

STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

RESTORING THE VALUE OF
KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE IN
POLICY AND POLITICS



The Dutch Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) publishes solicited and unsolicited advisory reports to the Dutch government. Its independent reports are strategic in nature and focus on the contours of government science, technology and innovation policy. Council members are drawn from knowledge institutes and the business world. AWTI's work is founded on the principle that knowledge, science and innovation are vital for the economy and society, and will become more important in the future.

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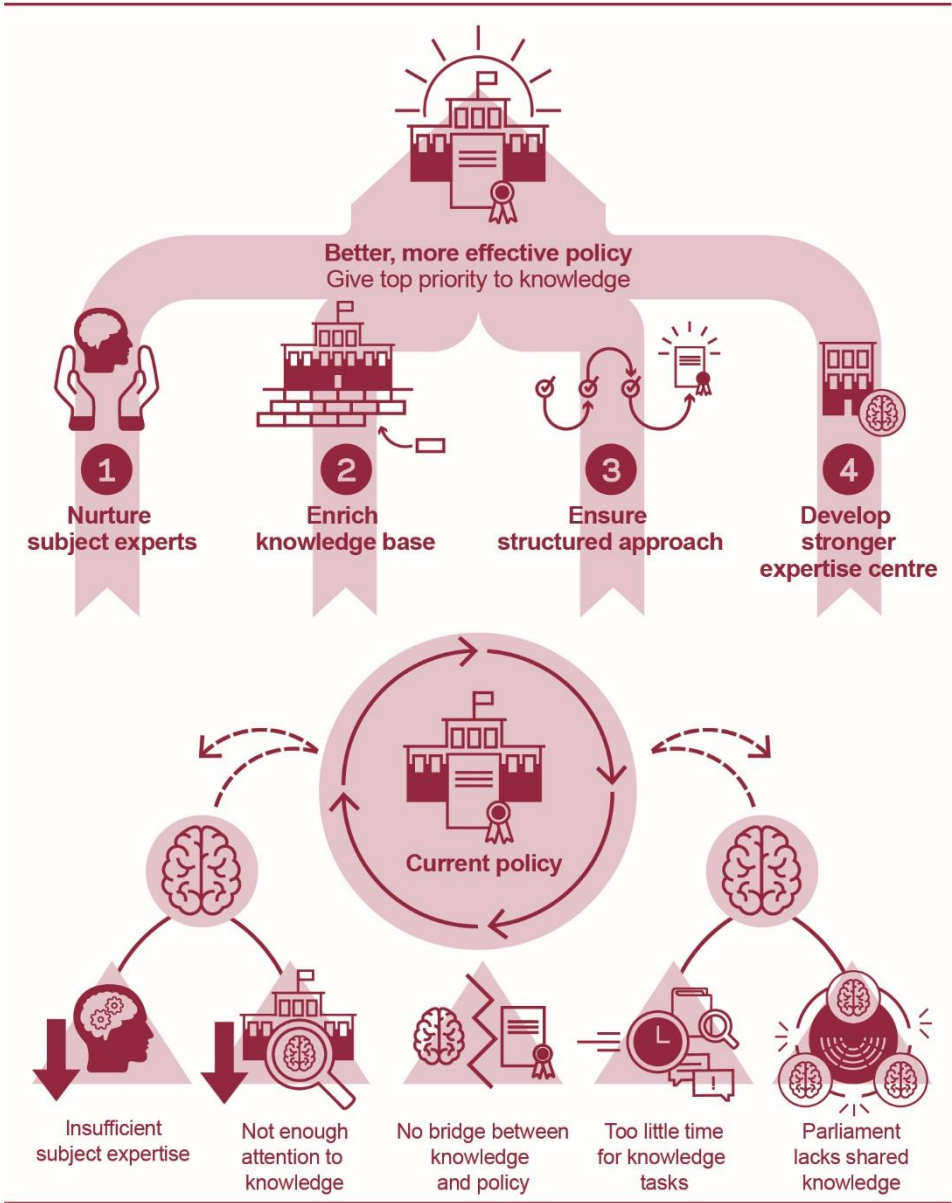
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Summary

The Netherlands is a country rich in knowledge, but there are problems in ensuring that government policy is always properly informed by that knowledge. As a result, the Netherlands is missing out on opportunities to make policy more effective and improve its public services. Although the government has taken some steps on the path to better embedding of knowledge, much more needs to be done. That is the subject of this report.

Which next steps should government and parliament take on the path to a better embedment of knowledge in policy processes? How can government ministries, executive agencies and parliament, and the people who work there, be better equipped to utilise knowledge in policy?

Science, technology and innovation – the three areas on which the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) advises – can each serve as a source of knowledge and expertise for policy and politicians. It is vital that this knowledge and expertise is used to the full in the coming years, as society is facing many of complex societal and social challenges. Think of topics such as sustainability, the growing divisions in society, and of course the prevention and combating of pandemics. Then there are the societal opportunities and risks presented by new technologies such as artificial intelligence and bioscience.

However, knowledge does not automatically feed into political decisions and policy. Political decisions also involve weighing different, sometimes conflicting, values and goals. Additionally, scientists and other parties supply knowledge and expertise in a diversity of fields and pursue different goals (education versus economy versus care). It is precisely because the relationship between knowledge and policy is never straightforward that attention is needed for developing sound, structured ways of ensuring the systematic utilisation of knowledge in policy. Policy and political decisions are always better if they are robustly underpinned with relevant knowledge.

Despite their self-evident importance, the attention devoted to knowledge and expertise in the system of government and politics is declining. Increasingly, more time and energy is being devoted to short-term issues, to accountability and to incidents. Government ministries and executive agencies today have to develop and implement policy at pace. Despite the many highly trained people who work there, they lack sufficient substantive expertise and the ability to challenge prevailing ideas, and have too little scope to develop their own knowledge and expertise. The steps taken by the government to improve the utilisation of knowledge in policy are good ones, but are as yet insufficiently structured and methodical. Parliament, also, is not building up enough substantive knowledge and expertise.

Effective, efficient and feasible government policy requires a climate in which policymakers and politicians base their proposals more, and more effectively, on knowledge and expertise.

AWTI advises the government and Parliament to take four steps in the near term in order to improve the situation:

- ▶ Nurture knowledge and subject experts and reduce the pace of rotation of policy staff, directors and senior civil servants at ministries and executive agencies.
- ▶ Enrich the knowledge base at government ministries and executive agencies; make sure there are enough possibilities to challenge prevailing thinking.
- ▶ Develop a structured approach designed to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, including the development of a national policy lab.
- ▶ Develop a robust parliamentary expertise centre.

The background features a complex geometric pattern of triangles. A large maroon triangle is at the top, pointing downwards. Below it, a dark blue triangle points upwards. In the center, there are two overlapping triangles: a smaller maroon one pointing down and a light blue one pointing up. The bottom half of the page is dominated by a large white triangle pointing upwards, which is set against a dark blue background. The text 'Advisory Report' is centered in the upper maroon section.

Advisory Report

Background: Gaps in knowledge create problems for government

The Netherlands is a country rich in knowledge, but there are problems in ensuring that government policy is properly informed by that knowledge. As a result, the Netherlands is missing out on opportunities to make policy more effective and improve its public services – at a time when the country faces complex societal challenges and numerous crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite recent steps taken by government and parliament towards better utilisation of knowledge, there is still a long way to go. Which next steps are necessary? How can government ministries, their executive agencies and parliament become powerful links between the knowledge and innovation system on the one hand and politics and policy on the other?

1.1 Signs that the flow of knowledge does not benefit policy

The government and parliament regularly receive indications that knowledge is delivering insufficient benefit to legislation and policy, and consequently to better public services. Lack of knowledge and underutilisation of knowledge play a role in problems with policy and policy implementation, for example around digitalisation, in the nitrogen crisis, the childcare benefits scandal and the COVID-19 crisis.¹ This means that political debates and policy proposals are often incomplete, because not all opportunities, possibilities, risks and societal values are taken into account. Moreover, if knowledge about ‘what works’ does not feed into policy, this results in less effective and workable policies than possible .

In 2020 specifically there were numerous indications that knowledge was failing to hit the mark. In May, a Parliamentary inquiry into digitalisation concluded that Parliament knows too little about the subject, despite the enormous flow of knowledge on this topic.² In September, teams of scientists studied three legislative proposals at the request of the House of Representatives.

¹ The Netherlands is certainly not alone in this. Recently, for example, 35 European cities working together in the City Science Initiative drew attention to the need for a better relationship between knowledge and policy. See https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/sites/jrccties/files/csi_report2020_def.pdf

² Final report of the Temporary Committee on the Digital Future (Tijdelijke Commissie Digitale toekomst) (May 2020).

They concluded that the goals were unclear and that the scientific basis on which policy choices were made was limited.³ In December the Parliamentary inquiry into the problems surrounding childcare benefits found among other things that the government had opted for an ‘all or nothing’ approach, which did not follow directly from the legislation and which received predominantly negative reviews in the scientific literature.⁴ These inquiries also revealed that MPs, ministers and civil servants often devote too little attention during the policy development process to the feasibility and likely effectiveness of measures.⁵

Flawed knowledge utilisation in the COVID-19 crisis

The approach to tackling the COVID-19 crisis is an example of a slow reaction to knowledge and underutilisation of expertise. The wearing of face masks in public spaces was only made mandatory at the end of 2020, even though it was known as early as September that they can help combat the spread of infection.⁶ When developing a coronavirus app, too few genuine experts were initially brought in. The reports by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and the recommendations of the Outbreak Management Team (OMT) of medics and virologists are playing a leading role in tackling the pandemic. However, the government still does poorly in bringing in other areas of knowledge and experts to help tackle the pandemic, for example the recommendations of the ‘Red Team C19 NL’; this self-founded team has set itself the goal of issuing advice which presents an alternative view to the plans of the OMT, in a bid to avoid tunnel vision and blind spots.⁷

Whereas the Netherlands is a knowledge-intensive country...

