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## Enhancing the Impact of Public Policy as an Academic Entity in Malta

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## Enhancing the Impact of Public Policy as an Academic Entity in Malta

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### Abstract

This article highlights the continued relevance of public policy, as an academic entity, across national and global settings. It suggests practical ways to enhance the impact of the discipline within the context of policy research and vertical-horizontal networking, identification of the nature and dimensions of existing social problems while ultimately addressing the ever-changing and complex needs of the citizens. It concludes that researchers from the discipline should move beyond theoretical postulations and embrace advocacy and activism to make governments remain focused by enhancing the quality and impact of policies and services.

### Introduction

Public policy studies emerged after the Second World War as an academic subfield “with strong roots in the United States” (Bandelow et al., 2022:165). It now exists in many universities as one of the problem-solving academic fields. The emergence of public policy as a new approach in social sciences was in response to the growing expectations of certain political institutions to manage “specific public problems, such as housing, poverty or unemployment” (Lasswell, 1951) among other social problems that modern societies grapple with. Expectedly therefore, governments all over the world have continually explored the social scientific understanding and quantitative expertise of public policy units/institutes of their countries in the context of rational application of academic postulations to practical conditions.

Over the past few decades, public policy has evolved into an essential academic discipline given how scholars and policy analysts are showing interest in the use of policy instruments to address social concerns (Salamon, 2000; LasCoumes & Le Gales, 2007). They are also creating policy innovation or new knowledge to fill some gaps in governance, relating to institutions, knowledge, policies, norms and compliance. With the expanding intricacy of policy challenges facing governments (He et al., 2016) partly owing to defective public and social mechanisms, policy studies has remained a significant player in understanding the relationship between knowledge and policy. It has also become an essential pillar in deciding the role of the state and government in relation to the complex social, technological, political, economic and environmental challenges in societies. Put differently, in many countries where public policy has been acknowledged as an academic discipline, its study has facilitated the efficacious policy process, policy instruments and policy measures needed by governments and how societies allocate resources to tackle social needs earlier mentioned.

Drawing partly on extant literature, this article highlights the continued relevance of public policy, as an academic entity, across national and global settings. It suggests practical ways to enhance the impact of the discipline within the context of policy research and vertical-horizontal networking, identification of the nature and dimensions of existing social problems while ultimately addressing the ever-changing and complex needs of the citizens. It concludes that researchers from the discipline should move beyond theoretical postulations and embrace advocacy and activism to make governments remain focused by enhancing the quality and impact of policies and services.

### **Public Policy Research and its Relevance**

As an academic entity peopled by erudite scholars, researchers and practitioners, the intellectual powerhouse most often focuses practically on all areas of governance and human existence. These include education and learning, trade and investment policy, energy, environment, infrastructure, health and health care, regulatory affairs, knowledge management, gender development, families and communities, social policy, global development, technology, taxation, international cooperation, security and defense. With research outcomes tailored to appropriate audiences, address specific problems in society and made available to policymakers and governments, the Department of Public Policy, like many other policy research institutes across the globe, can contribute to sound public governance.

As a matter of fact, public policies remain the driving force of government either at national or international level given that all deliverables (in every governance sector) are achievable through the instrumentality of promulgated policies. In this context, the existing partnership between the gown and town presupposes that the University provides intellectual framework to address public and social concerns through research. This partnership should be strengthened for greater impact. The Department of Public Policy in any ivory tower is central to these processes. As an academic entity, the Department of Public Policy has the capacity to stimulate a public-governance reform agenda which can “effectively respond to complex, multidimensional challenges” (OECD, 2019:1) being faced by the national government. Specifically, the Department of Public Policy can furnish governments with a coherent and distinctive benchmarking tool to guide policymakers and politicians in ensuring improvements in the wellbeing and ever-changing needs of its citizens and delivering prosperity for the country.

In pursuing this, policy actors take into consideration four basic variables which shape the context of policymaking: the administrative environment; the political environment; the social and cultural environment; and the economic environment. Any of these variables can permeate the stages of policymaking: problem identification; agenda setting; policy formulation; policy legitimation; policy implementation; and policy evaluation. Government’s priorities on competing social problems can be affected by such variety of circumstances because public policy does not happen in a vacuum. Other focusing events can also place some particular issues on the front burner of government’s agenda as they are framed by some people to capture the attention of policymakers and citizens, thereby provoking widespread and dramatic change in public policy.

### **Enhancing the Impact of Public Policy: From the Local to the Global**

Considering the broader social, economic and political considerations that influence the increasingly complex process of policymaking across national and international settings, a

thorough evaluation of the impact of public decisions on citizens is regarded as a necessity. Relying on scientific data, government can employ effective policy instruments and measures to arrive at a decision concerning an issue or a problem already acknowledged in the political realm. In the policymaking process therefore, transforming raw data and information into actionable 'state of the art' knowledge by a diverse range of actors, especially researchers of public institutions, remains an essential condition. The ability of researchers to make their research findings attractive, convince practitioners and policymakers about new approach (Young 2008), facilitate effective engagements among other stakeholders (Harris, 2015) are cogent ways of maximizing the impact of an academic entity like Public Policy with the aim of achieving productive and positive outcomes at both national and global levels.

