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An Empirical Case for Policy Institutes in Higher Education Environments

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1 Introduction

The challenge of translating academic research into actionable public policy is a persistent issue for governance and policymaking around the world. Often characterized as a "research-policy gap," the nature of this gap and how to bridge it have been the subject of decades of scholarship and practical interventions.

The research-policy gap can be especially problematic for impact-focused institutions because it undermines their ability to drive wider change across society. Even if institutional research activity is strategically aligned with societal problems, a failure to translate these findings and expertise to inform policymaking inevitably curtails real-world impact. This represents a significant loss of potential value from investment into research, including direct financial savings and the avoidance of unnecessary costs for governments and society (RAND Corporation 2025).

This paper explores the role of policy institutes as one mechanism for bridging the gap between knowledge producers in academia and knowledge users in policymaking. Policy institutes aim to support evidence-informed policymaking by reducing the separation between these two communities, even as each operates on its own incentives, timescales, and definitions of success (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007).

To start, the paper discusses how research makes its way into policy. Then it reviews insights from real-world experience and considers how conditions in Saudi Arabia reflect those needed for the development of policy institutes. After summing up the case for policy institutes, the paper turns to matters of design, organizational models, and effectiveness. The paper concludes with a summary of the issues that policy institutes can address and how Saudi Arabia can benefit from policy institutes.

KEY CONCEPT

What do we mean by policy?

Public policy is the deliberate system of principles, decisions, and 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.

Policy decisions are made at different levels, from international to local, and while the structures for policy making differ across cultures and contexts, they typically share a goal of contributing towards the common good.

2 The Principles of Getting Research into Policy

Decades of evidence and research have reconceptualized the connection between research and policy. Notably, discourse has shifted away from the traditional 'push' model whereby research is disseminated in an academic publication, read by relevant policymakers and subsequently converted to inform their policy decisions.

Moving beyond this linear view has fundamentally reshaped our understanding of the research-policy gap. Rather than stemming from the individual failures of poorly communicative academics or uninterested policymakers, the failure instead sits with institutional design and the absence of support structures and knowledge brokers.

Policy analysis provides a structured approach for identifying problems, designing alternatives, projecting outcomes, and evaluating trade-offs (Dunn 2012, Bardach and Patashnik 2019, Sabatier 1988). Policy analysis is not purely technical: it requires sensitivity to political, financial, and institutional contexts. Ideally, universities can contribute independent and objective expertise, methodological rigor, and novel perspectives that help policymakers navigate uncertainty and complexity, making universities potential participants in the policy process, not distant observers.

Foundational scholarship led by Weiss (1977, 1980) was central to dismantling the simplistic linear view of the research-policy interface. Conceptualized as the "enlightenment function" of research (in this case, social research), Weiss (1977) argued that the primary influence of research on policy is rarely direct but instead reflects an often slow and diffuse process. Rather than research supplying a direct answer to a policy problem, Weiss (1980) describes a process of indirect "knowledge creep" in which policymakers' engagement with research and researchers seeds new concepts, language, data, and perspectives among policymakers (Weiss 1980). This percolation of research serves to influence policymaking indirectly and over the long-term.

The relevant difference between the two communities, those of researchers and policymakers, can be observed in their differing conceptualizations of evidence. Researchers are concerned with *summative* evidence: empirically derived and theoretically driven information which is produced with few time constraints and results in outputs tightly coupled to caveats and qualifications. In contrast, policymakers are concerned with *colloquial* evidence to answer interpretive questions, with an appetite for clear, timely, and practical outputs (Lomas 2005).

Building on these foundations, contemporary scholarship has sought to empirically validate "what works" at the research-policy interface. One review (Oliver et al. 2014, updated by Oliver 2024) systematically coded 145 studies, largely in health and medical science, to identify the barriers and facilitators shaping the use of evidence by policymakers. Table 1 shows the top five barriers and facilitators.

USING EVIDENCE IN POLICYMAKING

Top 5 Barriers to Use	Top 5 Facilitators of Use
• Availability and access to research/ improved dissemination (n = 63)	• Availability and access to research/ improved dissemination (n = 65)
• Clarity/relevance/reliability of research fundings (n = 54)	• Collaboration (n = 49)
• Timing/opportunity (n = 42)	• Clarity/relevance/reliability of research fundings (n = 46)
• Policymaker research skills (n = 26)	• Relationship with policymakers (n = 39)
• Costs (n = 25)	• Relationship with researchers/ information staff (n = 37)

Table 1 — Leading barriers to and facilitators of evidence use by policymakers. Source: Oliver 2014.

