

Chapter 8

The Knowledge Chamber, Netherlands

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In this chapter, we shed light on the Dutch “Knowledge Chamber” (Kenniskamer). This Chamber was created in 2006 to bring together stakeholders on education policy and on knowledge of education policy in an environment which takes into account both politics and knowledge.

Introduction

Education policy is a sensitive phenomenon. Schools are jealous of their autonomy, but at the same time desire guidance from authorities. Authorities define the problems which they wish to solve and design education policies which should bring about solutions. At the same time, interested third parties (parents, employers) are often quite outspoken in formulating their wishes.

Within this complicated framework, which is further bedevilled by the dynamics of politics, the processes leading to concrete policy-measures are often not primarily shaped by rational and knowledge-oriented considerations. It is probably an illusion to think that a completely rational and knowledge-oriented method of policy-making is possible. There will always remain conflicts of interest and struggles for influence. But also in a highly-politicised environment evidence may play a role. In the Netherlands, an effort is currently being made to bring together stakeholders on education policy and on knowledge of education policy in an environment which takes into account both politics and the knowledge factor. This is the so-called “Knowledge Chamber” (*Kenniskamer*), which met for the first time in the summer of 2006, on the initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

In the Netherlands, the international debate on the importance of evidence-based policy-making has not gone unnoticed. Also the Netherlands have been internationally active, both in the debate generated by OECD as well as, on their own initiative, in putting evidence-based policy-making on the “European agenda”. At the same time, the influential Education Council of the Netherlands, the government’s chief advisory committee on educational matters, has emphatically demanded attention for the necessity to base educational policy-making on a more evidence-based footing (January 2006). And the Advisory Council for Science and Technology policy (AWT – *Adviesraad voor Wetenschaps- en Technologiebeleid*) published in May 2005 an advice on the knowledge

policy of the national government called *Knowledge for policy – policy for knowledge*. Both councils emphasised the necessity of a coherent knowledge policy. These developments took place against a background of increasing civil dissatisfaction with educational policy. Retroactively many of the policies and strategies which had helped shape education since the 1980s were called into question or even repudiated as downright counterproductive. Great strategies were partially dismantled, as in the case of *basisvorming* (“basic education”), the semi-comprehensive schooling system for 12-16 year-olds, or the *studiehuis* (“studying house”) which was to enable 16-18 year-olds to develop independent learning capacities. Doubts were cast on the very capacity of the ministry of Education, Culture and Science to develop effective policies at all.

The Knowledge Chamber is partially an expedient political response to recently expressed doubts concerning educational policy-making. But in the Dutch context it also represents a time-honoured method of tackling problems in that it brings together government and stakeholders in a structuralised give-and-take of views, information and knowledge. As such, there are good conditions to produce, offer and obtaining knowledge, while at the same time there remains a certain measure of room for political manoeuvring.

In this paper we first shed some light on the background of the Knowledge Chamber and after that we will discuss the design of the Chamber.

The Ministry desires a new way to deal with knowledge

Before we get to the background of the Knowledge Chamber it is useful to specify the notion of “knowledge” we use in this paper. With regard to the work of the Knowledge Chamber we follow the AWT and define knowledge “as being empirical data, concepts, analyses and theories that are considered true and correct and enable people to take decisions” (www.awt.nl/uploads/files/a63uk.pdf). This means codified, stored and traceable knowledge that is publicly validated, mostly in an academic forum. This kind of knowledge is often the result of scientific research, which is performed mainly at universities, research institutes, planning offices and advisory councils and less frequent by commercial consultants.

What then is the background of the Knowledge Chamber on Education, Culture and Science? A very immediate reason is the reorganisation plan or programme for action that the ministry of Education, Culture and Science issued at the end of 2005, called “OCW changes” (*OCW verandert*). One of the main lines of that programme is the aim to make effective policy (a paraphrase of “beleid dat werkt in de praktijk”). To reach that goal the action programme states that we need to strengthen the scientific knowledge basis of our policies or, as it is often called in international discourse, we need evidence based policies. The reason for this speaks for itself. Up to now, a policy proposal may only be based on a single study, while at the same time political pressure may be exerted to implement that proposal. This is not an exceptional state of affairs, neither in the Netherlands nor in other countries, as we learned from the OECD project on evidence-based policy research. The Ministry draw the conclusion that it needed to include researchers and experts in policy-making to share their views and insights with policy advisors in order to bring scientific evidence in. Therefore the Ministry established among other things the Knowledge Chamber.

Mobilising top-ranking officials to minimise overkill, compartmentalisation and process-fetishism

The Knowledge Chamber is a consultative body of the top-ranking officials of both the knowledge institutions and the Ministry. Why does it exactly focus on the top? In answer to this question, we are getting at a second reason for the realisation of the Knowledge Chamber.

