Comparative Study on Government Research and Policy Analysis Units in the UK and the Netherlands

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent opinions of the SDC, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation or University of Fribourg.
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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>BIS</td>
<td>Department for Business, Innovation and Skills</td>
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<td>CPB</td>
<td>Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Chief Scientific Advisor</td>
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<td>DCLG</td>
<td>Department for Communities and Local Government</td>
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<td>DWP</td>
<td>Department for Work and Pensions</td>
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<td>EBP</td>
<td>Evidence based policy</td>
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<td>FCO</td>
<td>Foreign and Commonwealth Office</td>
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<td>GCSA</td>
<td>Government Chief Scientific Advisor</td>
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<td>GESR</td>
<td>Government Economic and Social Research Team</td>
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<td>GOS</td>
<td>Government Office for Science</td>
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<td>GSR</td>
<td>Government Social Research Profession</td>
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<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<td>NICE</td>
<td>National Institute for Health and Care Excellence</td>
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<td>PBL</td>
<td>Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency</td>
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<td>PERFORM</td>
<td>Performing and Responsive Social Sciences project</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Randomised controlled trials</td>
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<td>SAGE</td>
<td>Science Advice Group in Emergencies</td>
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<td>SCP</td>
<td>Netherlands Institute for Social Research</td>
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<td>WRR</td>
<td>Scientific Council for Government Policy</td>
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<td>WWC</td>
<td>What Works Centre</td>
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<td>WWG</td>
<td>What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth</td>
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Introduction

This research was commissioned by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation within the scope of the project ‘Performing and Responsive Social Sciences’ (PERFORM). PERFORM aims to enhance the relevance and contribution of social sciences research to reform processes and policies in the Western Balkan countries. Among other things, this project seeks to establish systemic linkages between research and policy communities, and thus contribute to evidence informed policy making in Albania and Serbia. In this context, this research seeks to explore different models of evidence informed policy making institutions in place in Western European countries in order to inform PERFORM’s future activities in the Western Balkans.

The idea of using evidence to steer policy has acquired an increased prominence in policy circles over the last two decades. The notion of evidence based policy (EBP) was championed by the United Kingdom’s New Labour in the late 1990s. The New Labour’s slogan ‘what matters is what works’ promoted EBP as a new form of decision making beyond ideology: EBP was meant to replace ideologically driven policy-making with rational decision-making. This new approach to policy making effectively sought to put the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation.

As the EBP concept has gained prominence in both developed and developing countries, it has become an important subject of inquiry (and criticism) among social scientists. Most of current literature on this subject critically looks at the premises of EBP: the idea that the quality of policies, their effectiveness and efficiency can be measured in an objective and conclusive way, and the assumption that policy making can be rationalised (Frey and Ledermann 2010, p. 3). The first section of this report offers a brief overview of this literature by focusing on two key issues: (1) what is evidence and (2) how it should be incorporated in policy making. This review of the literature was primarily aimed at setting the stage for the analysis of EBP institutions in the remainder of the report.

The second section of the report focuses on government research and policy analysis units in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. These two countries were chosen on the basis of the availability of secondary literature and primary sources in English on EBP institutions within their respective governments. Surprisingly, while there is an abundant literature on the concept of EBP and its application in various fields, there are relatively few studies dealing with EBP institutions as such. As a result, this section of the report is entirely based on interviews with representatives of government and research institutions in the UK and the Netherlands, unless stated otherwise. A list of persons interviewed is provided in the reference section of the report. Each interview explored the institutional set-up of the research unit, the way that research is conducted and disseminated, relationships with policy makers and engagement with the broader scientific community. The conclusion gives an overview of the different models of institutions considered in this report and their respective features.
Section 1 – Evidence Based Policy: Key Issues and Debates

1. What counts as evidence?

One of the key themes in the literature on EBP is how to define ‘evidence’ – what counts as evidence and how should different types of evidence be approached and prioritised. Evidence is indeed a broad and vague notion. It is usually associated with research which can be defined as ‘any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge’ (OECD quoted in Sutcliffe and Court 2005, p.3). From this perspective, evidence constitutes a component of research, namely the empirical findings (Nutley et al. 2010, p. 133). However, evidence can also have a broader meaning that includes different types of knowledge (practitioners experience, common sense, etc.). In this case, research represents just one form of evidence among others. Jonathan Grant from RAND Europe distinguishes between different types of evidence (NESF 2005, p. 21):

