

Evidence Based Public Health Policy and Practice, 2024-2025

Guidance on the Module Assignment

Introduction

The module has one formative assessment and one assessed summative assignment, which relate to the main themes of the module.

A formative assessment is designed to help students prepare for the formal summative assignment. For formative assessment students will work in small groups and will receive feedback rather than a mark. The group presentations will be presented to the class in week 11, with verbal feedback provided in the session from the teaching team and from fellow students. Students can choose any topic and/or policy area in the field of public health where they think that current practice does not reflect the best evidence of effectiveness, and any country setting. This formative assessment is based on the elements in the module that focus on the policy making process and the deployment of evidence in that process. Students are asked to prepare an 'agenda setting' or influencing strategy on behalf of a non-governmental organisation, designed to get a research-driven issue onto the policy agenda of a ministry of health. This strategy should include stakeholder analysis and an assessment of the different types of evidence which might support the proposed strategy.

The summative assignment consists of three inter-related tasks: (a) an appraisal of an evidence review, (b) a strategy to gather additional information for a policy briefing and (c) a policy briefing. The first task is to select a topic likely to be of interest to a minister of health in a country of their choice, then identify an existing evidence review on the topic and to conduct its appraisal. The appraisal should cover not only methodological quality but also consider other dimensions of quality such as policy relevance, acceptability and equity. The second task is to consider the applicability of the review to the identified policy issue and to identify any further information that might be necessary for inclusion in the policy briefing (for example, demographic information, cost information, data on public and or professional perspectives). The list of potential additional sources can be presented as a table of sources with a commentary on their potential contribution. The final third task will be to write a short policy briefing note on the implications of the review prepared for a minister of health in a country of the student's choice.

This document sets out a detailed guidance for the module's summative assignment.

Purpose of the assignment

To enable students to demonstrate their ability to:

- identify and/or refine a suitable review objective and/or question(s);
- critically appraise a systematic review relevant to a policy topic;
- summarise the findings and their policy, practice and research implications in a succinct and policy-friendly briefing note.

The task

- To identify a policy issue and appraise an existing systematic review on the topic
- To reflect on applicability of the review to the policy issue and develop a strategy to gather additional information for a policy briefing
- To develop a short policy briefing for a minister of health of a country of your choosing

Identifying a policy issue and appraising a systematic review

First, you need to identify a policy issue of relevance to the ministry of health in a particular context. This can be either your country of origin or where you have worked recently or a country you know well.

Then, you need to identify a recent systematic review relevant to the briefing you will prepare and appraise this systematic review. You are encouraged to use an established appraisal tool as part of the appraisal, but the output should be in written narrative form.

As a guide only, this part of the assignment can be approximately 1,500 words.

Applicability of the review to the policy issue and strategy to gather further information

You then are expected to reflect on the applicability of the review to the identified policy issue within its context.

Following that, you need to devise a strategy to gather any relevant additional information required for your policy briefing and to write this up as part of the assignment

As a guide only, this part of the assignment can be approximately 1000 words.

Policy briefing on the findings of the evidence review to the Minister of Health

You are expected to prepare a short policy briefing for the Minister of Health summarising the findings of the systematic review, then setting out their relevance and implications for the country, and recommending an appropriate course of action within the current policy environment (which could include a 'do nothing' option).

As a guide only, the policy briefing can be approximately 1,500 words long, including any references.

It should be written in plain, jargon-free English. Bear in mind that the Minister is likely to be a very busy person, may not have a scientific training and has to deal with many different issues every day, so it has to be evident from the first sentence why s/he should read your paper and what decisions, if any, s/he is being asked to take.

The following is a broad guide to possible structuring of the policy briefing:

- Executive summary including a clear steer as to what you are asking the minister to decide on
- Purpose of the briefing and how it addresses the identified evidence need
- Background to the policy issue, and why it matters (e.g. scale, consequences) and to whom, in the particular context
- A brief summary of the findings, and assessment of any policy options – including the strength of the evidence and its relevance to the country.
- Recommendations for the Minister (if anything) and whether further research or evaluation is needed to inform future policy decisions (e.g. on cost-effectiveness).

You can find some guidance on writing ministerial briefing papers produced for British civil servants in, *Working with Ministers: a practical handbook on advising, briefing and drafting* to be found at:

http://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/2015_Working_with_Ministers.pdf

This website has links to a range of resources related to writing for policy makers:

<https://politicalscienceguide.com/home/policy-paper/>

The assignment as a whole should not exceed 4000 words including references. It is possible to attach tools you have used (e.g. a quality appraisal tool) as an appendix.

Deadline

Please submit the assignment via Moodle by 4pm on 29th January 2025.

General information and guidance

Submission process

Please submit via Moodle a Word document, with LSHTM cover sheet, which should state an accurate word count for the assignment, related to the requirement for each assignment. **Note:** A grade penalty is applied to assignments that are over the required length. Please check the regulations for the current guidance.

Assessment of and feedback on the assignment

Your assignments will be independently, blind assessed by two members of staff. You will receive written feedback as well as a grade for your assignment according to the scheme below.

