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OCCASIONAL PAPER

# Signaling the Policy Relevance of KAUST Research:

# A Practical Approach to Identifying and Highlighting the Connection Between Research and Policy

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# 1 Introduction

Not all of us conduct research with immediate applicability to policy, but many of us conduct research that can contribute to policy eventually. **Even if the contribution of your research is likely to occur indirectly or well into the future, you may still be able to trace a plausible path from your research to policy and highlight the relevance to policy in your research proposals and products,**[1] whether your audience is funders, fellow academics, blog subscribers, industry, or policymakers themselves.

This paper is intended primarily for KAUST researchers who are seeking to identify and highlight the policy relevance of their research proposals and products. It discusses the meaning of policy, defines policy relevance, and introduces a practical approach to connecting research to policy, drawing an example from a recent KAUST-led project.

[1] Research products can include journal articles, books, policy briefs, blog posts, and patents, and the results, findings, discoveries, and inventions presented or contained therein.

# 2 What Is Policy Relevance?

Defining policy relevance requires a shared understanding of the word "policy," which may be interpreted differently in the public and private sectors and in different countries, languages, and disciplines. Policy scholars have said that policy, more specifically **"public policy," is what government does to achieve its goals in the public interest.**

Here we focus on public policy and define it more concretely as the deliberate system of principles, decisions, or actions adopted or implemented by a public authority to address economic growth, human capital development, or societal problems, or to regulate behavior, allocate resources, or achieve specific collective goals *in the public interest* with emphasis on the public interest. Such policy typically addresses circumstances that entail enduring conditions or recurring decisions that would benefit from consistency, and often is embodied in laws, regulations, standards, or guidance.

KEY CONCEPT

### Perspectives on the meaning of policy

Scholars and practitioners have written extensively on the meaning of policy.

Among the most cited scholarly definitions of public policy is that by Thomas R. Dye (1972), who said, "public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do." Adding to that, James E. Anderson (2015) emphasizes that policy consists of purposive courses of action intended to address public problems.[2]

From a legal and administrative standpoint, the Legal Clarity Team at Legalclarity.org (2026) addresses recurrence and consistency, saying a policy is "a set of principles that tells an organization or government how to handle recurring decisions," and "a formal statement" that "defines goals, establishes boundaries for acceptable behavior, and creates a consistent framework so that decisions don't depend on [individuals]."[3]

We define research as "policy relevant" if it bears on the public interest or the formulation, selection, or implementation of policy in terms of:

1. What policy says, that is, its content.
2. How policy is made, such as the methods, processes, tools, or criteria used to make it.

[2] See Anderson, James E. 2015. *Public Policymaking: An Introduction, 8th ed*. Cengage, 6.; Dye, Thomas R. 1972. *Understanding Public Policy*. Prentice Hall, 2.

[3] See Legal Clarity Team at Legalclarity.org. 2026. "What Is a Policy? Definition, Types, and Key Elements." Published May 28, 2026 and accessed June 17, 2026. https://legalclarity.org/what-is-a-policy-definition-types-and-key-elements/; and Legal Clarity Team at Legalclarity.org. 2026. "What Is a Policy? Meaning, Components, and Compliance." Published June 3, 2026 and accessed June 17, 2026. https://legalclarity.org/what-is-a-policy-meaning-components-and-compliance/.

3. How policy is implemented.

Like research conducted elsewhere, not all research conducted at KAUST will have immediate policy relevance, but it may still link to future real-world applications that relate to a policy decision, policy development (the steps leading to that decision, including the means to reach it), or policy implementation. For example:

- **Relevance to a policy decision** could include evidence on whether to dredge aging reservoirs, revise a healthcare protocol, invest in an energy-saving technology, modify the terms of water-use licenses, adjust a crop production target, or sign a multilateral environmental agreement.
- **Relevance to policy development** could include evidence on the value of new criteria for making policy, a new tool for choosing among policy options, or a new approach to convening experts to elicit their perspectives on policy.
- **Relevance to policy implementation** could include evidence on preferred funding mechanisms for infrastructure projects or the efficiency of different oversight mechanisms for water licensing.

In sum, policy-relevant research can contribute to policy now or, with additional work, in the future in myriad ways. **However, research with policy relevance may still be only one voice among many voices that policymakers need to consider.** As such, policy relevance may not equate to impact, but it could still play a part in achieving impact.

# 3 Identifying and Highlighting Policy Relevance

In general terms, researchers can signal the policy relevance of their research first, by seeing it for themselves, and second, by explaining it to their audience. This may take very little effort for an immediate connection between the research and policy (e.g., when the research is designed to address a policy concern), but more effort for a distant one.

To uncover the connection, you might ask yourself questions about where your research is leading and how it does or could relate to the public interest.

Such questions could include:

- Is my work contributing to a larger research stream?
- How can my research inform future work?
- Who needs or will use my results?
- What might be the applications or implications of my work?
- What problems could it help solve?
- How could my research, directly or indirectly, help improve people's lives, the economy, the environment, or society overall, now or in the future?

These questions touch on different aspects of why your research matters within the academic community and more broadly. By answering them, you can develop a narrative that points to the policy relevance of your work, even as a building block for future research.