- Organisational evidence which refers to the corporate memory that allows organisations to develop their own procedures and knowledge
- Practitioner evidence derived from the experience of people working in the field
- Evidence that emanates from the policy community who debates and discusses ideas in specific fields
- User evidence which is gained from the experience of using public services
- Empirical research, which is ‘information systematically gathered by pre-prescribed methods’

This variety of evidence, which often involves contradictory views, has led policy makers and policy-oriented researchers to create ‘hierarchies of evidence’ to determine which evidence should be given priority. In the UK, for instance, public policies are developed in function of a limited range of what is considered ‘top-end’ evidence which involves empirical research, policy evaluation and expert knowledge (Sutcliffe and Court 2005, p. 3). Policy evaluations have been given particular weight over other forms of evidence. As Solesbury argues, ‘much of the effort at getting to know ‘what works’ is spent on ex post evaluation undertaken by large consortia drawn from both the commercial and academic sectors’ (p. 7).

Even when ‘evidence’ is considered exclusively as empirical/research-based evidence, policy makers and practitioners often find themselves confronted with an array of contradictory findings based on different methodologies. What counts as ‘top end’ evidence is a matter of contention within the scientific community, less so among the EBP community. The hierarchy of evidence applied in EBP generally tends to prioritise systematic reviews and randomised controlled trials over other types of
evidence. Systematic reviews seek to identify and synthesize the findings from all the existing research on a given topic (Young et al. 2002, p. 220). A systematic review should encompass all the published and unpublished literature that allows to address a specific question or test a hypothesis. The primary studies taken into consideration in the review are assessed on the basis of their methodological quality. The conclusions of the review are based on those studies that are considered most relevant and robust. Systematic reviews have been endorsed by most intermediary knowledge brokering institutions such as the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration which operate in the fields of medicine and social care respectively. These institutions have tended to focus exclusively on, or give priority to, primary studies that rely on randomised controlled trials (RCT) methods. RCTs seek to assess the impact of an intervention by randomly selecting the members of the target group affected by the policy/treatment that is being tested and establishing a control group that is not exposed to the policy/treatment as a counterfactual. This allows to establish causality between the policy/treatment and the observed outcomes, provided that all the other characteristics of the target and control groups are (more or less) equal.

The emphasis on RCT-based systematic reviews as the gold standard in terms of methodological quality and robustness is one of the main points of contention in the literature on EBP. This methodology was developed and popularised in the field of medicine where clinical trials were conducted to test the effectiveness of medical interventions. As the EBP movement was largely inspired by the use of evidence in informing healthcare practices, systematic reviews and controlled experiments were applied to other areas of public policy (Boaz et al. 2002 cited in Nutley et al. 2010, p.5). Observers have questioned the extent to which such meta analyses and experiments involving mostly quantitative data can be useful for prescribing social policy across the board. Saltelli and Giampietro (2015, pp.10-15) thus argue that the quantitative modelling which is behind most EBP relies on ‘a series of dramatic simplification and linearization’ that deliberately excludes certain knowledge simply because it does not ‘fit into the model’. There is a general view among critics that the use of alternative research methods such as case studies or observational studies is lagging behind in EBP (Young et al. 2002, p.221). Solesbury attributes this state of affairs to the excessive focus of EBP on ‘what works’. According to him, this leads policy makers to omit a whole set of important questions in policy development:

What works for whom in what circumstances is what policy makers and practitioners really need to know. And to answer that there needs to be not just research that is evaluative, but also research that is descriptive, analytical, diagnostic, theoretical and prescriptive. That is, an evidence base to policy in all stages of the policy cycle – in shaping agendas, in defining issues, in identifying options, in making choices of action, in delivering them and in monitoring their impact and outcomes. (Solesbury 2001, p.7)

From this perspective, there is a need to expand both the scope of enquiry and the range of research methods involved in EBP. Above all, there is a need for more flexibility and diversity in approaches to the study of different topics. Some authors advocate a ‘horses for courses’ approach by ‘identifying which policy and practice questions are amenable to analysis through what kinds of specific research techniques’ (Nutley, Davies & Walter 2002, p.8). Among other things, this requires giving more voice to users in defining problems and questions, and incorporating a broader range of approaches to research in reviews aimed at informing policy.
2. Research-Policy Dynamics

The question of how evidence can be incorporated in policy making is another key feature of the EBP literature. The relationship between research and policy is complex. It is naive to believe that policymakers are necessarily enthusiastic about research and that they are looking for evidence to inform their policies. As Keynes suggested, ‘there is nothing a government hates more than to be well informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult’ (quoted in Solesbury 2001, p.7). The example of the UK shows that linear models of EBP in which evidence is created by experts and drawn on as necessary by policymakers and practitioners does not reflect reality (Nutley, Davies & Walter 2002, p.1). Observers have pointed to the ‘paradox of policy analysis’: the fact that a lot of research is being produced without having an impact on policy (Nancy Shulock 1999 quoted in Young et al. 2002, p.218). While the number of NGOs, think tanks and research institutes producing policy-oriented research has dramatically increased over the past two decades, this has had relatively little bearing over policy making. Decision makers either find themselves unable to digest the evidence produced by researchers or they find other sources of information more useful for shaping policy.