All this is in stark contrast to another frequent observation, namely that the Netherlands is a knowledge-intensive country. Whether the subject is infrastructure, healthcare, education or agriculture, economic opportunities or societal challenges – science, technology and innovation have an essential role to play. Knowledge organisations at home and abroad provide a continuous flow of knowledge. The Netherlands can also draw on a wealth of international knowledge, including insights from the work of

³ Pilot project on scientific substantiation of policy (part of Operation ‘Insight into Quality’), Standing Finance Committee (2020), 8 September 2020 (annex to Parliamentary Papers II, 31865, no.176). Parliament has since developed a ‘science test’ for legislation and policy documents.

⁴ Final report of Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Childcare Benefits (December 2020).

⁵ The Parliamentary investigation by the Temporary Executive Agencies Committee was still ongoing at the time of publication of this report.

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>

⁷ The Red Team C19 NL most recently issued advice in October 2020, and recently observed that the strategy it advocates differs fundamentally from that of the government (CovidZero versus mitigation), and that it will add nothing by continuing to repeat that a different course is needed. See https://www.c19redteam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-02-04_-_Waar_is_het_RedTeam.pdf

European and international think tanks. And of course the Netherlands also has an extensive and first-rate research and innovation system and a system of autonomous strategic advisory councils to advise the government on legislation and policy.⁸

... and a good use of knowledge is sorely needed for evidence-based policy – including around transitions

Knowledge does not automatically feed into policy. Precisely for this reason, attention needs to be given to finding effective ways of utilising knowledge in policy. As became apparent in the COVID-19 crisis, many decisions about proposed courses of action did not directly mirror the available knowledge. That is partly due to the nature of scientific knowledge and the scientific method.

Scientific knowledge develops in phases; it starts with gathering lots of information and different theoretical perspectives and develops, often very slowly, into shared visions and consensus about principles and patterns which describe and explain reality.⁹ New knowledge often gives rise to new questions and new uncertainties.¹⁰ Scientists also develop knowledge and expertise in very different fields and accordingly focus on different and sometimes conflicting goals.

Given the complex societal challenges facing the Netherlands, it is particularly important that attention is devoted in the coming years to better use of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge, knowledge that is established in collaboration across different scientific disciplines and with broader society. Improving the present situation is essential for the progress of transitions such as: sustainability transitions, security issues, the need to reform the healthcare system, and of course the prevention and combating of pandemics.

Policy and political decisions are always better if they are underpinned with existing knowledge. Ideally, knowledge leads to a better insight into the problem or goal, into the relationship with other societal problems, norms and interests, and into the available solutions and their potential effects. Knowledge acquisition, knowledge-sharing and expertise-building provide a common substantive foundation underpinning the political debate, or at the very least offer analytical clarity.¹¹

However, the political process is fundamentally different from the scientific process. Knowledge and expertise are needed, but many decisions also involve weighing different, sometimes conflicting, values and goals. In the COVID-19 crisis, for example, there is a

⁸ See the framework law on advisory boards (Kaderwet adviescolleges).

⁹ ScienceGuide (2020); R. Bod (2019).

¹⁰ Lindblom (1959) and Lindblom & Cohen (1979).

¹¹ Slob & Staman (2012).

necessity to take measures to combat the spread of the virus, but also the desire to curtail the negative impact of those measures on society, for example sustaining the economy, keeping the education system running, safeguarding privacy and helping groups and individuals with specific needs and requirements. Knowledge is available in each of these domains which could be utilised to forge a well-considered approach.

Knowledge from science, technological literacy

Science, technology and innovation – the three areas on which AWTI advises – can each serve as a source of knowledge for policy and politicians. Science explores, describes, explains and tests reality and puts forward possibilities for change. Science can also describe and test the assumptions which underlie policy choices. It can substantiate those choices, but it can also debunk them and challenge established thinking.

The government also needs knowledge about technology and innovation in order to develop policy which exploits the opportunities they offer, provides guarantees for their safety and takes into account ethical and social aspects. An example is the use of face recognition; this technology offers both opportunities and risks: it allows people to be identified easily and accurately, but raises important questions about privacy and other human rights.

The Netherlands can boast first-rate knowledge organisations which deliver technological knowledge to government and politicians. However, government and politicians also need a degree of technological literacy themselves: in order to be able to weigh the value of external knowledge, in order not to be dependent on lobbyists, to be able to ask sensible questions of knowledge organisations and in order to arrive at realistic expectations about technology. Technology develops at a rapid pace, albeit not quite as rapidly as the almost constant succession of lists proclaiming the ‘ten technology trends for the coming year’ would have us believe. Key technologies take years to develop, and it is important that the government should broadly follow these developments.

At the same time, it is neither possible nor necessary for the government to have all knowledge about every technological development at its fingertips. Specific knowledge about the available technologies and technology-based innovations can be sought from external parties for each policy challenge. Knowledge about global technology developments and the strategies of other countries can also be periodically sought from specialist knowledge organisations.

1.2 Change needed, by building on earlier steps

The problems around use of knowledge in policy and politics are complex and concern society as a whole. The political processes of weighing different factors, decision-making

and control constitute a system with its own rules and shared culture. These are lengthy processes and change will come only gradually.¹²

To make better use of knowledge, the Netherlands needs a scientific system which takes serious steps towards open publication, which challenges scientists sufficiently and which gives them the scope to convey their knowledge to society, including the government. AWTI has previously argued in this context the importance of making the social mission of universities (including universities of applied sciences) explicit.¹³ Also, more ways must be found to identify and to the knowledge which is developed in society at large, for example through processes of social innovation and citizens science. This knowledge too must feed into policy. AWTI has already advised on these issues in several reports.¹⁴ This report addresses the question of what the government and parliament can do to improve the utilisation of knowledge.

Politicians and government have expressed a desire to make better use of knowledge, and have taken the first steps towards achieving this.

Operation 'Insight into Quality'

Government ministries and parliament are gradually working towards strengthening the input of knowledge into their work. The government is currently engaged in an operation entitled 'Insight into Quality' (see Box). This is not a simple challenge, and thus the operation has had many predecessors.¹⁵

Operation Insight into Quality

Parliament took the initiative in 2017 to gain more insight into the effectiveness of government policy and to strengthen the policy evaluation system.¹⁶ In response, the current government – the third cabinet under Prime Minister Mark Rutte launched Operation 'Insight into Quality'.¹⁷ The aim is to move in a series of small steps towards policy that is clear, understandable and feasible. To gain experience, fifteen departmental trial projects were set up in 2020, including a number of policy experiments.¹⁸ In addition, Operation Insight into Quality is intended to strengthen the

¹² Parkhurst (2017).

¹³ AWTI (2019).

¹⁴ AWTI (2014); AWTI (2017); AWTI (2019); AWTI (2020b).

¹⁵ Houppermans (2011).

¹⁶ Motion tabled by Member of Parliament Farid Azarkan (2017) on 31 May 2017 concerning Operation 'Insight into Quality' (Kamerstukken II, 34724, nr.15).

¹⁷ Coalition Agreement (Regeerakkoord) 2017-2021 VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie 'Vertrouwen in de toekomst' ('Confidence in the future'), p.20.

¹⁸ Letter to Parliament from the Minister of Finance (2020b) dated 3 August 2020 concerning the Third Progress Report on Operation Insight into Quality (Kamerstukken II, 31865, nr.169).

policy evaluation system by promoting continuous evaluation throughout the policy cycle. It has been agreed that each ministry will develop a Strategic Evaluation Agenda (SEA) for this purpose, which will look ahead over a period of three to four years and will be sent to the House of Representatives each year.

For some time it has been the norm for policy proposals to include a mandatory explanatory section which sets out the objectives plus an evidence-based substantiation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the policy.¹⁹ In practice, however, this explanatory note is often absent, or difficult for MPs to find. In a bid to resolve this, a pilot was run until the end of 2020 as part of the Operation, in which the substantiation was set out in a separate annex to the policy proposal. In addition, in order to improve the quality of the explanatory note, the House of Representatives recently developed a 'science test', where independent scientists examine the quality of the objectives and their substantiation and issue an opinion on the effectiveness of the policy proposals.

Existing instruments

As set out in the Box, the explanatory note underpinning the objectives and effectiveness of policy is a mandatory component of every government policy proposal (Section 3.1 of the Government Accounts Act). This is in line with the Integral Assessment Framework (IAK) for policy and regulations which the government has used since 2011. The Framework describes standards for good policy and good regulation, for example stipulating that policy objectives must be measurable, that measures must make a proven contribution to achieving those objectives and that policy must be subjected to monitoring and evaluation, preferably by an independent body. Following the recent childcare benefits scandal, the government has announced its intention of making better use of the Framework.²⁰

Evaluation research, knowledge organisations and the advisory system

Evaluation research has for some time been a structural element in the policy processes of the Dutch government.²¹ As stated, the Netherlands has a network of public knowledge organisations which also work for government ministries and parliament, as well as a

¹⁹ Pursuant to Section 3.1 of the Government Accounts Act 2016.