Table 1 demonstrates a broad distinction between the barriers and facilitator: the barriers to using evidence are largely practical and content-related (e.g., availability, relevancy, clarity, timing), while the facilitators of use are predominantly relational (e.g., collaboration, mutual understanding).

Subsequent work by Hinrichs-Krapels et al. (2020) has drawn out three guiding principles that underpin successful efforts to narrow the research-policy gap:

> **Translation:** findings must be accessible to policymakers (in terms of outlet, format, and language) and framed in a relevant way to policy challenges.
>
> **Trust:** long-term relationships must be nurtured between researchers and policymakers to establish trust in evidence and expertise and to build the skills needed for two-way communication.
>
> **Timing:** research must align with the window of opportunity for policymaking, ensuring that evidence is delivered when decisions are being made.

This framework further clarifies that the research-policy gap is not a challenge that can be overcome by individual academics alone but requires institutional solutions. The "linkage and exchange" model set out by Lomas (2000) explores an institutional framework in the context of a Canadian health foundation. The work outlines an approach centered around collaboration between researchers and policymakers. It encompasses priority-setting, sponsorship, and assessment, reflecting a model now broadly labelled as "co-production" that integrates the perspectives of evidence users into the research process from an early stage. While co-production can take many forms, Lomas and others describe the role of

knowledge brokers—individuals or organizations—that span the boundary between research and policymaking communities and can act as a mediator between them.

The work of Weiss, Oliver, Hinrichs-Krapels, and Lomas, taken as a whole, points to the need for institutions pursuing policy impact to create professionalized structures that can, in turn, create the environment for research to impact policy.

3 Real-World Insights

We can draw lessons on the research-policy interface from the prominence of policy impact in assessments of research impact. Research impact, defined as the demonstratable benefit of research, is systematically measured by funding bodies worldwide in two ways. These are:

> **Backward-tracing**, which means starting from a demonstrable real-world impact, such as a new policy, product or change in practice, and then tracing back to the body of research which enabled and shaped this impact.
>
> **Forward-tracing**, which means starting from a defined unit of research, such as a grant, and then tracing forward to all the subsequent attributable outcomes that have been reported over time.

Here we explore evidence from relevant research assessment exercises that individually and collectively demonstrate the high prevalence of policy impact and then address how the Saudi context might affect the interpretation of that evidence.

Case Study: Analysis of Impact Assessments

The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) are both examples of backward-tracing impact assessment, each of which is, itself, based on case studies.

The UK's REF process has evolved over time. Impact was first integrated into the REF as a point of assessment in 2014, and the next exercise may give increased weight to the research environment, including the support that institutions provide to enhance impact.

The REF uses short case studies submitted by institutions to assess impact. An analysis of non-academic impacts across 6,679 case studies submitted to the 2014 REF exercise found the most prevalent category of impact was "informing government policy" (see Figure 1), represented in 20 percent of the case studies (King's College London and Digital Science 2015). In comparison, commercialization-related impacts (e.g. licenses, spinouts, patents) accounted for 7 percent of case studies, meaning that research was almost three times more likely to generate a policy impact than a commercial one. The 2021 REF exercise showed similar patterns across all disciplines, but with a narrower gap between policy and commercialization impacts for STEM disciplines (Stevenson et al. 2023). However, this difference was driven largely by increased commercialization impact in the STEM case studied, not decreased policy impact in the non-STEM case studies.

In Hong Kong, the RAE assesses a research system which has a greater tilt towards applied research than that in the UK, but the process includes a similar assessment of short impact case studies from the eight higher education institutions involved. Analysis of 342 case studies submitted to the 2020 RAE found a high incidence of policy impact (Clarivate Analytics UK 2023). For example, research leading to explicit policy change through informing guidelines

or strategy was observed in 41 percent of "Health and healthcare" and 22 percent of "Engineering, energy and construction" case studies.