The ‘paradox of policy analysis’ arises out of a misconception of how research feeds into policy. The policy process can be divided in four stages: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy implementation, monitoring and policy evaluation (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005, pp. 5-6). Research has the potential to influence policy at any stage, but how? Scholars and practitioners have distinguished 5 models of how policy is deemed to incorporate the input of knowledge (Young et al. 2002, pp. 216-217; NESF 2005, p. 26):

- The ‘knowledge-driven’/ ‘push’ model which assumes that knowledge leads policy; policymakers draw on published research to develop their policy
- The ‘problem solving’/ ‘policy’ model in which policymakers commission research on the basis of their needs; in this case, research follows policy, policy issues shape research priorities
- The ‘interactive’ model which involves a dynamic cooperation between researchers and policymakers that influence each other; this cooperation mostly occurs within policy communities which are shaped by some influential actors that act as bridges between policy and academia
- The ‘political’/ ‘tactical’/ ‘adversarial’ model where research is used by policymakers as a tool for political contestation; research can be used both for advocating a specific agenda or as a defensive tool for countering lobby groups
- The ‘enlightenment’ model in which research operates at a higher level in terms of informing policymakers’ approaches to specific issues and providing ‘a frame for thinking about it’; this corresponds to ‘evidence informed’ rather than ‘evidence based’ policy making (Young et al. 2002, p. 217)

The first two models informed much of EBP thinking from the 1960s until the 1990s. They assume a linear relationship between research and policy making which has since then been discredited for being normatively simplistic and empirically unrealistic. The ‘interactive’ model developed in the 1990s and is still very influential nowadays. It revolves around the idea of ‘knowledge exchange’ within networks
of collaborating research producers and users. More recently, the notions of ‘knowledge integration’, ‘translation’ and ‘mobilisation’ have been introduced to highlight the need to embed knowledge within the priorities, cultures and contexts of organisations in order to improve research use (Nutley et al. 2010, p. 137).

The politicisation of research embodied in the ‘political’/ ‘tactical’/ ‘adversarial’ model is a matter of great concern among social scientists interested in EBP. Observers have deplored the fact that science is increasingly used in partisan squabbling, which erodes its authority and legitimacy. There has been an increasing occurrence of ‘shoddy’ science used by vested interests in order to advance their agendas. On numerous occasions, vested interests have also resorted to scientists to derail the use of sound science to achieve their desired ends (Rosenstock & Lee 2002). Saltelli and Glampietro (2015, p. 3) argue that, too often, evidence based policy turns into its opposite: policy based evidence. In their view, the separation between facts and values – on which the EBP concept is premised – is simply impossible to achieve. Policy makers use evidence either to challenge the positions, policies and values of power holders, or to strengthen their own power and promote their values and interests. One of the most striking examples of (mis)use of science over the past years concerns the rationale put forward in support of austerity policies in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (ibid., p. 7). Austerity measures were deemed necessary as research carried out by Harvard professors Kenneth Rogoff and Carmen Reinhart showed that a 90 per cent ratio of public debt to gross domestic product was an absolute ceiling above which growth would be hampered. Later research carried out at the University of Massachusetts showed that these findings were flawed due to a coding error in the work of the original authors. Nevertheless, the austerity policies had already been implemented and had caused great damage in many countries. In this context, some authors have argued that the value-loaded nature of research should be acknowledged. As a result, rather than informing public policy, evidence should inform democratic processes by enhancing public debate and political contestation. This involves a shift from ‘evidence based policy’ to ‘evidence based society’ in which ‘debate is reasoned and takes due account of (contested) evidence which is available to the many, not the few’ (Young et al. 2002, p. 219).