²⁰ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2021/01/15/kabinetsreactie-op-het-rapportongekend-onrecht>

²¹ Retrospective evaluation research is part of the policy process in the Netherlands. Policy reviews must be carried out every 4-7 years, with each policy article being reviewed on the basis of questions as set out in the Regulations on Periodic Evaluation (RPE).

network of independent testing and advisory bodies (such as the Netherlands Court of Audit and the Council of State) and a system of strategic advisory bodies.

1.3 Request for advice: What next?

The first steps have been taken. What steps need to follow? How can government ministries, their executive agencies and parliament become powerful links between the knowledge and innovation system on the one hand and politics and policy on the other?

This gives rise to the following requests for advice:

- ▶ **Which next steps should government and parliament take on the path to more utilisation of knowledge in policy processes?**
- ▶ **How can government ministries, executive agencies and parliament – and the people who work there – be better equipped to utilise knowledge in policy?**

Approach and guide to this report

In preparing this report, AWTI carried out desk research on topics including evidence-informed policy, knowledge management and the current knowledge position of government ministries and parliament. In addition, the Council held interviews with experts, members of parliament and policymakers. A list of the interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.

Definitions: knowledge, knowledge absorption, knowledge utilisation and expertise

For the purposes of this advisory report, AWTI defines knowledge as the entire body of facts and information, experiences, competencies, skills, theories, norms and values that enables someone to think or act.²² The Council aligns with the argumentation of Derksen (2011) who emphasises the added value of knowledge relative to information and facts.

Some knowledge can be expressed in language – this is explicit knowledge – and some cannot: implicit knowledge. The latter is knowledge that someone has in their head, heart and hands, as it were, in the way they do things. Knowledge can also be either individual or shared. Shared knowledge is contained in documents and

²² By adopting this pragmatic definition, AWTI is able to avoid the seemingly endless discussions about the nature and scope of the concept 'knowledge'.

databases, but also in work routines, rules and procedures, and organisational cultures.²³

AWTI defines 'knowledge absorption' as the process by which a person or organisation identifies, internalises and utilises relevant knowledge.²⁴ Knowledge utilisation is thus a component of knowledge absorption.

AWTI sees expertise as the entire body of knowledge and competence of a person or organisation. Competence here means the ability to convert knowledge into successful behaviour.

Project group and reviewers

This report was prepared by a project group comprising Council members Roshan Cools (chair), Tim van der Hagen and Marleen Stikker, and staff members Kathleen Torrance, Justien Dingelstad and Otilie Nieuwenhuis. Karin Wittebrood, independent researcher, also contributed to the report.

A draft version of the report was submitted to two external reviewers: Hans de Bruijn, Professor of Public Administration/Organisation and Management at Delft University of Technology and Caroline Nevejan, Chief Science Officer at the City of Amsterdam. They were asked to reflect on the consistency of the draft report and to pinpoint any omissions they observed. The reviewers' comments were incorporated in the final version of the report. Naturally, the report, the recommendations and the analyses remain the responsibility of AWTI.

Layout of the report

Chapter 2 opens with the heart of the matter: give top priority to knowledge in politics and policy. The chapter underpins this message by showing why this is necessary and where things are currently going wrong. Chapter 3 presents a number of recommendations suggesting what the government could do to improve its knowledge utilisation.

²³ Davenport & Prusak (2000) and AWTI (2016).

²⁴ AWTI (2016).

Advice: Give top priority to knowledge in policy and politics

The Netherlands must take the necessary steps towards creating a high-quality knowledge climate in government ministries, executive agencies and parliament. This is essential in a world which is continually creating new knowledge, which moreover rapidly becomes outdated. Developing effective, efficient and feasible government policy requires a climate in which policymakers and politicians base their proposals more, and more effectively, on knowledge and expertise. The government must also set an example in making good use of knowledge and expertise in a world where disinformation spreads like wildfire.

The world is creating and sharing more and more knowledge, which moreover rapidly becomes outdated. This is especially true where the topics at hand are complex. Moreover, disinformation travels incredibly quickly. The way in which the coronavirus crisis has been tackled has made plain that knowledge generally does not lead directly to policy; the political process is a crucial factor. Attention for knowledge and expertise ought to be a top priority within government, but is not. In fact, the gulf between policy and knowledge is growing ever wider, as section 2.1 illustrates.

The conditions for good use of knowledge in policy are not sufficiently present within national government. There is not enough substantive expertise within ministries and executive agencies, and too little time and attention is given to knowledge absorption and the ability to challenge accepted thinking. This is discussed in section 2.2.

The steps taken thus far by the government to improve the use of knowledge in policy are insufficiently structured and methodical. A structured approach incorporates instruments that help build a bridge between knowledge and policy, as well as steps in the policy process that lead to more and better knowledge utilisation.²⁵ This is discussed in section 2.3.

Parliament cannot perform its duties properly because it is insufficiently supported in the acquisition and application of knowledge. Although some improvements have been made, they are not enough. There is still a lack of knowledge across the breadth of parliament, especially as regards technological development. This is illustrated in section 2.4.

²⁵ Parkhurst (2017).

2.1 Need for careful knowledge absorption growing, but time and attention given to it diminishing

An interplay of developments in recent years has magnified the importance of careful knowledge absorption. The world is creating and sharing an increasing volume of knowledge, which does not always point in the same direction and which can often not be translated directly into policy choices. Knowledge quickly becomes outdated and new knowledge emerges rapidly, especially in areas which are technologically complex or wide-ranging. Moreover, disinformation travels incredibly quickly. Precisely at a time when knowledge utilisation should be a central focus, the attention for and valuing of knowledge and expertise at ministries and executive agencies is diminishing. Parliament also needs a stronger grip on knowledge and expertise.

Of course, even if knowledge absorption and utilisation improve, it will still be necessary to find compromises and socially acceptable middle ways when developing policy. The coronavirus crisis is a good example of this.

Nog enough attention for substantiating policy with knowledge

Politicians and policymakers are devoting more and more time and energy to striking compromises, holding ministers accountable and reacting to incidents, as the Dutch Council of State highlighted in a recent report on ministerial responsibility.²⁶ The compromises are encapsulated in detailed coalition agreements, which means the government is effectively hamstrung if, as new knowledge emerges, it wishes to strike out in different directions from those agreed earlier.. Thus, less time and attention is devoted to knowledge absorption than is necessary for well thought out, feasible legislation and policy. Subsequently, policy which is developed too hastily leads to execution problems. .

According to the Council of State, the role of civil servants is also changing. They are increasingly held publicly accountable (in the media) and committees of inquiry take their actions into account. This makes civil servants vulnerable, as they are not able to defend themselves in public. The increasing disclosure of official documents in the public domain, and of open digital communications, are relevant in this regard. Civil servants may feel they have less room to freely set down exchanges of ideas on paper, or to challenge prevailing ideas.²⁷ Civil servants are also increasingly becoming 'information brokers', following media messaging and organising media events, answering

²⁶ Raad van State (2020).

²⁷ The government reaction to the report 'Ongekend onrecht' ('Unprecedented injustice') announced that even more documents would be placed in the public domain.
<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2021/01/15/kamerbrief-met-reactiekabinet-op-rapport-ongekend-onrecht>

parliamentary questions and organising emergency debates and discussions with parliamentary committees. According to the Council of State, this is leading ministries to develop a 'different perspective', focused more on the short term and on 'sheltering' ministers, and less on robust analyses of policy missions and providing substantive advice to ministers.

2.2 Ministries and executive agencies have little time for knowledge and are too far removed from it

Against the backdrop of this political system and climate, ministries and executive agencies are having to develop and implement policy at a rapid pace. Just as in the political arena, the principal focus is firmly on the short term. There is much less time than in the past to reflect, absorb knowledge, develop a vision and build expertise. Where in the past ministries went through a lengthy process to arrive at long-term visions informed by knowledge, today they have to produce policy in a climate where they can look one, at most two, years ahead. More and more gaps are appearing in the knowledge base of ministries and executive agencies. Moreover, according to a study by the Rathenau Instituut, policy staff do not always know what knowledge is already present within their organisation;²⁸ knowledge held by colleagues is often difficult to find, and is therefore not properly valued or utilised. There is also a prevailing silo mentality, with compartmentalisation both between and within ministries, and with little interaction between policy directorates.

All this is partly the result of developments that have taken place since the 1990s, with successive administrations seeking to create a small, efficient government that could be run on more 'business-like' lines.²⁹ Knowledge acquisition has been increasingly pushed to the back burner as a result. Knowledge institutes which were previously embedded within ministries were hived off as autonomous organisations. The idea was that this would improve their performance, but it also changed the way staff within ministries think about knowledge, allowing the idea to take root that it is not by definition necessary to have all the knowledge they might need 'in-house', but that knowledge is a product that can simply be purchased to suit a particular purpose when needed.³⁰ This thinking in many cases led to subject experts at ministries being replaced by process experts, with ministries frequently buying in knowledge and expertise. The most recent report on the operation of government (Bedrijfsvoering Rijk 2019), for example, reports that in 2019

²⁸ Faasse et al (2020).

²⁹ This 'New Public Management' thinking gained popularity in the 1990s in the US, Australia, Western Europe and also the Netherlands. See also ROB (2020).