How you describe the connection might depend on the venue, such as a funding proposal, journal article, book, policy brief, or blog post, and the composition of your audience. In each case, the tone or placement may differ. We do not cover all the possibilities in this paper, but instead we walk through an example, based loosely on recent KAUST-led research on protecting Red Sea coral from desalination risks.[4]

### Example: Signaling Policy Relevance in Research on Protecting Red Sea Coral from Desalination Risks

In this example, suppose:

The research indicates that, at salinity levels 10% above ambient levels, the brine that discharges from water desalination plants will harm neighboring Red Sea coral. This

[4] We greatly simplify the narrative and extend it to policy implementation. The original work is Justo, Micaela S.S., Laura Beenham, João Cúrdia, Marta Cunha, Fern Lyne, Rita Bartossek, Carla Leite, Edwin Palmer, Edward Oldmeadow, Raquel S. Peixoto, Rosa Freitas, Michael L. Beruman, and Susana Carvalho. 2025. "Effects of Salinity Stress on *Acropora* Sp. and *Stylophora Pistillata* in the Red Sea: A Pre-Construction Risk Assessment for Desalination Plants." *Desalination* 616. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.desal.2025.119328. The related Policy Brief is available for download at https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/about/policy-institute.

finding implies that the discharge from a desalination plant near coral would need to be maintained below that threshold to protect coral health.

With this example on Red Sea coral health, we illustrate a practical approach to identifying and highlighting the policy relevance of your research.

## Identifying Policy Relevance

To start, we suggest sketching answers to each of the six questions set out above. Answering the final question, which entails drawing out the potential benefits of your work for different types of stakeholders—people, businesses, the environment, and society overall—might be the hardest, but it may still be possible to do so. To illustrate some possibilities, the research in the example might stand to contribute, eventually, to "preserving a recreation and tourism site that creates revenue and jobs;" "supporting life-sustaining ecosystems;" and/or "protecting coral for its own, intrinsic worth." All three answers can be true, but the relative emphasis placed on each perspective—and the perceived benefits associated with each perspective—could bear on policy decisions, development, and implementation.[5]

With your answers in mind, you can turn to the implications of your findings for policy. Turning again to the example, the research does not span the path to a fully formed policy, but rather it takes the first step down the path. It provides evidence on a safe threshold for brine salinity, "+10%," but not on whether or how to create policy to support that threshold. The findings could enter policy in different ways, depending partly on current practice and concerns. If the threshold level is less than the usual level, there might be a role for policy, such as a salinity standard and, perhaps, incentives for plants to meet the standard. However, there might be a better mechanism for ensuring discharge occurs at safe levels of salinity. The cost of the standard might exceed the perceived benefits from one or all perspectives, or coral health might be one of several competing concerns for policy. Still, you might be able to offer insight into policy, couched conditionally, based on your understanding of the context.

## Highlighting Policy Relevance

How, then, might you reasonably describe the connection to policy?

We suggest at least two ways: motivating the research with some aspects of why it matters and drawing out the implications of the findings for policy insomuch as possible.

In this example:

- **For motivation**, you might write, "This work bears on coral health, the viability of the ecosystems it supports, and the benefits that humans draw from it, including those of recreation, tourism, and aesthetic appeal."

[5] The technical terms for these perspectives are "anthropocentric," "ecocentric," and "non-speciesist," respectively. See Greenfield, Victoria A., and Letizia Paoli. 2025. "Sustainability as a Benchmark for Assessing Environmental Harms: How Shifting the Lens on Stakeholders and Interests Affects the Results." In *Sustainability, Law and Criminology*, edited by Dorothy Gruyaert. Intersentia.

- **For policy implications**, you might trace the path to policy as far as the "+10%" threshold or consider adding a discussion of how policy *could* achieve it:
    - "Our results suggest maintaining the salinity of brine discharge from desalination plants near coral at less than 10% above ambient levels to maintain coral health and the viability of the surrounding ecosystem."
    - "Policy *could* play a part in maintaining salinity at safe levels, for example, with formal measures, *such as* a salinity standard, or by creating incentives to encourage desalination plants to meet a standard."

Whether you choose to discuss potential approaches to developing or implementing policy, as per the second bullet, will depend partly on the strength or generalizability of your results, your understanding of the policy context, and your audience.

The placement of the policy discussion in your work may be specific to the audience and, relatedly, the venue. In a journal article, the material on motivation might belong in the abstract, introduction, discussion, or conclusions, whereas the material on policy implications might fit in any of those places, but its inclusion could also depend on the publication's requirements and the editor's expectations. Even within a single discipline, requirements and expectations can differ. Some journals might actively encourage a highly visible discussion of policy implications; others might not but still expect a discussion of future research and applications. In a paper tailored to a policy audience, you would typically place any policy discussion at the start of the document with the bottom line up front.

# 4 Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the meaning of policy, emphasizing policy developed and implemented in the public interest, defined policy relevance, and offered a practical approach to signaling the policy relevance of your research.

Although we offered just one example of the approach, some lessons are broadly applicable. Among them, you, the researcher, will need to decide how far you can reasonably take the link between your work and policy. Preferably, you will use soft language to describe the link, especially any policy implications. We suggest that you avoid saying "must" and "should" and reserve "recommendations" for the strongest findings. As an alternative to making recommendations, we might offer "proposals" or provide "policy options" for the reader's consideration. Why? Tonality and humility matter when engaging with or trying to reach out to policymakers. Telling a policymaker what to do—or seeming to—may be received poorly simply as a matter of etiquette, but also because the policymaker often has more information and will almost certainly need to consider many different concerns in their deliberations.

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