While research has the potential to influence policy, there are many other factors at play. These factors include the expertise, experience and judgment of policy makers; their values and ideologies; the resources they have; the various interests at play; and the existing policy making institutions, habits and traditions (Weiss 1977 and Davies 2004 cited in Sutcliffe & Court 2005, pp. 7-8). Evidence is thus only one resource among others. The extent to which it is used and the way it is used depends on the institutional structure and the political culture of a polity. The institutional structure defines the opportunities of the actors for EBP within the system, whereas the norms and values embodied in the political culture determine the extent to which policy makers take evidence into account and how they do it (Frey and Ledermann 2010, p. 8).

Much of the debate on EBP has focused on identifying the constraints to the use of evidence in policy making and finding ways to overcome them. It is generally recognised that there is an important communication gap between researchers and policy makers due to the fact that these two professional groups have different languages, different agendas, different time scales and different reward systems (Sutcliffe and Court 2005, pp. 7-8). The time constraint has been singled out as the most important factor. While research is generally time consuming and protracted, policy making requires quick answers as it is often done in haste in response to political pressures and emergencies. This is one of
the reasons why systematic reviews are the most widespread EBP tool: summarising already available evidence is much quicker than producing ‘original’ research (Frey and Ledermann 2010, p. 4). In addition to the time constraint, there is a more fundamental divergence in the agendas of social scientists and policy makers. While policy makers seek solutions for concrete problems, most social research is inspired by ‘an urge to understand, illuminate and explain’ (Young et al. 2002, p. 217). In this context, academic research is rarely ‘problem solving’. Most social scientists tend to explore the multifaceted dimensions of the subjects of enquiry rather than seeking clear answers to specific problems. Scientific enquiry thus involves a degree of complexity which can obscure the clarity of choices available to policy makers. Finally, there is a lack of incentives on both parts to cooperate with each other. Professional advancement in academia is essentially achieved through peer reviewed publications and participation in research projects of scientific value. On the other hand, policy makers and civil servants gain recognition by increasing departmental budgets, explaining policy options clearly and implementing them efficiently (NESF 2005, p. 8). These two worlds do not naturally interact with each other.

Researchers and practitioners involved in EBP have come up with a range of ideas and initiatives to fill the gap between research and policy making. These include:

- Dedicating funding for policy research projects developed in cooperation with government departments
- Creating forums for informal knowledge exchange between researchers and policy makers
- Setting up intermediary knowledge brokering institutions that will produce evidence and work with practitioners on the implementation of EBP
- Introduce secondments and two-way placements in order to promote the exchange of staff between universities and government departments
- Training government staff in the use of evidence
- Training academics to improve dissemination techniques to non-academic audiences.

Overall, the existing research shows that linear conceptualisations of EBP in which policy makers draw on existing evidence produced by researchers, or commission research from social scientists, do not reflect reality. The uptake of evidence in policy making depends on the ongoing interaction between evidence providers and evidence users which is ‘always likely to remain loose, shifting and contingent’ (Nutley, Davies & Walter 2002, p.9). This interaction is to a great extent determined by the governance structures, the political culture and the size of a polity. Smaller countries have the possibility of developing a better interaction between policy makers and researchers, but their research capabilities are also more limited. Countries that are characterised by an open and egalitarian political culture are generally more receptive to new ideas based on research and evidence (Nutley et al. 2010, p. 137). While a countries’ size and political culture can hardly be changed, its governance structures can be made more favourable to EBP. The remainder of this report examines different models of EBP institutions in Europe, by focusing on the UK and the Netherlands.
Section 2 – Government Research and Policy Analysis Units in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

1. The United Kingdom

There is a variety of research and analysis units that coexist and cooperate at different levels of government in the United Kingdom. This report focuses on three types of institutions: research units within government departments, institutions tasked with providing scientific advice at different levels of government, and knowledge brokering institutions embodied in the What Works Network. A simplified diagram representing the position of the institutions considered in this study and their relationships is provided in Figure 1.

Research Units within Government Departments

Institutional Setup:

The institutional setup of analytical units varies across departments. Some departments, such as the Home Office for instance, have centralised research units where all researchers sit together. In other departments, research analysts are embedded in policy teams, while there are also departments which use a combination of both approaches. The following analysis focuses on the Department for Work and Pensions and the Foreign Commonwealth Office, whose representatives were interviewed within the scope of this research.