³⁰ Faasse et al (2020).

more than 15 percent of the staff of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science were hired in externally; the figure for the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate was 24 percent.³¹ This operating model ignores the fact that an organisation needs a solid, substantive basis of its own. It needs the capacity to requisition knowledge in the right way and to be able to absorb external knowledge. To do that it must be able to assess the value of that knowledge, linking it to what is already known, translating it to relevant policy contexts and relating it to its own expertise.³²

Parliament lacks grip on the amount of knowledge and the correct knowledge

The almost endless flow of knowledge means that policymakers, executive agency staff and directors have to understand more and more issues and manage more and more portfolios. Parliament also feels this tension between too much and too little knowledge. It expresses it as follows in the Final Report on the Digital Future ('Eindrapport Digitale Toekomst'):

"In recent years a growing number of agendas and monitors have been sent to the House of Representatives from a variety of ministries, advisory bodies and knowledge institutes. Yet despite this, the sense of grip and control has not increased. In fact, the integral weighing of interests is sometimes actually made more difficult by the volume of information bombarding the House and the sometimes technical material it contains. At the same time, as stated earlier, the House lacks information about the European digitalisation agenda and how it is arrived at. The tension between too much and too little information is particularly acute for technologically complex or wide-ranging topics, such as open data and eHealth".³³

2.3 Insufficient conditions for knowledge use and expertise-building at ministries and executive agencies

In order to be able to formulate knowledge-based policy proposals ministries and executive agencies at least need substantive expertise and sufficient time and space for knowledge acquisition, critical reflection, challenge/discussion and knowledge-building. All of these elements are under pressure.

³¹ Letter to Parliament from the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (2020c) dated 20 May and annex to Jaarrapportage Bedrijfsvoering Rijk, p. 21, Kamerstukken II, 31490, nr. 279.

³² AWTI (2016); Letter to Parliament from the Minister of Finance (2020a) dated 20 April 2020 on Brede maatschappelijke heroverweging 9 Innovatieve samenleving ('Broad Social Review 9 innovative society') (Kamerstukken II, 32359, nr. 4).

³³ Final report of Temporary Committee on the Digital Future (Tijdelijke Commissie Digitale toekomst) (2020), p.24

Subject expertise less valued than generic skills

Ministries and executive agencies need more subject expertise in-house to facilitate a fruitful translation of knowledge into policy. More and more highly educated people are working in government,³⁴ but in most cases they do not develop into subject experts, but are more likely to become process specialists. This reflects the emphasis in the HR policy of ministries and executive agencies on fostering generic and process expertise.³⁵ Such expertise is important for ministries and executive agencies, giving them the flexibility they need to fulfil their rapidly changing tasks and policy missions. However, the pendulum has now swung too far, which means they now do not have enough specialist knowledge to maintain their own knowledge absorption capacity and knowledge base.

The personnel policy for senior civil servants also places high value on generic skills such as strategic political insight and external communication.³⁶ There is an explicit career policy for this group of employees focusing on rapid job rotation.³⁷ In addition to providing flexibility, this meets the desire to keep senior civil servants from remaining in the same role for decades, reinforcing the silo mentality between departments and building up power to such a degree that they are able to cross the ministerial reporting lines. In the current system, after three years senior civil servants must think about what they would like to do next; after five years they should start looking for a new position, and after no more than seven years they must leave their present role. In practice, senior civil servants grasp the opportunities to change their work location earlier than this, leading to an average incumbency of just over four years. This higher turnover rate means senior civil servants are unable to develop sufficient substantive expertise in the policy portfolios for which they are responsible. As a consequence, they have difficulty recognising patterns in policy and regulation. The short length of stay in a role (and therefore the short-term focus on the policy portfolio) also makes it difficult to learn from mistakes.³⁸ Finally, it is

³⁴ In 2012, 46% of government staff had a higher education background; this had risen to 54% in 2018. More than 80% of school-leavers entering the civil service in 2017 were highly educated. See ICTU (2020). There are no figures relating specifically to ministries.

³⁵ Letter to Parliament accompanying the report on strategic government HR policy ('Rapport 'Strategisch personeelsbeleid Rijk 2025') (2018), dated 13 September 2018 (Kamerstukken II, 31490, nr. 243) and the accompanying report (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2018).

³⁶ Since 1995, the upper echelons of the civil service apparatus have been integrated across individual departments in the Senior Civil Service (Algemene Bestuursdienst (ABD)). This body is responsible for the recruitment, selection and career guidance of senior civil servants (salary scales 15 and above). The 80 most senior roles (senior management layer) come under the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

³⁷ Letter to Parliament from the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (2020b) dated 7 February 2020 accompanying the inquiry into the functioning of the Senior Civil Service (Onderzoek functioneren Algemene Bestuursdienst, bijlage 2 Feiten en cijfers Algemene Bestuursdienst – 2019 (Kamerstukken II, 31490, nr. 270).

³⁸ See also the blog (in Dutch) by Pierre Koning 'Ministeries: minder proces, meer inhoud graag' on the ESB website (November 2020).

difficult for senior civil servants to offer a counterweight to plans put forward by a minister if they lack sufficient knowledge of the policy domain in question. In a recent reaction to the report of the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Childcare Benefits, the government emphasised that more attention needs to be given to subject expertise at the top of the civil service.³⁹

The problem of diminishing expertise is exacerbated by the difficulty in filling certain vacancies, especially for specialists.⁴⁰ There are shortages of ICT and data specialists, financial specialists (procurement officers), medical officers, judges, fitters and engineers.⁴¹ Given these shortages, it is questionable whether there is sufficient breadth and diversity in the training backgrounds of professionals working for government, though no figures are available on this. The strategic HR policy focuses on in-service training for incumbent staff (for example in ICT), and less explicitly on recruiting people from diverse disciplines.⁴²

Too little time and scope to focus on knowledge and reflection

Ministries and the people who work there ideally absorb knowledge by commissioning studies and policy experiments, studying literature themselves and talking to experts. They acquire and internalise knowledge by sharing and discussing it with colleagues and contacts, by interweaving new knowledge with what they already know and by looking for the action perspectives that stem from that knowledge. Civil servants then use the knowledge they have processed in this way to formulate legislative and policy proposals; in other words, they translate it into draft policies, measures, government services and products.

However, policy staff appear to find it increasingly difficult to contribute their own expertise and opinions into policy processes in this way.⁴³ The present political climate offers too little time and scope for in-depth problem analysis and for discussions about policy strategy and frameworks. The ability to think through innovative options is being squeezed, as is the ability to compare and weigh policy options and carry out policy experiments which test in advance whether a particular policy will work as intended. Critical reflection, internal debate and challenging ideas are essential for the creation of

³⁹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2021/01/15/kabinetsreactie-op-het-rapportongekend-onrecht>

⁴⁰ In a survey of more than 6,700 businesses and other organisations, employers within the government sector reported that 31% of vacancies were difficult to fill. UWV report Maurits & Van Brakel (2018).

⁴¹ Hulzebosch, Jonkhart & Maarl (2017).

⁴² See note 37.

⁴³ Schillemans (2019) and the accompanying interview by Notebomer and De Bruin (2019). <https://www.uu.nl/agenda/oratie-thomas-schillemans-denkend-bestuur>; Herold (2017).

high-quality policy, but they are becoming less the norm and are sometimes actively discouraged.⁴⁴

Too little knowledge-sharing and development, despite efforts

The problems around knowledge use remain, despite the efforts made by ministries and executive agencies towards better embedment of knowledge within their organisations. Ministries now have knowledge departments and roles such as Chief Science Officer and knowledge coordinators. They have special arrangements such as (strategic) knowledge and innovation agendas, and have structures in place to regulate their relationship with knowledge organisations. Ministries set off research, organise activities such as lunchtime lectures and knowledge festivals, and develop knowledge through periodic evaluations.

However, despite the policy of job rotation, the knowledge thus accrued does not flow freely through ministries and to other ministries.⁴⁵ Knowledge too often remains locked in the heads of individuals and disappears over time and as staff leave. Partly because of this, ministries and executive agencies are no longer able to build and retain a shared knowledge base and institutional memory around the policy missions on which they are engaged – a resource on which they need to be able to draw for policy development.⁴⁶

In interviews held by the Rathenau Instituut with policy staff, the respondents said that knowledge held by colleagues is often hard to find or consult, partly because of the internal silo mentality within policy directorates, leading to a lack of mutual interaction.⁴⁷ As a result, it is insufficiently clear what knowledge is available in-house. Policy staff also find it difficult to keep abreast of knowledge developed at other ministries. They also lack knowledge about how a policy might turn out in practice, because contacts with executive agencies are not well organised. There is a yawning gulf between researchers and policymakers (a problem that in fact also applies for other countries). The two groups do not always come together, or at least at the right time, or they find themselves talking at cross purposes.⁴⁸ And where there is a depth of knowledge and experience in a given policy domain, it is difficult for policy staff to select the right, most up-to-date or relevant information.

The Council aligns with the call by the Rathenau Instituut for more transdisciplinary collaboration in knowledge production between policy staff, scientists and experts from

⁴⁴ Raad van State (2020). Unsolicited report on ministerial responsibility.

⁴⁵ On the importance of knowledge-sharing, see also Depassé & La Roi (2009).

⁴⁶ For a description of the importance of this, see e.g. Cohen & Levinthal (1990), Depassé & La Roi (2009) and Weggeman (1997).

⁴⁷ Faasse et al (2020).

⁴⁸ Parkhurst (2016) also devotes attention to 'bridging the gap between research and policy', based on a report by the United Nations; see UNCTAD (2006).

relevant civil-society organisations.⁴⁹ It will generally be easier to link knowledge established in this way with policy, because the collaborating parties have to come to a shared definition of the policy mission and the knowledge that needs to be developed. This contrasts with the traditional methodology, in which the path from knowledge to policy based on a 'linear model':⁵⁰ the policy determines the questions asked, researchers provide the answer and the policy determines what is done with it. In the co-production model, policymakers and researchers work together as much as possible. They formulate research questions together, draw conclusions together and work together to translate the research findings into policy options. Both models have their advantages and disadvantages, with 'impartiality' being the core concept in the traditional knowledge utilisation model and 'collaboration' in the co-production model. The latter model requires a clear distribution of responsibilities, as also emphasised by the Rathenau Instituut.