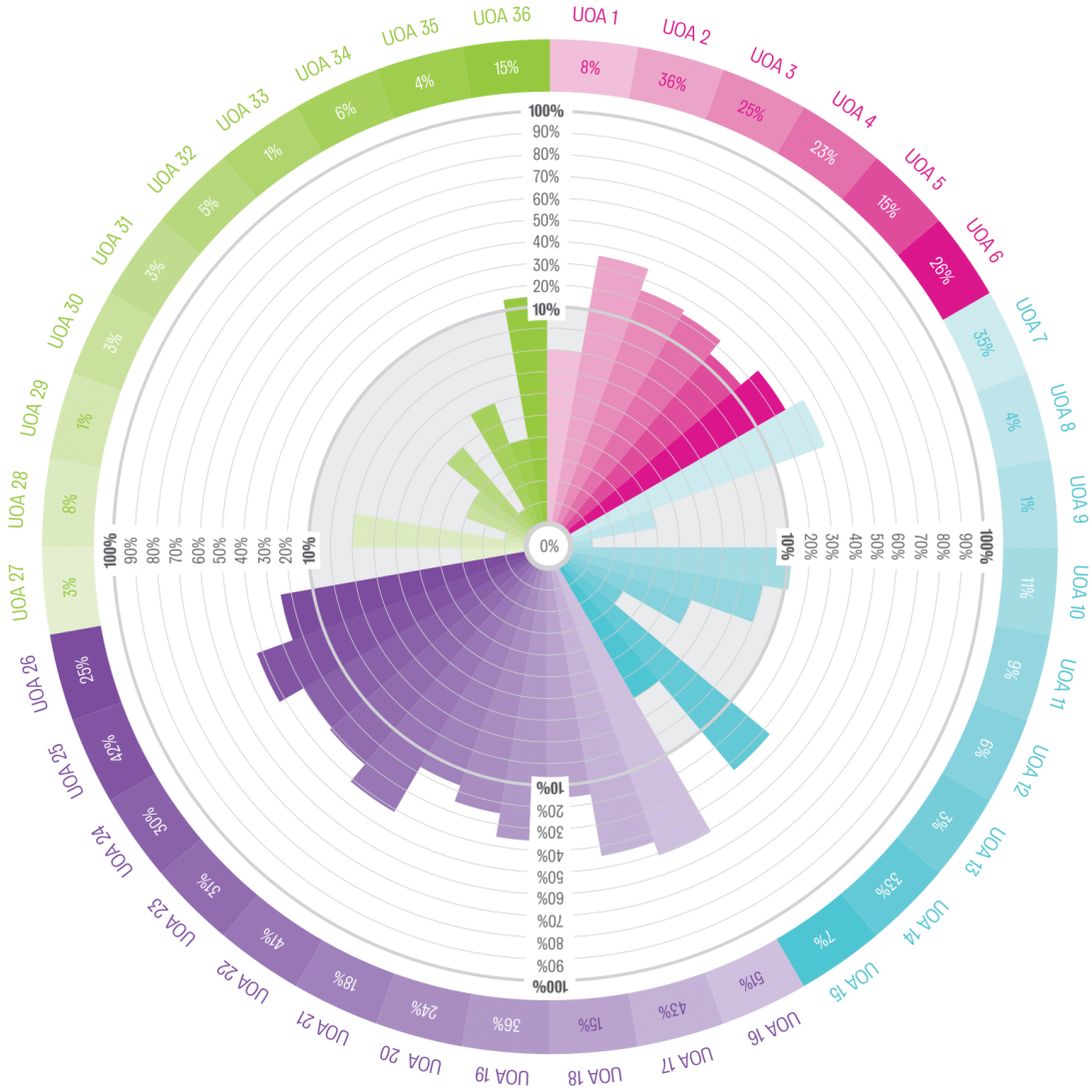

Figure 1 — Impact wheel ("Informing government policy," n=1,233).
The wheel identifies, for each REF Unit of Assessment (UoA), the proportion of case studies reporting impact on "informing government policy." Red data reflect Medicine, Health and Life Sciences; blue reflect Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics; purple reflect Social Sciences; and green reflect Arts and Humanities. Source: King's College London and Digital Science 2015, Figure 23.

Case Study: Analysis of Grant Outcomes Data

UK research funders used to conduct an annual census of funded research projects, programs, and fellowships using a tool called Researchfish.[1] An example of forward-tracing impact, Researchfish enabled researchers to report outcomes and impacts of their work in real time, providing data for funders to track impact of their investments.

