2007).** *Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- **Cairney (2020).** *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues* (2nd edition). London: Bloomsbury.
- **Stone (2022).** *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*. New York: WW Norton.
- **Rosenthal and Perlman (1986).** Ethical dimensions of public policy and administration. *Polity*, 19(1), 56-73.
- **John, P. (2016).** Behavioural approaches: how nudges lead to more intelligent policy design? In: Peters, B.G., and Zittoun, P. (eds), *Contemporary Approaches to Public Policy*, pp. 113-132.

Assessments

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

Assignment 1 – Policy memo + oral interview:	25%
Assignment 2 – Report on policy evaluation:	25%
Group project (presentation):	25%
Group project (peer evaluation):	10% (on presentation days)
Class attendance:	5%
Class participation:	10% (continuous)

Weekly course outline

This comprehensive 13-week course is structured in two main parts, providing systematic exploration of public policy foundations and processes.

Part I: Foundations of Policy Systems

Topic 1: Course Overview & What is Public Policy?

- What are the core definitions and broad scope of public policy, including its nature as an intervention to solve problems?
- How do policy problems differ from policy issues, and why are public policies crucial for correcting market failures?
- What are the main analytical frameworks and skills students will gain to address contemporary public policy issues?

Readings:

- Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., Perl, A. (2009). Chapter 1: Why study public policy?
- Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018). Chapter 1: Public managers and the policy process
- Hassel, A., and Wegrich, K. (2022). Chapter 1: Public policy

Topic 2: Ideas, Power, and Institutions

- How do dominant ideas and theories, like neoclassical economics or public choice, shape policy understanding and solutions?
- What are the dimensions of power in policy-making, and how does politics influence resource allocation?
- How do formal and informal institutions, such as constitutional arrangements or political systems, affect policy choices and generate path dependence?

Readings:

- Heywood, A. (2007). Chapter 1: What is politics? Chapter 2: Governments, systems, and regimes
- Cairney, P. (2020). Chapter 3: Power and public policy

Topic 3: Policy Context

- What are the key political, institutional, economic, social, sectoral, and technological factors that define a policy's environment?
- How does this policy context constrain choices and influence a policy's effectiveness, especially when transferring policies between settings?
- How does median voter theory explain decision outcomes in electoral systems, and what are its policy implications?

Case #1: Controversies of social welfare program in Taiwan (may be subject to change)

Topic 4: Policy Actors

- Who are the diverse governmental, societal, and international actors in the public policy process?
- How do we explain actors' perspectives, and what resources do they use to exert influence?
- What are stakeholder analysis and political mapping, and how do they help assess actors' interests and positions?

Readings:

- Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., Perl, A. (2009). Chapter 3: The policy context

Case #2: The Belt & Road Initiative in Sri Lanka (may be subject to change)

Special Workshop on A.I. for Public Policy

Part II: Policy Processes

Topic 5: Values and Ethics in Public Policy

- What are the core values in public policy, including efficiency, equality, equity, liberty, and security?
- How can utilitarianism and Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) be used to measure efficiency and social benefits?
- What are the inherent trade-offs and challenges in applying these values, for example, between efficiency and equality?

Readings:

- Stone, D. (2022). Chapter 2: Equity; Chapter 3: Efficiency; Chapter 4: Security; Chapter 5: Liberty
- Rosenthal, D., and Perlman, B. (1986). Ethical dimensions of public policy and administration

Case #3: Legalising Casino Gambling in Singapore (may be subject to change)

Topic 6: Agenda Setting

- What is agenda setting, and how do issues move through different levels, from the "agenda universe" to the "decision agenda"?
- What mechanisms and focusing events help problems gain public and elite attention?
- How do issue framing, causal stories, and the Multiple Streams Framework explain agenda setting, and what role do "policy entrepreneurs" play?

Readings:

- Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018). Chapter 2: Agenda setting
- Hassel, A., and Wegrich, K. (2022). Chapter 3: How to set the agenda?

Case Study #4: How was the Individual Visit Scheme Launched in Hong Kong? (may be subject to change)

Case Study #5: Rural Health Care Reforms in China (may be subject to change)

Topic 7: Policy Formulation

- What is policy formulation, and who are the key actors involved in generating policy choices?
- How are policy tools classified (e.g., regulation, expenditure, private/public instruments), and what are their characteristics?
- What are the challenges in policy formulation, including the bias towards incrementalism and political/technical/organizational constraints?

Readings:

- Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018). Chapter 3: Policy formulation
- Hassel, A., and Wegrich, K. (2022). Chapter 4: How to choose and design policy instruments?
- John, P. (2016). Behavioural approaches: how nudges lead to more intelligent policy design?

Topic 8: Decision Making

- What is decision-making in public policy, and who are the authoritative actors involved?
- How do rational choice, incrementalism, and garbage can models explain actual decision processes?
- How are decision criteria used to compare alternatives, considering political, economic, social, environmental, and safety trade-offs?

Readings:

- Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018). Chapter 4: Decision making
- Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., Perl, A. (2009). Chapter 6: Public policy decision-making

Case Study #6: The Ocean Discharge of Nuclear Wastewater in Japan (may be subject to change)

Topic 9: Policy Implementation

- Why is policy implementation often problematic, and what are the "optimism problem" and political/technical obstacles?
- What are the "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches to understanding implementation, and how do they inform an integrated framework?
- What strategies can managers use to improve implementation, including policy design, resource mobilisation, network capacity, and change management?

Readings:

- Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018). Chapter 5: Policy implementation
- Hassel, A., and Wegrich, K. (2022). Chapter 5: How to implement public policy?

Case Study #7: "Think of a Pig": Shanghai's Waste Sorting Policy (may be subject to change)

Topic 10: Policy Evaluation

- What are the purposes of policy evaluation, such as improving design, ensuring fiscal accountability, and facilitating learning?
- What are the technical, political, and organisational challenges to conducting effective policy evaluation, and how can they be overcome?

Readings:

- Wu, X., Ramesh, M., and Fritzen, S. (2018). Chapter 6: Policy evaluation
- Hassel, A., and Wegrich, K. (2022). Chapter 6: How to evaluate policies?

Weeks 11–12: Student Presentations

- Group presentations of special policy cases (e.g. behavioural nudges)
- Peer evaluation and feedback
- Synthesis of course themes

Final word

In our rapidly evolving world, the ability to understand, analyse, and evaluate policy is not merely an academic pursuit — it's an essential skill for creating meaningful societal change. I'm thrilled to embark on this journey with you through the complexities of public policy! Throughout our classes, we'll explore fascinating real-world cases, engage in dynamic policy discussions, and learn from the diverse perspectives that each of you brings to the classroom. Whether your interests lie in education, public health, environment, or LGBTQ+ rights, the analytical frameworks and practical tools you'll develop in this course will serve you throughout your career in public service. The world needs thoughtful, skilled policy experts who can navigate complex societal challenges while balancing multiple stakeholder interests. I'm looking forward to guiding you through the foundations of public policy and the policy cycle in an engaging, collaborative environment where we can collectively explore how to craft better public policies. Let's make this semester a transformative experience and discover how we can contribute to building more effective and equitable public policies. See you in class!