2.4 Inadequate organisation of knowledge utilisation

The way in which knowledge feeds into policy is insufficiently structured. A structured approach incorporates tools and steps in the policy process which lead to more knowledge utilisation and good use of knowledge, or 'good governance of evidence'.⁵¹ In the current situation, there is a particular lack of systematic attention for a number of key intermediate steps on the path from knowledge to policy: (1) knowledge debate and weighing of evidence; (2) design knowledge; and (3) policy pilots and policy testing. These issues are discussed further below.

Knowledge debate and weighing of evidence insufficiently organised

Substantive debate and weighing the nuances in the available knowledge should always take place before knowledge is utilised in policy. This debate focuses on the uncertainties in the available knowledge, the things that are unknown or not yet known. What social interests are represented by the knowledge? Are these reflected in policy proposals? Policy generally encompasses several social issues and interests, for each of which different knowledge may be useful and relevant. One study may for example suggest that artificial intelligence offers solutions for the overburdened healthcare system, while another demonstrates that AI algorithms discriminate.

It is essential that all relevant knowledge is weighed and that there is sufficient discussion about what constitutes relevant knowledge and what does not. This will avoid the creation of policy based on incorrect, wrongly interpreted, inadequate or irrelevant knowledge.

⁴⁹ Faasse et al (2020).

⁵⁰ E.g. Talbot & Talbot (2015).

⁵¹ Parkhurst (2017).

Debate and weighing of knowledge also makes it more difficult for individuals and groups to abuse relevant knowledge, for example by selectively seeking out knowledge which confirms their own ideas and proposals rather than using systematic reviews. And it makes it more difficult to use knowledge that has not been subjected to critical scrutiny (fact-checking/peer-review).

In seeking to ensure that the knowledge debate is well organised, policymakers could look to the world of science, which possesses powerful methods and processes to ensure that knowledge-building processes are carried out adequately. In the current COVID-19 crisis, for example, science has consistently embraced its vulnerability and shown that there are many unknowns, with scientists being free to contradict each other and if necessary themselves in order to build a progressive understanding together.

Too little attention for design

Design research with accompanying design strategies and methodologies is an emerging science which can lead to transdisciplinary knowledge that can be fed directly into the policy process. This discipline is still in the throes of development and it is therefore not surprising that it has yet to acquire a permanent place in government policy development. Thinking in terms of design has added value for complex societal problems which cannot be addressed by a single group of stakeholders or with a single type of knowledge. Design research is aimed at creating a structured link between the knowledge and expertise of different parties and from different sources in order to arrive at shared knowledge and action perspectives. A widely used approach in design research is the 'double diamond' method devised by the UK Design Council.⁵² This method distinguishes four phases in the design process which the Netherlands Court of Audit defines as follows:⁵³

- ▶ Discover. Diverging: gather and discover as much relevant information as possible.
- ▶ Define. Converging: make a choice from the information gathered in the discovery phase.
- ▶ Develop. Diverging: think of and develop all possible solutions.
- ▶ Discover. Converging: Make a choice that leads to results.

Design research has recently been attracting more attention in research by universities and universities of applied sciences, from civil-society organisations such as the Netherlands Court of Audit and from various public authorities. The creative sector is a key player in developing the strategies and methodologies that can be used during the

⁵² <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/double-diamond-universally-accepted-depictiondesign-process>

⁵³ See <https://www.rekenkamer.nl/over-de-algemene-rekenkamer/werkwijze/innovatie/design-auditstudio/ontwerpend-onderzoek>

design process, for example strategies to establish shared goals, ways of exploring policy goals from different perspectives or methodologies to depict and visualise the preferred outcomes.⁵⁴ A lot of attention is being given at international level to ways in which design can contribute to political decision-making processes.⁵⁵ Ministries would also do well to develop knowledge about ways of improving knowledge utilisation in policy through design.

Policy pilots insufficiently positioned

Provided they are properly set up, policy pilots in which proposed policies are tested on a small scale can help bridge the gulf between knowledge and policy. This is currently only occasional practice in the Netherlands. Policy pilots can take the form of policy experiments; these are gaining in popularity across the world, especially in economic and innovation policy.⁵⁶ They exist in several forms, with the 'original' format being the **controlled experiment** as traditionally used in the natural and medical sciences. In this type of experimentation, researchers create an experimental and a control group based on random sampling. The experimental group undergoes a policy intervention (treatment). Researchers then measure the difference in results between the two groups and thus the effect of the policy intervention. The Nesta Innovation Growth lab plays a leading role in the development of policy experiments of this kind.⁵⁷

Controlled experiments are a 'gold standard' for many researchers, but in policy practice they are generally not feasible. The social reality is limited to manipulation, and ethical questions can arise concerning the unequal treatment of the two groups: is it acceptable to exclude a control group from a potentially helpful intervention? It is moreover often difficult to generalise the results of tightly set up experiments, because the uncertainty remains about what will happen if the intervention is applied on a larger scale, and for example if the target group changes. Practical objections to the use of experiments are that they are generally expensive and time-consuming. The value of such persuasive evidence could be particularly great for 'protracted' policy issues.⁵⁸

It is sometimes possible to perform a **natural experiment** with policy. This is where a situation already exists in reality which automatically creates an experimental group and a

⁵⁴ See Bason (2014); and Click.nl (2019). Also gebruikercentraal.nl, a platform (in Dutch) which for many years has called for users to be given an explicit role in the design of public services.

⁵⁵ Bason (2014).

⁵⁶ Banerjee & Duflo (2019). This idea has also been under consideration for some time in the Netherlands. See e.g. Cornet & Webbink (2004). This makes reference to several reports calling for more policy experiments. See also the ESB New Year article 2017 'Durf te leren' by the former Secretary-General at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate, Maarten Camps.

⁵⁷ <https://www.innovationgrowthlab.org/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/publicaties/download/lerend-beleid-het-versterken-vanbeleid-door-experimenteren-en-evalueren.pdf>

control group. Only the experimental group has undergone a particular intervention, for example a measure for which only people above a certain age are eligible. Researchers measure the difference between the two groups and determine what proportion of the effects can be ascribed to the policy intervention.

In practice, many policy pilots will be set up in a much less stringent way, but their quality will increase as expertise develops. Policy pilots can also be developed in a 'living lab' setting. The advantage of this is that living labs bring several different forms of knowledge and expertise to bear on an issue. To date, living labs have been used mainly to arrive at practical solutions for local problems.⁵⁹

2.5 Parliament has too little substantive support

Parliament is at the heart of our democracy. However, the Dutch House of Representatives is inadequately equipped to properly perform its most important task – scrutinising the actions of the government. The House receives too little support in acquiring and applying knowledge. Although steps have been taken in recent years to address this,⁶⁰ more is needed to create a strong knowledge and research function which enables parliament to make genuine use of the wealth of knowledge that is developed in the Netherlands and elsewhere. In particular, there is a need for knowledge across parliament in relation to topics which all standing parliamentary committees have to deal with, especially those relating to technological development.

Parliament at an international disadvantage in terms of support

More and longer-term investment is needed in the House of Representatives as an institution to enable MPs to make genuine use of available knowledge and expertise in fulfilling their duties. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, have surrounded their parliaments – sometimes for centuries – with every possible form of support: extensive facilities, splendid libraries and reading rooms in which MPs can reflect quietly on matters.⁶¹ By doing so, these countries create a culture in which knowledge acquisition

⁵⁹ <https://www.rathenau.nl/nl/vitale-kennisecosystemen/living-labs-vooral-nog-lokale-beloftes>

⁶⁰ See 'Kennis en onderzoek in de kamer' on the House of Representatives website: (<https://www.tweedekamer.nl>). <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerleden-en-commissies/kennisen-onderzoek-de-kamer>

⁶¹ In the United Kingdom, for example, for 200 years there has been a House of Commons Library employing 150 staff, as well as a House of Lords Library employing a further 30 staff. They serve both as libraries and as knowledge institutes for Parliament. Each of the four nations making up the United Kingdom also has its own parliamentary knowledge department. Other countries also have similar Parliamentary Libraries, such as Germany, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. In addition, for the last 30 years the UK has had a (unique) Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), which can be used by both Houses. POST has eight advisers and offers posts to doctoral research graduates and fellows.

and utilisation are at the heart of policy and decision-making, a culture which they sustain long-term.

The Netherlands has some ground to make up on this point. There are no extensive facilities and knowledge departments to assist Dutch Members of Parliament. Such an investment should not be seen as additional funding of MPs and parliamentary parties, as it is sometimes portrayed.⁶² Rather, it is a long-term investment in the House as an **institution**. AWTI accordingly aligns with the various parties who have recently recommended that parliament's research and knowledge function be strengthened.⁶³ Over time, this will contribute to better use of knowledge, more efficient and more effective government policy and a better service to citizens. Ultimately it will also lead to a reduction in costs, because there will be fewer delays in implementing projects, fewer mistakes to rectify, and fewer parliamentary and other committees needed to identify those mistakes.