In the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), research analysts are embedded within policy directorates: each policy area has a Policy Director and a Lead Analyst with a team of research analysts (see Figure 2). As a result, there is close interaction between policy makers and analysts. In addition to the research teams embedded in policy directorates, DWP has a Chief Analyst who provides vision and leadership across the Analytical Community. The Chief Analyst is supported by three research teams that look across the department and have a coordinating function. These are the Research Planning and Monitoring Team that overlooks all the research that is taking place at DWP, the Trialling and Experimentation Strategy Team that supervises all the trialling that is going on at DWP and the Evidence Strategy Team that is in charge of identifying and prioritising evidence needs across the Department. These teams do not carry out research as such, they have a purely supporting function. With approximately 600 analysts, DWP has the biggest analytical community among UK government
departments. The research profiles include economists, statisticians, social researchers, operational researchers, and data scientists (Daly, 2016). All the research analysts are part of their respective professional networks which provide them with guidance, support and continuous learning opportunities and mentoring schemes. These are led within the Department by Head of Professions and supported by a central unit, such as the Government Social and Economic Research Unit (GESR) (see Box 1).
FIGURE 1: RESEARCH UNITS IN THE UK GOVERNMENT

- What Works Network
- Cabinet Office
- Department for Work and Pensions
  - Policy Makers
  - Chief Analyst
  - Research Analysts
- Chief Scientific Advisor
- Foreign Commonwealth Office
  - Policy Makers
  - Chief Scientific Advisor
- Government Office for Science
  - Research Cadre
At the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the institutional setup varies between directorates. In some cases, research analysts are embedded within policy teams (i.e. Western Balkans unit) but there are also separate research units for specific regions (i.e. the Africa Research Group). The institutional setup depends on the number of researchers dedicated to a particular geographic area: there are only 40-50 research analysts at the FCO, so the distribution of researchers varies between countries and regions. Research analysts are all part of the research cadre, which is an internal professional body within the FCO. They are required to have a master’s degree and specialised knowledge on the region they work on. There are opportunities for research analysts to take sabbatical leave to complete a PhD and all sorts of trainings are made available to them: language courses, public speaking and influencing trainings, etc.

Research – policy dynamics:

Having research analysts embedded in Policy Directorates allows for very close interaction between policy-makers and analysts. Research analysts are up to date about what issues are relevant for policy makers as they tend to be included in departmental meetings where priorities are discussed. As a result, policy makers and analysts often work together on the development of policies from the outset. While policy makers may commission research from analysts, it is more usual for them to negotiate the research agenda on the basis of the knowledge gaps identified by the research analysts and the needs of the policy makers. Often, research analysts help policy makers ask the right questions but the decision is ultimately up to the policy makers, they have the power to veto the research analysts. At FCO, there is a lot of turnover among policy makers, whilst researchers usually stay on their positions. As a result, researchers are very important not only because they specialise on specific geographic or thematic areas, but also because they are a significant source of corporate memory.

Some departments commission research from external stakeholders, others do not. At DWP, a lot of research is externally contracted. This applies notably to the policy evaluations which are outsourced for the sake of ensuring independence. Decisions on whether and which research projects will be externally commissioned are made by the Lead Analyst depending on a number of factors such as whether DWP has the capacity to conduct the research internally, the cost and the speed of the research. On the other hand, the FCO only outsources research on very specific topics or technical issues (i.e. digital economy, energy security, etc.) There is an ongoing debate within the FCO whether more research should be externally contracted, the main argument against it being the sensitivity of information.

The policy regarding the publication of research also varies between departments. At DWP, research is published on the government website for the sake of ensuring both transparency and independence. However, policy makers do not directly rely on the publication of the research report. Since researchers and policy makers interact throughout the research process, policy makers can draw upon preliminary findings of the research to inform the policy making process. Through the interim reports, policy makers know early on the direction that the research is heading in. The FCO rarely makes its research public, most of it is used in-house.

The interviewees identified time constraint as the main challenge for the use of evidence in policy. From an analyst’s perspective, there is a tension between the need to support policy colleagues by coming up with relevant evidence in the short term and the fact that producing robust evidence often
takes longer than policy makers would like. Research analysts are under a lot of pressure to produce research as quickly as possible and they are constantly dealing with policy requests which can make it difficult for them to be sufficiently forward looking. As a result, analytical units within government departments generally have a flexible approach regarding the type of evidence used in their research. Due to the short deadlines and, sometimes, the scarcity of data, research analysts look across a range of evidence whose robustness varies. They have been trained to carefully assess the robustness of evidence and to point out to any potential limitations of evidence when presenting the research findings. A key part of the analyst’s role is to ensure the quality of their outputs. Quality control mechanisms vary substantially based on different types of analysis and different departments. Some interviewees pointed out that politics sometimes trumps evidence in decision making. Government objectives may indeed be at odds with what the research suggests is the right thing to do. Research analysts can nonetheless disagree with policy makers and make their differences of opinion known. It is a key part of the analyst’s role to point out to policy makers and Ministers where policy decisions are inconsistent with the evidence.