The above-mentioned advice of the AWT-Council concluded on the basis of an inventory that only a few departments have formulated an explicit knowledge policy. Without such a policy government runs various risks, according to the Council.

- First there is the risk of an excess of knowledge and information. As the amount of data and information is constantly rising it is becoming more difficult to pick up relevant research, to interpret it correctly and to link it to knowledge already available.
- The second risk according to the Council is compartmentalisation in knowledge domains. The compartmentalisation between and within departments is reflected in the way the knowledge infrastructure is organised, namely in separated domains. An integral approach is hindered by the compartmentalisation of knowledge.
- The third risk the Council distinguishes is that government officials, especially at the top, concentrate on the process of policy-making rather than on the content of a certain policy. According to the Council, the national government's personnel management nowadays values process-related skills more than expertise concerning content. As a consequence it can happen that (mostly) senior executives lack the understanding to examine the evidence base of policy proposals properly.

It is to minimise these risks that the Ministry has made the Knowledge Chamber into a crucial ingredient of its knowledge policy and follows the view of the AWT, which stresses the need to formulate knowledge policy at the top, starting from a strategic vision of the role of knowledge in policy. The top-ranking officials after all are ultimately responsible that policy is evidence based. Besides that, departments not only need evidence for the formulation and implementation of (short-term) policy measures. They also require perspectives on long-term developments in order to be able to formulate long-term strategies and to prioritise policy issues. This is a typical responsibility of top management.

Modernising government

A third reason for the establishment of the Knowledge Chamber follows from the government programme *Andere Overheid* ("Modernising Government"), which aims to realise "a powerful and decisive government, which puts the community foremost". One of the initiatives of *Andere Overheid* was the restructuring of the system of advisory councils and knowledge institutions (such as planning offices and research institutes). The results of this initiative were set down in a letter from the cabinet to the parliament. In this letter the government stated that the direct interaction between policy makers on the one hand and knowledge institutions and researchers must be improved. This corresponds with a recommendation of the AWT, namely that constant interaction is

needed to further the active use of knowledge by policy makers. The letter also states that the form in which this interaction is organised is up to each ministry to decide. A knowledge chamber is strongly recommended but not prescribed. Every ministry must devise an arrangement that suits the conditions on their domain the best.

A knowledge chamber is not a strictly defined entity. The essence is interaction between policy and research. In its letter the cabinet distinguishes several variants such as a “narrow chamber” in which the interaction focuses on the information needed for current policy programmes, and a “broad chamber” which is not limited to current policy but which also explores long term issues. Differences can also arise in the degree of independence of the knowledge chamber. Is it purely a unit within the civil service and staffed by government professionals or is it organised as an agency at a distance from the ministry? Other variations concern the composition of a knowledge chamber. For instance, the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management organised their knowledge chamber as a broad meeting of representatives of universities, research institutes, planning offices, social organisations, central government and local governments. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, on the other hand, is inclined to arrange its knowledge chamber as a consultation of the top management with a small group of the most concerned knowledge institutions.

The cabinet expects that by exchanging various experiences with and good practices of knowledge chambers, ministries not only will learn from each other but also that the best practices will ultimately prevail. The development of knowledge chambers is expressly designed as a learning process, a process of weighing up the pros and cons of various models.

The essence: structural consultation on knowledge

In June 2006 a varied group of people gathered in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in The Hague. Present were not only the top-ranking officials of the Ministry but also chairmen and managers of various knowledge institutions in the fields of education, culture and science, such as advisory councils, planning offices, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, the Education Inspectorate and a commission for long term enquiries. It was the first and founding meeting of the Knowledge Chamber, a consultative body on the production of knowledge that serves government policies on education, culture and science. We will now examine the design of that chamber.

The essence of the Knowledge Chamber is a structural consultation between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and those knowledge institutes to which the Ministry formally assigns knowledge-related tasks. This essence will be the focus during the first stage of the Knowledge Chamber, the stage during which the Chamber is constructed and tested.

The Knowledge Chamber will meet, in principle, twice a year, in spring and in autumn. The spring meeting will mainly be used to programme and plan the “knowledge agenda” for the following year, which will be reflected in the working plan of the knowledge institutes. The autumn meeting will perform a review of the Knowledge Chamber’s activities, addressing questions like “what knowledge did the activities of the Chamber yield” and “how was this knowledge put to use by policy makers”. In addition to the semi-annual regular meetings of the Knowledge Chamber there will be one or more

special meetings, which will be organised from a specific angle and aim at broadening the Ministry's perspective.