Researchfish data from 2012 to 2023 on approximately 96,000 research grants demonstrate the prevalence of policy advice and influence as a route for generating research impact (Elsevier 2024). Figure 2 visualizes this analysis as an outcome array of research grants (columns) and outcome types (rows). It shows that, on average across all disciplines, 2 percent of grants led to patents, 3 percent to spinout companies, and 18 percent to policy influence. This implies that research is about three times more likely to have policy impact than commercial impact. This result aligns closely with the results of the REF 2014 analysis, but also with the caveat that the gap is likely to be less pronounced if only including science and technology disciplines.

Comparisons to the Saudi Arabian Research System

The evidence presented above centers on the UK research system, albeit with corroborative data from the Hong Kong system.

The UK has a broad, multi-disciplinary research system, which connects into an established system designed to support evidence-informed policymaking. Elements of this system include:

- A network of **Chief Scientific Advisers** in each major government department, coordinated under the Government Office for Science, which channels evidence directly into ministerial and departmental decisions.
- The **What Works Network** of centers, covering a range of policy areas, which systematically collates robust evidence for policymakers.
- The **Treasury's Green Book** of guidance, which mandates rigorous evaluation of evidence, ensuring economics research is factored into major policy decisions.

These components are complemented by a diverse landscape of policy institutes and think tanks, including some located within institutions of higher education (e.g., King's College London Policy Institute) and others set up as independent organizations (e.g., Institute for Fiscal Studies and RAND Corporation).

In light of this context, one might argue that the evidence and lessons of the previous section have limited applicability to a more focused research system, such as that found in Saudi Arabia. However, there are arguments for the importance of a strong research-policy interface being even greater in countries such as Saudi Arabia.

[1] Researchfish was a web-based reporting platform used by several major research funders in the UK to track the outputs and impacts of funded research.

As an academic discipline, scholarship on the research-policy interface gained traction as the latter half of the 20th century unfolded, when expertise and evidence were helping many countries navigate major societal and economic transitions (Smith 1991). Such broad national transitions create time-limited opportunities where many aspects of policy are simultaneously in flux.

Guided by Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is currently moving through a profound and strategic national transition, in which many major economic and social policy domains—from energy to education to industrial development—are being actively reshaped. This transition offers a rare context for the research-policy interface, by presenting a broad policy window that substantially boosts demand for and value from structures, which can provide timely and tailored evidence to inform policy decisions.