Engagement with the scientific community:

There is continuous engagement between research analysts and the academic community, both formally and informally. Engaging with the academic community and building networks is an integral part of a research analyst’s job at DWP. This interaction occurs on a regular basis through participation of DWP researchers in academic events or by organising seminars where academics present their research at DWP. The FCO has very close contacts with the biggest universities (LSE, Cambridge, Oxford...). There are also institutional arrangements to promote the exchange of staff between government and academia: academics can get placements at the FCO while research analysts can get sabbaticals to work at a university or a think tank. The FCO also invites people from academia and think tanks to their seminars and their brainstorming sessions. External researchers are notably invited to give briefings to newly appointed ambassadors in order to help them understand better the country where they will be representing the UK.
Scientific Advice in the UK Government

The provision of scientific advice is organised at different levels in the UK government. At the highest level, the Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA) advises the Prime Minister and the Cabinet on all matters related to science. The current GCSA is Sir Mark Walport, a medical scientist. Besides providing regular scientific advice for policy, the GCSA is also responsible for the provision of scientific advice for emergencies. This is done through the Science Advice Group in Emergencies (SAGE), a mechanism for creating ad hoc expert groups that feed scientific advice on specific issues to the Cabinet.

In addition to the GCSA, there are approximately 10 Chief Scientific Advisors (CSAs) within different departments (almost each department has one). These CSAs have oversight over all the science that happens in their department. Their role is to make sure that the science that is being done answers the policy questions for that department. They also act as intermediaries between policy makers and the broader research community: the CSAs are there to advise on what is researchable and whom to ask for specific pieces of research. The position of the CSA and the number of people under his authority varies between departments. All the CSAs are recruited from outside government and some of them retain academic positions, which allows them to bring an element of external independence and challenge to government. CSAs are civil servants, they do not change with political cycles. Although they work for their respective departments, CSAs meet once per week under the auspices of the GCSA who coordinates their work.

Government departments also have two different types of advisory boards: the Science Advisory Councils and the Scientific Committees. The Advisory Councils are composed of full time academics who have a formal tenure on the Councils for 3 or 5 years. They usually meet four times a year to assist in writing the evidence strategy for the department. The role of the Councils is primarily to horizon scan in order to anticipate the needs of the policy makers and to bring new perspectives on the work of the research analysts. They also tackle evidence-related issues in specific areas and put forward new research ideas to address the needs of the department. While the Advisory Councils have a broad remit and a strategic function, the Scientific Committees are expert groups focusing on very specific issues. For instance, the Food Department has a toxicological expert group, the Home Office has an expert group dealing with illicit drugs, etc. These Committees are also staffed with academics who are not part of the government machinery. Both the Councils and the Committees promote mutual understanding and cooperation between government and the science community. In some departments, the Council is formed by the Chair of each Committee and the CSA. In other departments, these structures are separate and the Committees may feed directly to the officials (Permanent
Secretary, etc.). A schematic representation of the interaction between department officials, CSAs, advisory councils and committees is provided in Figure 3.

The GCSA is backed by the Government Office for Science (GOS) which is in charge of coordinating science across government and undertaking research on cross-cutting issues that are not addressed by individual government departments. The GOS is there to make sure that all the research done in government departments is coming together well and to commission research, when necessary, from various universities, academies and research councils. The role of the GOS is to take a broader view on research. They do a lot of horizon scanning on threats and opportunities for public services and business in the UK. For example, they have produced a report about block-chain and the opportunities that it offers for the government in the future. GOS also does foresight studies on broad societal issues such as the future of ageing and the future of cities. The GOS commissions most of its research from researchers in academia. For each project, they create a Lead Expert Group composed of 15-20 leading academics who work on these projects along with their teams of researchers for 2 years. All the research projects are either commissioned by the government or they are put forward by GOS to the government which may or may not approve it. Every research project must have a ‘customer’ inside government, the GOS would not undertake a research project if there is no interest in it within government. The GOS has very close contacts with the academic community, both through the research projects that they commission from academics and through institutional mechanisms that promote exchanges between government and academia. The GOS has secondment schemes for people from academia and the research councils to work in government and they also offer a lot of internship opportunities for early career scientists to work for a short time in government in order to understand what are the research needs in the policy community.
FIGURE 3: SCIENTIFIC ADVICE IN UK GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS
The What Works Network

The What Works Network acts as a knowledge broker between policy makers, practitioners and the research community. The network was launched in 2013 in order to help identify which social policy interventions are the most effective (Bristow, Carter & Martin, 2015). The driving force behind the establishment of the What Works Network was to support better decision-making in social policy by improving the way government and other organisations create, share and use high quality evidence.

