



Netherlands: Scientific research supporting the public sector

The National Research Programme presented by the Dutch government in September 2016 was prepared by a “knowledge coalition” consisting in representatives of all the stakeholder groups involved in, as well as those affected by, research activities. This innovative process based on participation and collaboration gave rise to a roadmap for the next four years that reflects the interactions between the scientific community, the public sector, the corporate world and civil society.

Accounting for 1.7% of global scientific output (whereas the country represents a mere 0.23% of global population), the Dutch research community is a particularly productive one. The Journal Impact Factor, a measure of the visibility of scientific output according to criteria defined by the Global Institute for Scientific Information, ranks the Netherlands among the top five countries in the world¹. This universally recognised yardstick speaks to the quality of the country’s 14 universities and 41 specialty schools, as well as that of three bodies including the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences), which has input in the field of the social sciences in particular and has advised Dutch governments² since it was founded in 1808.

The Netherlands is widely viewed as a bastion of public policy analysis due to its high density of think tanks specialising in governance³. The four “planning bureaus⁴” – a Dutch exception whose name dating to the post-war period is somewhat misleading today – plays a central role not only in assessing and monitoring public policy but also upstream, by defining issues to be included on the government’s policy agenda and preparing a range of policy options.

A determined effort to streamline scholarly expertise

The Netherlands, a country marked by a strong tradition of consensus, is the birthplace of the *polder model*⁵. This decision-making model is rooted in building a consensus among the various stakeholders, including – or especially – when their interests conflict. The process first emerged in the mid-1980s and has made possible the implementation of numerous economic reforms. Although the model came under criticism during the 2009 crisis when it was deemed partly responsible for the slowness of government action, it is still, today, one of the drivers of an institutionalized cooperation between academic and government circles⁶.

The advisory system is written into Articles 79 and 80 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and framed by the *Kaderwet adviescolleges*⁷ (Advisory Bodies Framework Act in effect since 1 January 1997). However, the scope of this Act is confined to bodies in which at least 50% of the members are civil servants. At the time, the government had set targets to sharply reduce the number of existing bodies and make better use of the expertise provided by the scientific community as a whole. The Act is evaluated every four years and the conclusions submitted

¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/dataisbeautiful/comments/20k5dk/top_40_countries_by_the_number_of_scientific/

² <http://www.knaw.nl/en/advisory-work>

³ <http://www.nwo.nl/en/about-nwo/organisation/nwo-domains/sqw>

⁴ http://halfman.net/papers/Measuring_the_stakes.pdf

⁵ <https://www.uni-muenster.de/NiederlandeNet/nl-wissen/wirtschaft/vertiefung/wirtschaftspolitik/poldermodell.html>

⁶ <http://www.economist.com/node/1098153>

⁷ <https://www.government.nl/topics/public-administration/contents/central-public-administration/organisation-of-the-civil-service/advisory-system>

to Parliament by the Ministry of the Interior. The most recent report covers the period 2010-2015⁸. Its main conclusion concerns more efficient and effective collaboration made possible by “loans” of scientists between different organisations.

Effective on 1 February 2017, the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, NWO) underwent a complete revamp⁹. The aim of the reorganisation is for NWO to encourage cooperation between its eight specialised research institutes to better address changes occurring in science and society. Accordingly, four major fields have now been established: Sciences, Applied and Engineering Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities, and Health.

Sharing expertise: from scientific consulting to knowledge chambers

At the forefront of the Netherlands’ unique advisory system is the *Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid* (Science Council for Government Policy). Established in 1972 as a temporary advisory body, it was given an official status by a legislative act in June 1976¹⁰. It is a completely independent body that informs and advises the Dutch government and Parliament on long-term issues that are likely to have important political and societal consequences. It operates within a multidisciplinary scope. To ensure the scientific legitimacy of the advice it provides, the Council maintains close ties with academia as well as with non-governmental organisations and the research bureaus of the political parties.

The Council currently has nine members (appointed for a five-year term, renewable one time). Members are personally in charge of research studies and draft their reports jointly with the scientific staff (22 researchers). All Council decisions are taken collectively. In its forty-year existence, the Council has produced 88 reports, 17 preliminary studies and 250 working documents¹¹. These have contributed significantly to the reforms undertaken by the central, provincial and local authorities.

Cascading this advisory function to other structures, each ministry has now set up its own *Kenniskamer*¹² (knowledge chamber). Knowledge Chambers are intended to promote the interaction between the top echelons of the ministry on the one hand and knowledge institutions on the other. This works on the principle of reciprocity: a ministry formulates topics where it has a demand for knowledge, as regards both current and future policy, and the knowledge chambers then indicate whether they can meet that demand. In exchange, scientists and scientific institutions are apprised of the questions posed in policy fields, allowing them to take account of those questions in the research in their particular discipline.

The government as a proving ground for outcomes of scientific research

After having conducted and published a study entitled *De menselijke beslisser* (The Human Decision-Maker), which analyses decision-making processes based on actual stakeholder behaviours (particularly their irrationality, cognitive biases, risk-aversion, etc.), the Scientific Council issued a report on taking behavioural insights into account when defining public policy¹³. The report raises several questions: should an expert team be set up within each department of a ministry? Are policy-makers always in a position to make the right choices in the many decisions they must face today? If not, what measures should the government take to correct the problem?

Four ministries and four government agencies were interested in this work, and formed their own brainstorming group to conduct experiments and explore the benefits of incorporating human behavioural factors into their fields of activity. The project is being coordinated by the Dutch Ministry for Economic Affairs, and was cited by the Joint Research Centre of the European Union in its comparative study¹⁴ on behavioural insights in 2016. Several of these achievements will be presented at the Nudge Conference¹⁵ to be held at the University of Utrecht next 23-24 June.

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⁸ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2016/01/15/kamerbrief-over-verslag-van-de-vierde-evaluatie-van-de-kaderwet-adviescolleges-2010-2015>

⁹ <http://www.nwo.nl/en/about-nwo/nwo+in+transition>

¹⁰ <http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0003043/1998-01-21>

¹¹ <https://english.wrr.nl/about-us/history>

¹² <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2007/06/13/bijlage-overzicht-kenniskamers-en-verkenningsfunctie/19408a.pdf>

¹³ http://test6.wrr.nl/fileadmin/en/publicaties/PDF-samenvattingen/Policymaking_Using_Behavioural_Expertise.pdf

¹⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/behavioural-insights-applied-policy-european-report-2016>

¹⁵ <http://winkthenudgeconference.com/>