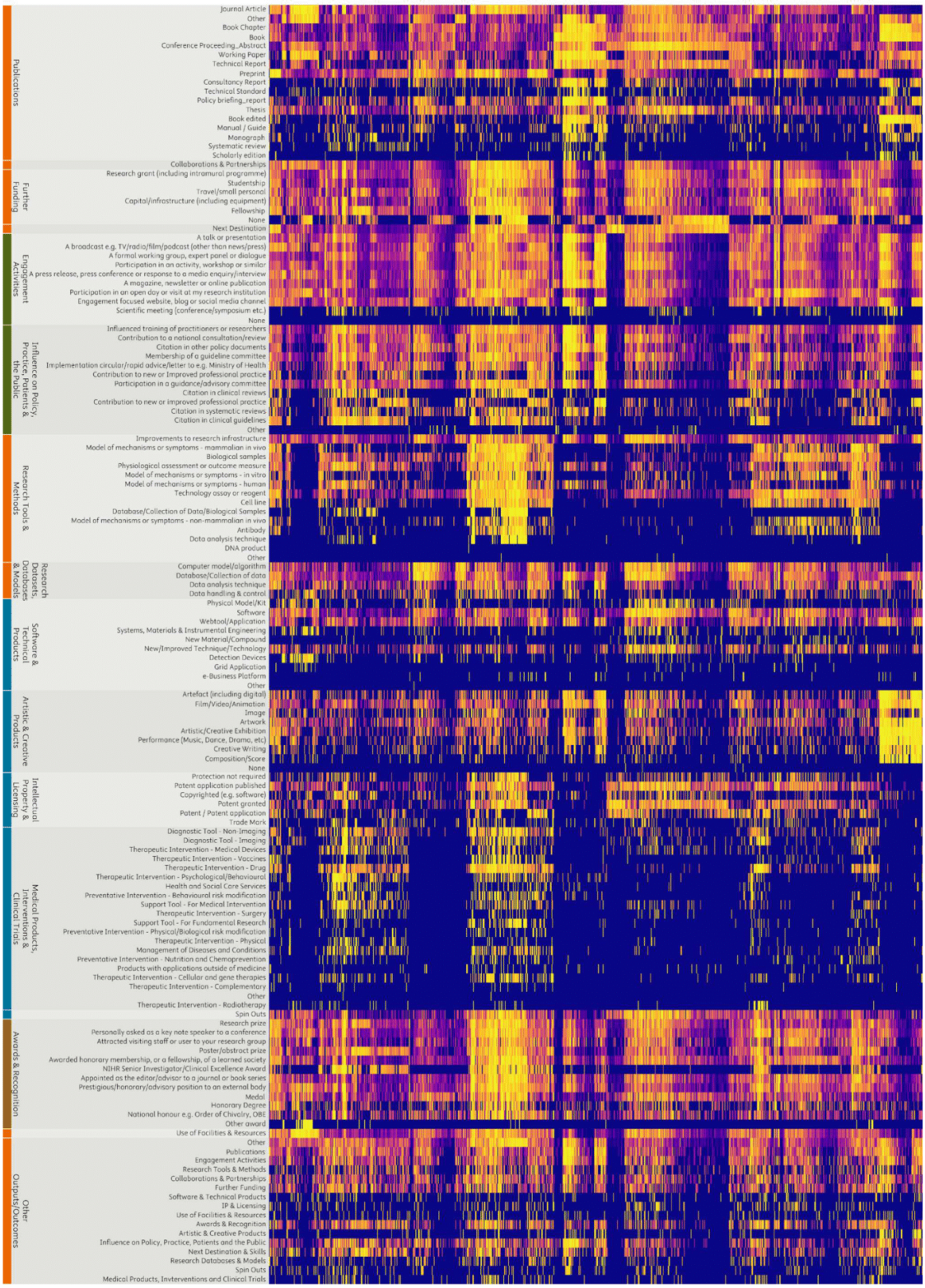

Figure 1 — Outcome array mapping 96,734 awards and 140 outcome types.
Each column represents a sample of 100 awards where the average value for the outcome type (rows) is used to fill the cell. Data columns are ordered by funder. Colors are scaled from dark blue (zero outcomes), through orange (50th percentile), to yellow (maximum value). Source: Elsevier 2024, figure 7.

4 The Case for Policy Institutes

Over recent decades, a widespread consensus has emerged around the value of universities establishing in-house technology transfer offices (TTOs) as a route to boosting their commercial impact (Phan and Siegel 2006, League of European Research Universities 2017, Siegel, Veugelers, and Wright 2007).

The rise of TTOs reflects an acknowledgement that translating research into commercial impact requires overcoming many of the same barriers associated with the research-policy gap. Siegel et al. (2003) has drawn attention to the familiar barriers of cultural differences and misaligned incentives and highlighted the need for TTOs as dedicated infrastructure providing specialized support for researchers to navigate the unfamiliar worlds of patenting, licensing, and commercialization.

While the adoption of TTOs is well-advanced, there is a lack of equivalent infrastructure to manage policy and societal impact. Policy institutes represent a counterpart to TTOs, acting similarly as brokers between unfamiliar worlds and applying the three guiding principles for narrowing the research-policy gap (Hinrichs-Krapels et al. 2020):

> **Translation:** Policy institutes can support the co-production of research questions by researchers and policymakers and synthesize findings into accessible and actionable formats.
>
> **Trust:** Policy institutes can maintain the long-term relationships needed to build trust and shift ad hoc engagement towards more structured approaches.
>
> **Timing:** Policy institutes can build awareness of policy cycles among researchers and highlight when evidence can have impact.

Effective and well-resourced policy institutes can amplify the policy impact of research, mirroring the role of TTOs in amplifying economic impact. This helps to mobilize the full value of the expertise and research conducted within a university, supports greater interaction between academics and policymakers, and nurtures an impact-led mindset among researchers that can yield lasting benefits in how research is conducted.

Below, we describe three university-affiliated policy institutes.

Case Study: Imperial Policy Forum, UK

Although it conducts significant fundamental research, the identity and strategy of Imperial College London are deeply rooted around the application of science, engineering, medicine, and business to real-world challenges.