There are a total of 7 What Works Centres (WWCs), and 2 affiliate centres, working in different subject areas (see Figure 4). The WWCs were modelled on the example of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) that was established in the 1990s. The establishment of the centres was driven by a range of factors. For instance, the Education Endowment Foundation aims to raise the attainment of children facing disadvantage by generating and synthesising evidence about educational innovations, and encouraging decision-makers to apply evidence and adopt those innovations found to be effective. To give a further example, What Works Wellbeing was founded in response to growing interest in quality of life beyond economic measures, with the objective of making the evidence base meaningful, reliable, and easy to navigate. The WWCs receive funding from various sources, including government and research councils. In theory, any research institute can become a member of the What Works Network as long as it fulfils the accession criteria. In practice, to date, only a small number of institutions have fulfilled the criteria, although the network may in future expand as there has already been commitment to government funding of up to £20 million for a new ‘What Works Centre’, with the aim of making sure social workers across the country are able to learn from the very best examples of frontline social work (UK Government, 2016).

The WWCs function independently from each other. They meet through the What Works Council where the Chairs of the WWCs share information on the work of the different centres and identify shared priorities. Coordination is also performed through the Operational Group that brings together the heads of analysis/evidence within each WWC. The What Works Network is headed by a National What Works Advisor who is appointed by the government. The network has a team of 3 people that sit in the Cabinet Office. The role of the What Works Team is to strengthen and build the What Works Network by, for example, supporting the launch of new centres or supporting collaboration between centres. At the same time, the What Works Team looks at ways to extend the broader ‘What Works’ approach of using evidence in decision-making. For example, they provide policy makers and analysts with practical support through a Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel and wider work to build the capability of policy officials to understand and use evidence.

There are important differences between the WWCs in terms of size, budget, approaches for generating and transmitting evidence (Bristow, Carter & Martin, 2015). The WWCs mainly collate, assess, translate and support the adoption of information based on systematic reviews of existing literature and controlled trial methodology.
FIGURE 4: THE WHAT WORKS NETWORK
While some centres undertake systematic reviews of existing evidence in house, others commission the reviews externally. The target audiences also vary between WWCs. Although all centres engage with a combination of central government departments, local authorities and practitioners, the scope and emphasis of their engagement varies. The WWCs’ work with local authorities proved very useful in the context of spending cuts which forced many local authorities to get rid of their analytical capacities. There is no common standard regarding what is considered as good evidence across centres owing to the fact that the subject areas of the WWCs are so different. However, there are some criteria set out in the conditions for becoming part of the What Works Network.

Box 2: The Research Councils

Scientific research in the UK is funded through the research councils. Research councils are public bodies that are constitutionally independent of the government. While the government determines the structure and appoints the governing board for each council, it does not have any say in the choice of scientific priorities or the allocation of funding by the research councils. The independence of the research councils is based on the Holding Principle which asserts that scientists rather than politicians are best placed to choose scientific priorities. According to Prof Reid, the Holding Principle ensures that research funding is allocated on the basis of scientific merit, which is why the UK has one of the most efficient and cost-effective funding frameworks for science in the world. Academic freedom is a pre-condition for building a research base and an expertise on which government can draw for policy making. (Reid, 2016)
2. The Netherlands

Evidence based policy in the Netherlands is characterised by the existence of strong research units embodied in the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB), the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) and the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL). Although they formally sit in different ministries, these three Planbureaus are independent and they have the capacity to generate primary research. So does the Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, WRR) which sits in the Ministry of General Affairs and advises the government on intersectoral issues of great future importance and long term policies (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015).

While this report focuses on these strategic research units, it is nonetheless important to note that there are other research and policy analysis institutions at different levels of government (see Figure 5). Most ministries have Knowledge Directorates that are tasked with developing the evidence strategy and conducting and commissioning research for the ministries. Some Knowledge Directorates are centralised and sizeable (i.e. Ministry of Education), while others are divided along ministerial departments (i.e. Ministry of Health and Welfare). Some ministries also have Scientific Advisors that oversee the research done within the Ministry and advise high ranking policy makers. Occasionally, Ministries set up Knowledge Chambers (Kenniskamers) which are one-day events regrouping experts and high level civil servants to discuss specific issues. The meetings of the Knowledge Chambers usually take place 3-4 times a year.