Grade point	Descriptor	Typical work should show evidence of ...
5	Excellent	Excellent engagement with the topic, excellent depth of understanding & insight, excellent argument & analysis. Generally, this work will be 'distinction standard'. → NB that excellent work does not have to be 'outstanding' or exceptional by comparison with other students; these grades should not be capped to a limited number of students per class. Nor should such work be expected to be 100% perfect
4	Very good	Very good engagement with the topic, very good depth of understanding & insight, very good argument & analysis. This work may be 'borderline distinction standard'. → Note that very good work may have some inaccuracies or omissions but not enough to question the understanding of the subject matter.
3	Good	Good (but not necessarily comprehensive) engagement with the topic, clear understanding & insight, reasonable argument & analysis, but may have some inaccuracies or omissions.
2	Satisfactory	Adequate evidence of engagement with the topic but some gaps in understanding or insight, routine argument & analysis, and may have some inaccuracies or omissions.
1	Unsatisfactory / poor (fail)	Inadequate engagement with the topic, gaps in understanding, poor argument & analysis.
0	Very poor (fail)	Poor engagement with the topic, limited understanding, very poor argument & analysis.

Please note: ALL grades are provisional until confirmed by the exam board.

Plagiarism

All assignments are put through plagiarism detection software and reports are made available to the markers. See the LSHTM guidance on avoiding plagiarism at <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/sites/default/files/academicwritinghandbook.pdf>

Late submissions, extensions and extenuating circumstances

Students are reminded that those who hand in assignments late will be penalised unless an 'Extension' has been granted. The mark for any assignment submitted up to one week late without an agreed extension will be lowered by one grade. Assignments submitted more than one week late without an agreed extension will be considered a failure and students will have to resubmit the assignment at the next opportunity to be able to complete the taught component of the DrPH and move on to the next stage.

Extensions can only be granted in circumstances that are unforeseen, exceptional, short-term events, which are outside a student's control and have a negative impact on their ability to prepare for or take an assessment. They cannot be claimed for circumstances that are not deemed exceptional or which could have been prevented or foreseen by the student. Requests for extension must be submitted prior to the deadline for submitting the assessed work.

Students can claim 'Extenuating Circumstances' if the assignment has been submitted but they feel that extenuating circumstances have put them at a disadvantage. Requests for 'Extenuating Circumstances' have to be submitted within 3 calendar weeks of the assignment deadline.

The LSHTM Extenuating Circumstances Policy is set out in full in section 7.4 of: <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/sites/default/files/academic-manual-chapter-07.pdf>

Students who want to request an 'Extension' or claim 'Extenuating Circumstances' must submit a completed Extenuating Circumstances Form and provide relevant documentary evidence in support of the claim to the LSHTM Registry, via assessments@lshtm.ac.uk. The email header should contain 'EXTENSION_firstname_surname' or 'ECs_firstname_surname', respectively. Please consult the Extenuating Circumstances Policy (see link above) for a list of circumstances that are likely to be acceptable or unacceptable and for the standard of evidence required.

The Extenuating Circumstances Form can be accessed through the School's intranet: <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/study/new-students/msc-research-students/regulations-policies-and-procedures>

The request will then be considered by the Extenuating Circumstances Committee.

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1st September 2024

Some feedback on previous assessments

1. Not everyone remembers to provide a brief executive summary at the beginning, or, if they do, sometimes it does not include the key recommendations. Many students take too much space summarising the findings of the previous review and not enough space on the policy advice related to the specific context of the country and the minister.
2. It is essential that a briefing to a minister tries to answer these questions: why should I care about this now (often this is well done); what are you asking me to do and what decisions do I need to make (this is usually less well done); what are the likely costs and benefits of the options you are giving me (not always included)? Ministers often like to be given some options in relation to a specific recommendation (e.g. carry out on a pilot basis, phased roll-out, full roll-out, etc.) and to have some ability to extricate themselves from an initiative if it turns out not to work particularly well. However, this may be different in an emergency situation.
3. There is no need to provide much, if any, detail of the methods of the review in the policy paper. It would suffice to say that the review was carried out using internationally accepted, rigorous standards and has confined itself to the best studies available (or that the best studies said ...).
4. It is essential to give the Minister a sense of the *amount*, *relevance* and *quality* of the evidence you have used to reach your conclusions even if this is just a one sentence statement. S/he does not need to know the detail underlying your assessment of these features of the evidence.
5. It is important to make it clear when you are going beyond the review's evidence to rely on other sources of data (e.g. country-specific information) to recommend lines of action.
6. While commissioning more research can be beneficial for improving policy responses to public health issues, one needs to strike a sensible balance between recommending that 'more research is needed' before any action can be taken, recommending actions that can themselves be evaluated in order to learn more, and acting based on the best available evidence that an intervention could plausibly work and then monitoring the consequences. There is a tendency in the policy briefs to focus excessively on doing more research. Don't let the search for perfect evidence become paralysing.
7. The aim of the review is to synthesise the available evidence of effectiveness from any part of the world (taking account of the quality of the evidence) and the purpose of the policy brief is to apply this knowledge to provide advice relevant to a particular context. The review can include discussion of which types of interventions were either more effective or more likely to be suitable in different places but is not intended to be presented in relation to a particular country setting.