Imperial established its Policy Forum in 2018 to "use the latest evidence from Imperial's world-leading academics to inform the policy conversations that really matter," per its mission statement (Imperial College London 2026). It aims to support researchers and policymakers,

enable capacity building and training, and facilitate relationship-building and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Forum is embedded in the Strategic Engagement Division and is institutionally funded, while receiving some external funding for targeted programs or initiatives as well. Although its long-term impact is still unfolding, it is already generating greater engagement with government bodies, a growing range of policy impact stories, and a shifting mindset towards policy impact within Imperial.

Case Study: Centre of Excellence in Public Policy, Law and Governance, India

The Centre of Excellence in Public Policy, Law and Governance at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur "envisions fostering a generation of leaders and professionals who are not only skilled but also deeply committed to the ideals of public service and social equity" (IIT Kharagpur 2026a).

The Centre describes itself as having a focus on interdisciplinary collaboration, being dedicated to advancing public policy, law, and governance through research, degree programs, experiential learning, and capacity-building initiatives, and seeking "to make meaningful contributions to the policymaking ecosystem" (IIT Kharagpur 2026b).

The center is embedded within IIT Kharagpur, from which it receives its core funding, but aspires to operate as an outward-facing, self-governing policy think tank that shapes discourse, informs decision making, and contributes to better policy outcomes.

Case Study: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, Lebanon

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut aims to bridge the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting and disseminating high-quality research, generating evidence-based policy recommendations, and creating a space for interdisciplinary dialogue, engagement, and exchanges of ideas among stakeholders (American University of Beirut 2026).

The institute focuses on understanding the policy landscape in Lebanon to identify policy options for relevant stakeholders. It does so through targeted policy research and reports, policy engagement, and capacity building initiatives.

The institute operates as a university affiliated think tank, located in a purpose-built facility. It has built strong links with departments across the university as well as with external partners. It operates from an initial endowment from the Lebanese government, and subsequent domestic and foreign grants and project-based funding.

5 Designing an Effective Policy Institute

Durrant and MacKillop (2022) offer a taxonomy that can help guide thinking about university-based policy institutes in Saudi Arabia, given the Kingdom's specific context and needs. This taxonomy is based on a comprehensive mapping of university policy functions within the UK, and classifies them according to their activities, outputs, impact, and staff:

Type 1: Policy impact support offices

Providing policy professional services staff who support researchers in developing pathways from research to impact, building capacity through toolkits and training, and capturing success in impact case studies.

Type 2: Knowledge brokers

Providing policy professionals and support staff who nurture relationships with policymakers to understand the demand for objective analysis and identify windows to inform policymaking, and who actively coach researchers with relevant policy analysis skills and tools.

Type 3: Policy evidence producers

Providing policy professionals and senior academics who nurture relationships with policymakers to raise demand for evidence-based policy analysis, proactively produce policy-relevant research resources, and develop extensive programs to cultivate internal policy skills and mindsets.

Type 4: Demand-led relationship builders

Providing policy professionals, senior academics, and consultancy staff who establish responsive, two-way relationships with policymakers, create platforms for ongoing interaction, and foster a closer and more open evidence-informed dialogue between researchers and policymakers through private forums.

As reflected in the foregoing examples of policy institutes, many policy institute models combine multiple functions into a single entity. Given the specific context and needs of Saudi Arabia, we suggest the Kingdom may be best served by a model which combines three core functions:

1. **Policy Analysis (Producer/Arbiter):** Providing a centralized team of professional knowledge exchange professionals and policy analysts who focus on translating and synthesizing existing, complex academic research into accessible formats, such as briefings and reports tailored to specific policy audiences.
2. **Training (Support Office):** Delivering capacity-building activities within Saudi Arabia to equip researchers—especially early-career researchers—with the skills and tools to navigate the policy landscape and engage with policymaking.

3. **Engagement (Broker/Builder):** Acting as the external facing 'front door' for policymakers by facilitating frictionless and rapid access to the most relevant academic experts and nurturing sustained relationships with policymakers.