Steps have been taken in recent years to improve the position of knowledge

Parliamentarians can draw on civil service support if they wish to table a bill, amendment or motion. The House can commission its own research or seek external advice and has its own Analysis and Research Department (DAO) (see Box). This Department acts as a source of knowledge for the House, coordinates parliamentary research and answers questions from parliamentary committees. New members undergo an induction programme and the DAO organizes knowledge-sharing with scientists in roundtable discussions, breakfast sessions and its own annual mini-symposium. This more intensive collaboration between parliament and the world outside is leading to an increase in the number of scientific publications and network surveys commissioned by parliament.⁶⁴

The Analysis and Research Department (DAO) and the parliamentary committees

The DAO is tasked with analysing, structuring and processing information to generate knowledge that is directly relevant for the parliamentary process. It does this among other things by advising committees and rapporteurs during the budgetary and accountability cycle, by performing and commissioning research, coordinating parliamentary surveys and maintaining relationships with knowledge providers.

⁶² Plenary report 'Kamer spreekt over eigen begroting' ('House debates own budget') (2019) dated 21 November.

⁶³ See e.g. Final report of Staatscommissie parlementair stelsel (2018), ROB (2020); and Van den Berg, Heringa & Schinkelshoek (2017).

⁶⁴ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal (2020).

Since 2016, the standing parliamentary committees have also been focusing more clearly on knowledge. In addition to the competitive political process, they are attempting to operate as 'knowledge units'. To achieve this, each committee has its own staff consisting of a clerk and deputy clerk, knowledge coordinators, an EU specialist, an information specialist and one or more committee assistants. Since 2019, each standing committee has had a knowledge agenda. Members of Parliament must therefore be willing and able to operate as a knowledge unit in a way that goes beyond party interests and political differences. The various committees put this into practice in different ways.

The knowledge coordinators come under the DAO and provide substantive advice to Members of Parliament. They also maintain working relationships with knowledge organisations and seek to improve the access of reports by those organisations into parliament.

The DAO coordinates the 'Parliament and Science' partnership, a structure fostering collaboration with several knowledge and interest organisations from the world of science. The aim is to ensure more structured contacts and establish 'rights of access' to scientific knowledge. To date, this has happened in three ways: organising meetings between MPs and scientists; creating factsheets for debates; and carrying out network surveys (which relevant scientists are there in this field?).

There is also financial support for the individual parliamentary parties. The House of Representatives adopted a motion in 2019 to allocate an additional 10 million euros per annum for this support for both Houses (the Senate and the House of Representatives). The government has promised to implement this from 2021.⁶⁵ This will enable both Houses to take on additional staff,⁶⁶ mainly to support the parliamentary parties. Parliamentarians need customised support, in the form of staff who can translate knowledge into the principles and views of their own party.

This extra support is desperately needed. MPs have a heavy workload – too heavy according to many of them.⁶⁷ There are long days of meetings and hundreds of

⁶⁵ Motion tabled by Rob Jetten et al. on increasing the budget for support to parliamentarians and the subsidies to political parties (2019), 10 September 2019 (Kamerstukken II, 35300, nr. 19) and plenary report 'Kamer spreekt over eigen begroting' ('House debates own budget')(2019), 21 November 2019.

⁶⁶ Article at Parlement.com 'Motie aangenomen: Tweede Kamer krijgt meer financiële ondersteuning' (20 September 2019).

⁶⁷ De Joode (2019).

emergency and routine debates. On top of that there are mountains of reading matter, motions and series of questions to ministers. The pressure on Members of Parliament has increased due to social media and the direct contact with (potential) voters, experts and other critical citizens. Until recently, Members on average had one personal staff member and several staff shared with other parliamentary parties, paid from a fixed allowance for each Member.⁶⁸ Members rely mainly on their own networks for support. Members of large parliamentary parties with 20 or 30 MPs can divide up portfolios among Members and thus have more manpower than small parliamentary parties, in which one person has to manage several portfolios. Additionally, coalition parties, which receive a lot of knowledge via the government coalition, are generally in a better position in terms of knowledge than the opposition parties.

Updating of 'Kok Ukase' in progress

Until recently, the 'Instructions on external contacts by civil servants' (Aanwijzing externe contacten rijksambtenaren), drafted under the then Prime Minister Wim Kok in 1998 and referred to informally as the 'Kok Ukase' (Oekaze-Kok), were limited to the contacts between civil servants and Members of Parliament; however, they are now being updated.⁶⁹ The Instructions stipulate that if one of the two Houses of Parliament requests contact with civil servants, it is the relevant minister who decides whether that contact is permitted. As far as possible, contacts must take place in the presence of the minister, and in contacts with Members of Parliament, civil servants must restrict themselves to the facts. In practice, this means that the government has an information advantage over parliament, and within parliament that members of coalition parties have an information advantage over members of the opposition. Accordingly, MPs recently called for a review of the Instructions, for experiments with more factual information provision and more explanations to parliament by civil servants. The Minister of the Interior (Kajsa Ollongren) has indicated that the updated text will emphasise what is possible in those contacts rather than what is not possible.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Via the 'Regeling Financiële ondersteuning fracties 2014'.

⁶⁹ See 'Aanwijzing externe contacten rijksambtenaren'.

⁷⁰ See letter of presentation from the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations for the review of the instructions on external contacts by civil servants (Herziening Aanwijzing voor de externe contacten van rijksambtenaren) (2020a), 16 December 2020 (Kamerstukken II, 28844-221) and various news reports including Boonstra (October 2020), De Lange & Couwenbergh (November 2020) and Bekkers (December 2020).

Still not enough: the House lacks shared, international knowledge

The improvements made thus far are good, but are not enough. More knowledge is needed across parliament, in particular about technological developments and their impact. Attention needs to be given to building a parliamentary knowledge memory, on which members can draw and which enables new Members of Parliament to build on the work of their predecessors. More knowledge is also needed of methodologies such as policy experiments which could bridge the gulf between knowledge and policy (see section 2.3). The recent decision to install a Standing Parliamentary Committee on Digitalisation⁷¹ is praiseworthy, and illustrates the need to gain a better grip of the subject. It is unclear at this point whether this Committee will also look at knowledge acquisition in relation to key technologies with a less prominent digitalisation component, which are highly likely to have a fundamental impact on society and the economy in the future, such as nanotechnology, photonics, materials technology, advanced production technologies, chemical and life sciences technologies.⁷² It is of course impossible to set up a new committee for every issue which goes beyond the remit of the parliamentary committees, Where necessary, parliament will therefore have to continue the shared building of knowledge.

Societal challenges demand a multidisciplinary vision and practical knowledge. Most Members of Parliament and ministers have a legal, economic, administrative or historical training background; a smaller group have a background in the humanities or behavioural sciences. Knowledge of technology, medical knowledge and knowledge in fields such as agriculture is largely absent. Targeted substantive support could perhaps partially compensate for this imbalance.

An aside: the Senate is in a different position as regards knowledge

In gathering knowledge from the government, the Upper Chamber of the Dutch Parliament (the Senate), to some extent has the same powers as the House of Representatives. There is a right of interpolation, a right of inquiry, a right to table motions and a right to submit written questions to the government. A Senate committee can also consult verbally with a minister. To garner expert knowledge, the Senate organises regular expert meetings, talks to provincial authorities and maintains international parliamentary contacts. Senate members sometimes undertake working visits and draw knowledge from their own networks. The Senate

⁷¹ Following the recommendation to this effect in the final report of the Temporary Committee on the Digital Future (Tijdelijke commissie Digitale toekomst) (2020).

⁷² See AWTI (2020a).

also has a 'Content Directorate' which provides Senate committees and members with substantive support on specific topics.

AWTI has not received any indications to suggest that the Senate falls short in its knowledge acquisition. This may be related to the fact that members of the Senate have fewer tasks than their colleagues in the House of Representatives: members of the Senate spend one day per week in the House, whereas members of the House of Representatives are occupied full-time. Their part-time roles enable members of the Senate to have greater contact with the practical field, and they are therefore better able to follow and interpret developments in their portfolios. The task of the Senate is to react to legislative proposals. This requires sufficient knowledge to assess the quality of submitted proposals, and is more focused than the broad knowledge needed by members of the House of Representatives.

Four recommendations for giving priority to knowledge and expertise in government policy

AWTI advises government and parliament to take concrete steps in the forthcoming government term to improve the use of knowledge and expertise in the development of policy. Both substantive and methodological knowledge and expertise need to be more firmly embedded in policy processes and in the work of parliament, ministries and executive agencies. The Council makes four recommendations in this regard.

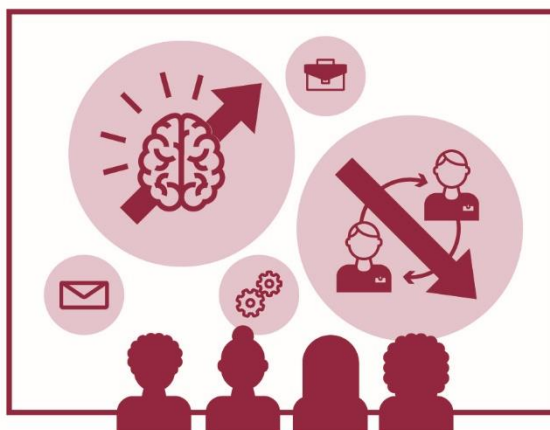
As the analysis used in preparing this advisory report shows (chapter 2), attention will need to be given in the next government term to more and better utilisation of knowledge in policy and politics. The effect of this will be to strengthen the knowledge climate in government ministries, executive agencies and parliament. In a climate such as this, policy development and testing are automatically accompanied by knowledge absorption and the development of knowledge and expertise, over an extended period. Among other things, this requires sufficient time and space for substantive debate and reflection and for finding ways of bridging the gap between knowledge and policy and between knowledge and policy execution. This will gradually create a more fertile ground for building knowledge and expertise and put government and politicians in a better position to learn from and about policy. This in turn can enable the knowledge and innovation system, and the system of advisory councils, to increase their impact. Ultimately, all of this will lead to more effective and more efficient policy and to better service delivery to the citizen.