- i. **Promotion of strong community engagement:** Every policy has a local content and there is no better way to enhance impact than the grassroots where integrative and context-focused responses that embrace locally relevant and culturally embedded initiatives can be promoted. The impact of public policy as an academic entity can manifest in its engagement with local nonprofit organizations and municipal governments through community-based participatory research (CBPR) and other forms of horizontal and vertical collaboration in order to create successful solutions to public challenges. For example, the Department, in collaboration with local councils, can organize capacity building (training-of-trainers) workshops for municipal information/communication officers on policies that promote community participation in governance or create awareness on a number of policies and practices- health, environment, social security, migration, tax, family physical activity and wellness.
- ii. **Actionable policies for national development:** Researchers "have devoted much time and energy to talking about bridging the gap between research and decision making, yet significant gaps still exist between the two" (Omilusi, 2019). This gap can be substantially bridged. The Department of public policy can enhance its impact by providing guidance for national government towards greater effectiveness and efficiency in public policy as well as in the fulfillment of its plans for the citizenry. For instance, the Department of Public Policy, University of Malta, can interrogate the intersections of land reclamation, environmental sustainability and public policy with a view to providing appropriate measures to stem threats to nature protection on the Island. For education, a worrisome development of Malta having the highest percentage of early school leavers (16.7%) in the EU despite tuition-free policy at all levels of education also deserves an academic enquiry and actionable policy. This can also be replicated in other sectors- health, migration, climate change, social facilities, economy, among others.
- iii. **Solidarity networks and co-creation of knowledge:** This becomes imperative among the public policy academic communities across the globe. Sharing knowledge, technologies, expertise, and financial resources by multiple actors (beyond the two-communities model) across different fields of study will not only produce new epistemological and methodological approaches, but further promote inclusive global dialogue on policy issues towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More fundamentally, efforts should be

made to attract stakeholders' attention to public policy research and the evidence generated by academia which are often not effectively exploited. Suffice it to note that the effect of research and evidence on governments and public services cannot be underestimated.

- iv. **Beyond theoretical postulations:** Engendering institutional policy reforms and sound policy implementation (considering the '3Is' of ideas, interests and institutions and the '4Ps' of places, people, policies and pace) at all levels of governance, also requires activism and transformational knowledge. The Department of Public Policy can, through its global associations, provide a strong voice on a wide range of policy issues at international forums. At the national level, public policy researchers can be actively involved in monitoring policy implementation and clear performance goals, the correlation between government's strategic objectives, its decisions on the allocation of resources and the outputs and outcomes of a policy. They can also seek the understanding/intervention of the national parliamentarians by providing them with evidence-based policy recommendations to improve the efficacy of specific government programmes and projects. In addition, public policy researchers can serve in government as ministers or heads of strategic government agencies where such impact can be felt as an insider.
- v. **Access to funding and other resources:** The conduct of governance and how political processes are managed in the society can be diagnosed through the lens of policy-making. Such diagnosis (in this case, research activities) desire adequate funding by intergovernmental organisations and national governments. Such research grants can be considered a validation of the University's impact through its public policy unit.

## Conclusion

When the politics and environment of policymaking are well captured by extant theories of public policy with insights from the rich body of literature across many other scientific disciplines<sup>1</sup>, the process of improved decision-making and effective co-production in policy formulation and delivery can be entrenched. With a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods therefore, public policy researchers provide a deep understanding of how resources are allocated and decisions are made by the state to address social needs and real-world problems.

As highlighted in this essay, the impact of public policy as an academic entity in Malta, and other countries, can be enhanced through varied ways and methods- research publications, access to funding and other resources, partnership with local, national and international policymakers, engagement with practitioners, the wider public and governments on core issues of governance and societal challenges. Apart from providing sound research data that form the guidelines and principles of a society, it should be emphasized that professional and research community should equally partner with advocacy groups to shape public policy priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> . Such scientific disciplines include public administration, economics, sociology of knowledge, anthropology, law, history and political science.

While serving as a resource for government operations and procedures and maximizing impact through collaboration, “the ultimate culmination of the town and gown orientation” (deLeon and Vogenbeck, 2007:3) which public policy symbolizes, should be evident in delivering essential, values-driven services to the generality of the citizens. Put differently, policies should be designed and implemented with the sole aim of meeting the needs of the people governments serve contrary to the egocentric requirements and processes of policymakers.

There is scanty literature on meaningful involvement of stakeholders in policy design and project implementation in both developed and developing countries. While most studies on public policy focus on direct linkage between researchers and bureaucrats in addressing social problems, this article generates novel ideas on how public policy departments or institutes can enhance governance for development beyond recommending research findings for end-users outside of academia. It explores, in practical terms, the expected collective engagement among policy communities at local and national levels, thereby contributing to public policy education. Further research on this thematic area can be expanded to interrogate knowledge transfer, including resources and technologies, in a mutually beneficial way.

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