The design of any new policy institute is well-placed to benefit from the systematic evidence that has been collected on "what works" in policy engagement, including the tools and practices that are needed to bridge the research-policy gap. Along those lines, Oliver and Cairney (2019) set out eight guiding principles for influencing policy that are broadly applicable across policy institute models:

1. **Do high-quality research and analysis:** use robust and well-established policy research and analysis methods and approaches, ensuring that evidence is rigorous, objective, and credible for political audiences.
2. **Make research policy-relevant and readable:** package findings for non-expert audiences, with digestible summaries and compelling narratives.
3. **Understand the policy process:** accommodate the complexities and constraints of the policymaking process, and the fact that evidence is one factor among many that influence decisions.
4. **Be accessible:** nurture a regular and flexible relationship built around mutual respect, aiming to act as a trusted, reliable, and approachable source of information.
5. **Decide on your role:** make, and communicate, a conscious choice about whether you are acting as a trustworthy 'honest broker' to objectively explain the evidence, or as an 'issue advocate' championing a particular policy outcome.
6. **Establish a clear relationship:** invest in building long-term collaborative relationships with policymakers, reinforced by clear ground rules that can establish boundaries and nurture trust.
7. **Be entrepreneurial:** act as a champion for the evidence, informed by the needs of decisionmakers, seeking to respond to moments of opportunity or to work with knowledge brokers who can help you do so.
8. **Reflect continuously:** keep track of activities and corresponding impact, to allow the evolution of practices over time that can maximize efficacy.

Creating a policy institute within a university setting also offers an opportunity to prioritize mission over profit. Doing so would embed the institute within an organizational incentive structure that is mission oriented, rather than profit led, meaning that the organization is intended to contribute to broader forms of economic and societal impact and is considering the results of its efforts on that basis. This aligns with the positioning of universities as impact-led agents of social change, as explored by Grant (2021) and others.

6 Organizational Models

Policy institutes seek to operate at the boundary of academia and policymaking and are therefore often built to sit on the periphery of institutional structures. This outward-facing nature promotes a greater understanding of the context and conditions facing policymakers while still maintaining the strong institutional connections needed to engage with, and mobilize, academic strengths (Vining and Weimer 2025).

For example, Imperial's Policy Forum promotes integration by reliance on institutional funding and an operational model that drives institution-wide engagement. The IIT Kharagpur's Centre represents an embedded model that is seeking to evolve into a more nation-facing and self-governing think tank. This reflects the model of the Hoover Institution in the USA, which is located at Stanford University but has gained significant autonomy over several decades. The Hoover model includes developing its own governance board and funding streams, which has allowed the institution to expand its scope while maintaining academic credibility. Similarly, NORC at the University of Chicago maintains a high degree of structural and financial independence from its host university, with a model built around project-based funding.

When policy institute governance models rely on institutional structures, positions are typically dominated by academic staff. In the face of this, several U.S. institutions have opted for a mixed governance model that seeks to bring in policymakers at the strategic levels. For example, the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah, which includes former Senator Mitt Romney as a Convenor, and the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern. The Issam Fares Institute Advisory Board also draws on academics, policy experts, and practitioners, and is designed with a higher level of strategic independence compared to the Imperial Policy Forum, for example.

To serve their role, policy institutes typically depend on dedicated staffing, often alongside affiliated researchers and policy fellows. Core teams tend to include a director or lead, program staff with thematic specialization, and administrative support staff. Additional staff may deliver targeted research and analysis or synthesize evidence.

While many policy institutes rely on core funding from their host universities, most also attract some level of external funding via project funding, government grants, or philanthropic contributions. The Centre at IIT Kharagpur reflects a mixed funding model where IIT funding provides a baseline that is supplemented with income from its Master's program. The Hoover Institution sits further along the spectrum of financial independence, drawing its income from an endowment supplemented by donations.

7 Conclusion

This paper sets out the barriers that generate the research-policy gap and what can be done to close it. It draws attention to translation, trust, and timing as three guiding principles for supporting evidence-informed policymaking and it uses the results of case-based analyses of impacts in the UK and Hong Kong to demonstrate the prevalence of policy impact that is possible when infrastructure and incentives are present.

Just as technology transfer offices were established to boost the commercial impact of research by overcoming cultural, structural, and systemic barriers between academia and industry, policy institutes can act as a counterpart to bridge the gap between researchers and policymakers and professionalize engagement between them.

Saudi Arabia is uniquely placed to benefit from a policy institute that can channel the Kingdom's academic expertise towards domestic policymaking. Guided by Vision 2030, the Kingdom is navigating a profound economic and social transition that has opened a wide 'policy window' – creating an opportunity for a new, broad-based policy institute to serve this transition with robust, accessible, and timely evidence.

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