AWTI makes four recommendations to government and Parliament for actions which will help create a high-quality knowledge climate:

- ▶ Nurture subject experts and reduce the pace of rotation of policy staff, directors and senior civil servants at ministries and executive agencies.
- ▶ Enrich the knowledge base at government ministries and executive agencies and improve the internal ability to challenge prevailing thinking.
- ▶ Develop a structured approach to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy.
- ▶ Develop a stronger parliamentary expertise centre.

Recommendation: Nurture subject experts and reduce rotation

- 1** Recommendation
Nurture subject experts and reduce rotation.



3.1 Recommendation 1: Nurture subject experts and reduce rotation

Give subject experts specific tasks and also recruit specialists

Ministries and executive agencies should nurture their subject experts, knowledge-rich policy staff and long-standing policy staff with knowledge of portfolios. HR policy should stress the importance of knowledge-building and expertise development in addition to the importance of broad employability, political sensitivity and networking skills. Expertise once again needs to be explicitly incorporated in the recruitment and appraisal policy. Also recruit specialists and ensure that, once they are in post, they stay up to date and deepen their expertise. Provide career growth opportunities from policy expert to senior positions such as Chief Science Officer.

Adopt a more flexible approach to the job rotation policy for policy staff

A customised approach is called for. The benefits and potential risks of rotation for the knowledge base and for knowledge absorption should be weighed per team and per case. The aim should be teams with a mix of experienced heads and new, fresh thinkers. Make clear that it is important to retain experts for longer if they are important for a

department or organisation, and seek to create a climate in which they do not feel obliged to change roles rapidly.

Adjust the rotation policy for senior civil servants so they change roles less frequently

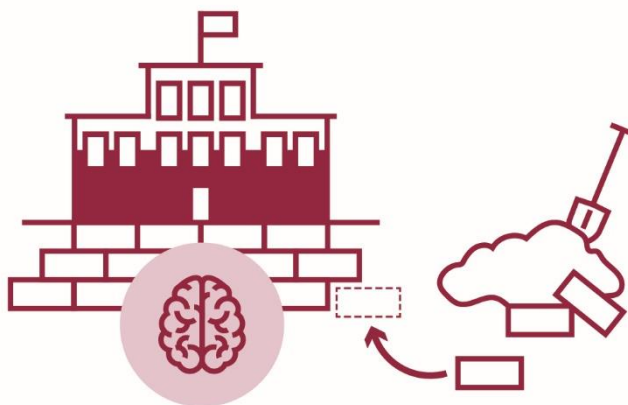
At present, senior civil servants remain in post for an average of just over four years; that is too short to build up expertise on policy portfolios. AWTI proposes that a minimum term of seven years should be regarded as the appropriate moment to begin looking for a new role.⁷³ Only after nine or ten years is rotation preferable to remaining in situ, in order to avoid the risk then of developing a silo mentality and of senior civil servants becoming 'part of the furniture' on whom ministers can lean.⁷⁴

Recommendation: Enrich the knowledge base and encourage a challenging mentality

2

Recommendation

Enrich the knowledge base and encourage a challenging mentality.



⁷³ This would replace the present 3-5-7 policy: after three years starting to think about what you would like to do next, after five years looking for a new role, and after a maximum of seven years moving to a new post.

⁷⁴ This is AWTI's own assessment; we are not aware of any research on the relationship between length of service and the performance of senior civil servants.

3.2 Recommendation 2: Enrich the knowledge base; encourage a challenging mentality

Organise multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity

Addressing the complex challenges facing our society demands an approach that draws on multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge. To be able to utilise this knowledge for policy development, ministries and executive agencies must themselves possess multidisciplinary knowledge. Knowledge procured from outside an organisation is only useful if the organisation is able to relate that knowledge to what is already known and what is still unknown.⁷⁵ Knowledge and data therefore need to be built up regarding the training profile of the staff at the different ministries. Given the current pressures on the labour market, it is also uncertain whether the government has sufficient policy staff who are trained in fields such as the exact or medical sciences. Investigate whether these or other training profiles are scarce and take targeted steps towards increasing multidisciplinary diversity.

Ministries also need to have sufficient feelers out in society, as well as ways of working together with society in obtaining transdisciplinary knowledge. AWTI has previously recommended that a new network be set up for this purpose consisting of linked transformative coalitions.⁷⁶

Strengthen the institutional memory

It is important that ministries and executive agencies have sufficient institutional memory: policy staff, directors and senior civil servants must collectively know enough about what has gone before, what policy has been pursued previously, what knowledge was developed, say, four years ago, how it was utilised and what the considerations were. Only then can new employees and teams build on the work of their predecessors. Ministries and executive agencies must take steps to improve their information management by systematically mapping which knowledge is collectively held within their organisation. They should in any event create a single digital locus where published reports from externally outsourced research can be readily accessed and consulted by people within and outside the organisation. An example of how this could be done is the open research platform operated by the City of Amsterdam.⁷⁷

Earmark a proportion of working time for knowledge

Give more policy staff explicit tasks in relation to knowledge development, knowledge-sharing and translating knowledge into policy and implementation choices. Devote a

⁷⁵ See literature review in AWTI (2016).

⁷⁶ AWTI (2020b).

⁷⁷ <https://openresearch.amsterdam/>

proportion of working time to this. Also set aside a portion of senior civil servants' time for the development of knowledge on the portfolios for which they are responsible. Direct part of the training towards this. The Senior Civil Service and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations⁷⁸ should test not only process skills and people skills, but also knowledge. Where necessary, it should be made mandatory for senior civil servants to follow subject-specific training.

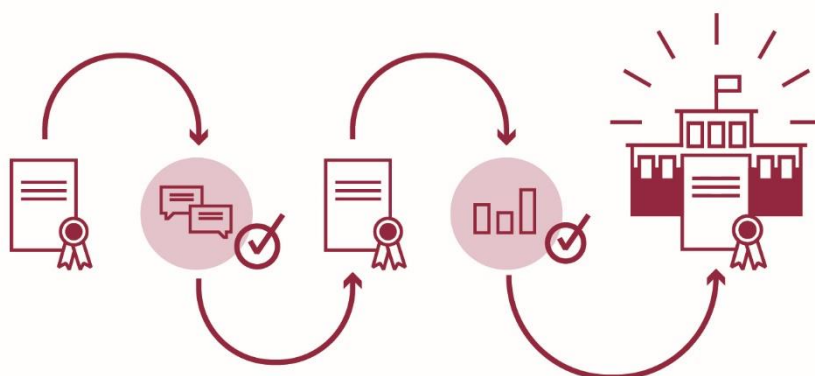
Ensure the giving feedback and challenging ideas are automatic

Government should ask ministries and executive agencies to work on creating a climate in which available knowledge is critically scrutinised and in which challenge and debate are valued and utilised. The scientific method can serve as an example here. Giving feedback and challenging fellow scientists are at the heart of the scientific process. That should also apply for the processes of policy development and implementation at ministries and executive agencies.

Recommendation: Develop a structured approach

3 Recommendation

Develop a structured approach.



⁷⁸ The approximately 80 most senior civil service roles constitute the senior management group comprising Secretaries-General (and their deputies), Director-Generals, Inspectors-General, managers of large executive agencies, directors of policy advisory bodies, etc. They are not employed by the Senior Civil Service, but by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

3.3 Recommendation 3: Develop a structured approach – and a national policy lab – to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy

Continue with Operation Insight into Quality

The next government should continue with Operation Insight into Quality. Develop an approach in which intermediate steps in the process from knowledge to policy are better positioned within the policy process. As part of this, work towards good governance of evidence. Devote attention as a minimum to three elements that are necessary in bridging the gap between knowledge and policy, and which currently receive too little attention (see section 2.4):

- ▶ (1) Knowledge debate and weighing the value and scope of knowledge.
- ▶ (2) Design strategies and methodologies.
- ▶ (3) Policy pilots.

Set up a national policy lab for experimentation

Establish a national policy lab as a centre for collaboration and experimentation for policy staff from different ministries, together with scientists and stakeholders from the wider community, following the example of the labs and future centres in many other countries,⁷⁹ such as the former MindLab in Denmark and the What Works Centres in the United Kingdom⁸⁰ (see Box). AWTI has previously called for the creation of such a work and experimentation centre for government policy,⁸¹ and is doing so once again here.

Government ministries are already increasingly working together in coalitions, communities and interdepartmental programmes. Policy staff have for some time been able to engage with varying coalitions based on shared issues, in order to focus on policy missions and policy development. In these coalitions they can talk about the issues, develop knowledge and look in depth at policy options together with scientific and civil-society partners, and explore the possibilities offered by policy experiments and design research. They subsequently return to their own ministry armed with a new arsenal of knowledge and action perspectives.

A further key task of the policy lab is to promote interdepartmental debate based on different knowledge domains. This can be done in collaboration with civil-society partners and scientists, for whom debate and challenge are intrinsic to what they do. The lab should be briefed with working with scientists to launch a 'debate project', comprising a

⁷⁹ See also Herold (2017).

⁸⁰ See also the What Works Centres in the UK.

⁸¹ AWTI (2018).

series of debates around the observation that knowledge does not automatically lead to policy (see section 2.3).

Civil-society actors and a broad, multidisciplinary group of experts, including not just policy staff, but also ethics specialists, social scientists, exact scientists, medics, etc., should all be involved in the development of the policy lab. The National Innovation Community (RIC)⁸² should also be involved in setting up and developing this expertise hub.