Participants in the meetings of the Knowledge Chamber will consist of two categories. The regular meetings will be attended by an inner circle composed of the Education Council, the Advisory Council for Science and Technology policy, the Culture Council, the Scientific Council for Government Policy, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, the Inspectorate of Education, the innovation consortium SenterNovem and the Consultative Committee of Sector Councils for Research and Development. For the theme-oriented special meetings also an outer circle will be invited, of varying composition.

The Knowledge Chamber must become the nucleus of a network of knowledge workers and policy makers. To promote this, the regular meetings of the Knowledge Chamber could be broadcasted through the Intranet facilities of the involved agencies, possibly offering staff members of the agencies the possibility to intervene and to formulate questions. A digital "home" for the Knowledge Chamber might help realise such a network function.

The essence of the Knowledge Chamber being a structural consultation between the Ministry and the knowledge institutes, in a practical sense this essence will be translated into identifying themes on which knowledge must be accumulated, following a "rolling agenda" – a knowledge agenda which may be brought up to date at each meeting of the Chamber, specifically during its "programming" springtime meeting. During the regular meetings, one or two specific themes may be highlighted – by one of the Chamber's members or by an external expert.

The meetings of the Knowledge Chamber will be prepared and facilitated by the Ministry's directorate for strategy.

Generating validated knowledge

The Knowledge Chamber will deal in *validated* knowledge, which may be used by policy makers. Knowledge stemming from scientific research is pre-eminently a form of validated knowledge. Such knowledge will consist of analytical studies of trends and developments in the educational field, on behaviour and perspective of stakeholders within the field and on the efficiency of institutes. The Knowledge Chamber will help to make such knowledge available and accessible. Another important form of knowledge concerns a perception of whether the instruments which the Ministry designs actually work. Evaluations will follow to determine whether policy aims have been effectuated (possibly coupled to *ex ante* evaluations of newly designed policy instruments).

Other possibilities are still in the future. Thus, the Knowledge Chamber may ultimately come to validate policy proposals by assigning a quality hallmark. Such a hallmark would be a stimulus for the knowledge-orientation of policy makers. Also, the Knowledge Chamber may some day empirically judge the sustainability of major policy projects, *e.g.* through screening the policy documents.

Organising creativity

Maybe the most challenging part of the Knowledge Chamber's task is the formulating of "knowledge questions". Thus, questions are identified which transcend the traditional boundaries of policy areas. The Knowledge Chamber will examine themes from a future-oriented perspective and from the angle of other policy fields. General knowledge questions which are important for each subject are: what is the actual problem? What are the perspectives of the stakeholders involved with the problem? Which instruments are effective and/or efficient (also in terms of financial costs)? Is it possible to identify effective government interventions to help solve the problem?

But above this basic knowledge questions, the Knowledge Chamber must operate creatively and from an innovative perspective. The Ministry expects from the Chamber sensible ideas on an always uncertain future, creativity, new and surprising perspectives and cross-grained views. These are notoriously difficult to organise. But the Chamber may use innovative debating and presentation techniques which are conducive to creativity. Elements like "digital storytelling" and mobilising new and/or different talents (students, pupils, artists) may be part of this approach. Thus, it is hoped that the essential product of the Knowledge Chamber, validated yet challenging knowledge which transcends traditional policy paradigms, will radiate from the Chamber and permeate both the Ministry and the educational institutions.

The Knowledge Chamber will be judged a success when its activities lead to the actual use of validated knowledge by policy makers – and when the furnishers of knowledge become aware that their efforts count. Of course, this implies that the knowledge institutes should produce *usable* knowledge – that is: knowledge which fits the actual process of policy-making and which makes clear the implications and consequences of the proposed policies. In order to be able to judge the results of the Knowledge Chamber, indicators will be developed to measure the above-mentioned criteria. In any case, the Knowledge Chamber will have to prove itself flexible and capable of adapting itself to new demands.

Biography

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Robert Boruch, Professor, University of Pennsylvania (USA). Dr. Boruch is current co-chair of the Steering Group of the International Campbell Collaboration, and principal investigator for the Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse, which is designed to be a central and trusted source of information on evidence about what works in education. Dr. Boruch is an elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Statistical Association, and the Academy for Experimental Criminology. He has received awards for his work on evaluation policy, randomised trials, and on privacy of individuals and confidentiality in social research. Dr. Boruch's academic background is in psychology, statistics, and mechanical engineering, with degrees from Iowa State University and Stevens Institute of Technology.

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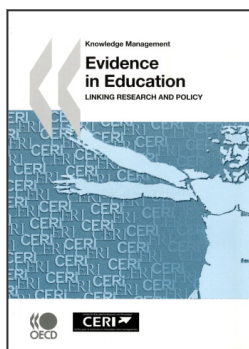
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