Policy labs or centres for design, experimentation and/or innovation

These are network organisations set up by government with the task of promoting innovative working methods in government and in policy. Their specific tasks depend on the purpose for which they are set up. They may be intended to develop innovative solutions or to test, implement and disseminate them. Or they may be tasked with involving the community in government policy formulation, or to set in motion systemic or other changes within government. Typical of innovation labs is that they apply innovative methods, sometimes in combination with traditional approaches.

A well-known example is MindLab in Denmark. It was founded in 2002 by the Danish Ministry of Economic Affairs and wound up again in 2017 under a different political administration. It began as a platform for creative thinking within the Ministry and developed into a physical hub for government innovation which was imitated worldwide. The focus of its work evolved from designing solutions for societal problems to embedding policy experiments and other innovative working methods in government policy.

Also worthy of mention in this regard is the What Works Network which has been developed over the last five years in the United Kingdom. The ten centres which now form part of this network were set up and developed to ensure that knowledge (evidence) is at the heart of policy development and public services. The centres develop new ways of building evidence about working methods used in sectors such as safety, education, local economic growth and social care.⁸³

⁸² The National Innovation Community (Rijks Innovatie Community – RIC) is a growing network of innovators within the civil service. Anyone who is interested in innovation and works at a ministry, executive agency, Inspectorate or autonomous administrative authority can become a member of RIC.

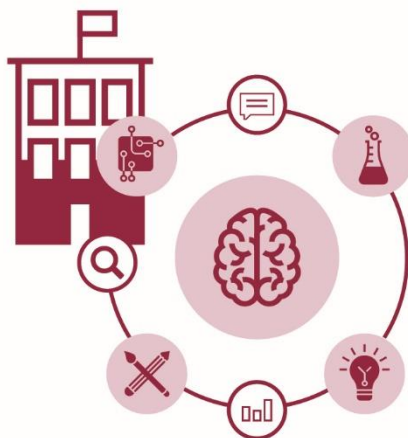
⁸³ Policy paper The What Works Network: Five Years On (2018).

Recommendation: Develop a stronger parliamentary expertise centre

4

Recommendation

Develop a stronger parliamentary expertise centre.



3.4 Recommendation 4: Develop a stronger parliamentary expertise centre

Develop the Analysis and Research Department into a centre of expertise

The Dutch parliament needs its own, well-resourced expertise centre to provide knowledge/evidence for policy. AWTI suggests equipping the existing Analysis and Research Department (DAO) for this purpose. At present, the DAO's limited capacity means it has its hands full with tasks relating to the substance of numerous ongoing parliamentary enquiries.

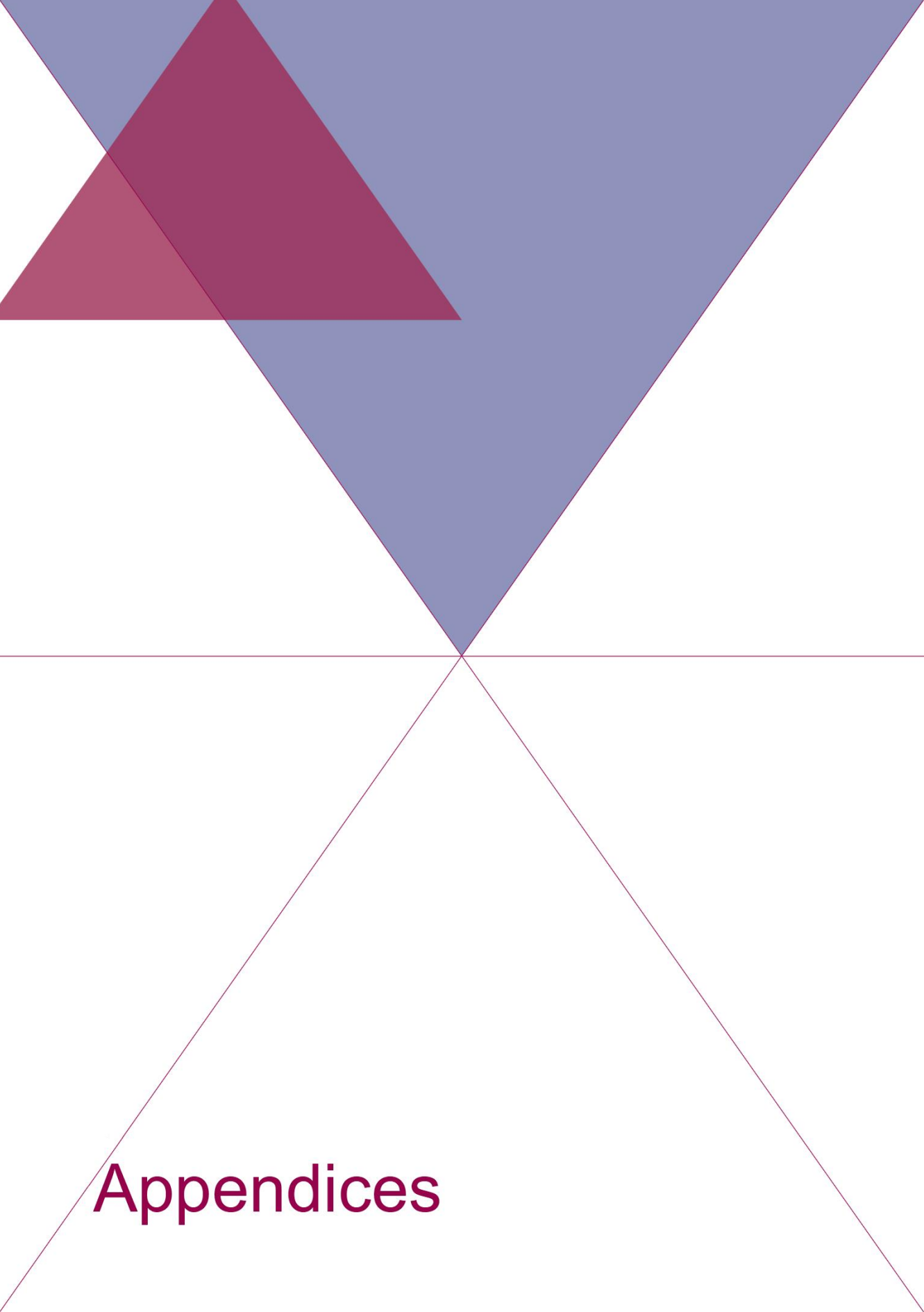
The expertise centre envisaged by the Council would operate close to parliament, would be independent of lobby and organisational interests and would have an insight into political processes and a feel for what is needed to improve those processes and when. This would make it a reliable partner for parliament as a whole as well as for individual members. On the one hand, the expertise centre would function as a knowledge basis, while on the other building new, collective knowledge together with knowledge institutes, both for the areas covered by the standing parliamentary committees and for overarching issues such as technology development and design and experimentation methodology. The centre would publish this knowledge in a variety of ways, depending on the need. In

addition to publications in text form, this would include modes such as data summaries, schematics, fact sheets, podcasts and film clips. The expertise centre would also build a network of knowledge organisations and work with them to transfer knowledge to parliament. The expertise centre could be accessible for the public, advisory councils and other knowledge institutes, with a transparent website and freely accessible publications. This would mean that accrued knowledge would continue to be available and accessible even when the political complexion of parliament changes, and this would put MPs in a better position to build on the work of their predecessors.

Parliament could entrust various knowledge-related tasks to the expertise centre which are currently organised on an ad hoc basis, for example the coordination and implementation of 'evidence checks' on legislative proposals and feasibility studies. It could also be given responsibility for coordinating and carrying out parliamentary research.

Invest generously in the expertise centre

Equipping the DAO so that it become the envisaged expertise centre will require a substantial extra investment to enable it to recruit experts in a range of fields, including the exact sciences and medical experts.



Appendices

Annex 1 Interviewees

AWTI interviewed approximately 25 individuals in preparing this report. Most of the interviewees are listed below. A small number preferred to remain anonymous; their names have accordingly been left out of the list.

- ▶ Peter van Baalen University of Amsterdam
- ▶ Hugo van Bergen Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
- ▶ Aart Jan Bette Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (now Municipality of Dordrecht)
- ▶ Eppo Bruins House of Representatives
- ▶ Tom Cordeweners Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations
- ▶ Daphne Depassé Independent researcher and adviser
- ▶ Pieter Duisenberg Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU)
- ▶ Steven de Groot Zuyd University of Applied Sciences
- ▶ Max Herold Radboud University
- ▶ Jeroen Kerseboom House of Representatives Analysis and Research Department
- ▶ Ilkay Kizil Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- ▶ Jeanne van Loon Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- ▶ Paul Iske Maastricht University / Instituut Briljante Mislukkingen (Institute of Brilliant Failures)
- ▶ Laura Menenti Ministry of Justice and Security
- ▶ Stefania Rosanio Ministry of Justice and Security
- ▶ Rien Rouw Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- ▶ Patrick Schelvis Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate
- ▶ Caroline Tempel Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- ▶ Ib Waterreus Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
- ▶ Mathieu Weggeman Eindhoven University of Technology

Annex 2 Reviewers

A draft version of this report was submitted to two external reviewers. They were asked to reflect on the consistency of the draft report and to highlight any observed gaps. The reviewers' comments and observations were incorporated in the final version of the report. Naturally, the report, the recommendations and the analyses remain the responsibility of AWTI.

The reviewers for this report were:

- ▶ Prof. J.A. (Hans) de Bruijn, Professor of Public Administration/Organisation and Management at Delft University of Technology
- ▶ Prof. C.I.M. (Caroline) Nevejan, Chief Science Officer at City of Amsterdam.

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