The Planbureaus

Institutional setup:

The Planbureaus are peculiar to the Dutch government. These are research institutes that are funded by the government but are entirely independent with regards to the research they pursue. The Planbureaus sit within different ministries: the CPB within the Ministry of Economy, the SCP within the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the PBL within the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment. The CPB is the oldest Planbureau. It was established in 1945 to draft guidelines for economic policy making. Instead of providing guidelines and directives, which many politicians and employers opposed, the CPB became a trusted source of macroeconomic forecasts, economic policy analysis and societal cost benefit analyses in a wide range of policy fields (Van de Haar, 2015). Nowadays, the CPB counts 115 full-time staff with an annual budget of around 14 million euros. The SCP was founded in 1973 with the objective to do research on, and to monitor in real time, the quality of life of Dutch citizens. It evaluates existing policies in this field and contributes to formulating new policies aimed at improving the well-being of the population of the Netherlands. With about 100 employees and a yearly budget of 12 million Euros, it is the smallest Planbureau. The PBL is the most recent and the biggest one, with more than 200 employees. The following analysis essentially focuses on the CPB and the SCP whose representatives were interviewed as part of this research.
FIGURE 5: RESEARCH UNITS IN THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT

- Ministry of General Affairs
  - Knowledge Directorate
    - Central Planning Bureau (CPB)
- Ministry of Economic Affairs
  - Knowledge Directorate
- Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport
  - Knowledge Directorate
    - Social and Cultural Planbuerau (SCP)
- Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment
  - Knowledge Directorate
    - Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL)
While the Planbureaus are funded by their respective ministries, their independence is guaranteed by law. In practice, this means that policy makers have no control over the research agenda of the Planbureaus which are defined internally in consultation with government officials. The CPB thus carries out consultations with different ministries and the Prime Minister’s office to identify their research needs, but policy makers have no decision rights over the CPB’s annual working plan. Government representatives and Members of Parliament (MPs) from all political parties can ask all three Planbureaus to undertake research on specific issues, but the Planbureaus are not obliged to accept these requests. When the CPB declines some requests, it usually does so either because it does not have sufficient knowledge on the question, or because it lacks resources, or because the research question is hard to answer, unclear, or has already been partly answered elsewhere. The same applies to the SCP. The SCP, like the two other Planbureaus, submits its working program to the Council of Ministers, but the final decision on the research agenda is exclusively in the hands of the SCP Director. However, the SCP is always attentive to the Ministries because one of the main criteria for the selection of research projects is their relevance for policy makers.

The research process:

The Planbureaus conduct primary research at the interface of policy and science in their respective fields. The CPB has longstanding topics that they always study such as the labour market, taxes, social security and health. For each of these topics, programmes are run for three-year periods. Every programme has an Advisory Committee composed of academics and policy makers who control the quality of the research and its relevance for policy. The CPB has high research quality standards that are upheld through connections and engagement with the scientific community: researchers at CPB are expected to participate at academic conferences and publish in peer reviewed journals. In addition, the CPB as an institution is reviewed every 3 to 5 years by a team of independent experts. Dissemination of research is done through books, discussion papers, policy briefs, notes written to ministries and MPs and seminars aimed specifically at policy makers.

The SCP has four departments, each one covering two ministries. Since the SCP’s research is interdisciplinary and of interest to different departments, they have very close contacts with all the ministries on a daily basis which allows them to follow the policy process and identify research needs within each ministry. Through this close cooperation, the SCP not only collects information on the ministries but it also influences the policy process. The SCP develops a draft of its annual working programme on the basis of this process of formal consultations and everyday contact with the Ministries. This draft is then discussed with high level ministry representatives before a final decision is made by the SCP executive. While the CPB mostly uses data from the Office for Statistics, the SCP also generates its own data through surveys that are commissioned externally. All the data analysis is done in-house and, as for the CPB, the SCP attaches a lot of importance to research quality. In order to ensure high quality standards, the SCP has a methodology section with 6 people who provide support to researchers in the definition and implementation of their projects. For each research project, they have an internal advisory committees composed of 3-4 colleagues who provide comments and feedback on the research. When there are big projects, they also have external advisory committees with scientists from universities and policy makers from the ministries. All the data collected by the SCP is available to other researchers for use, and all the research outputs are made public. The SCP is also reviewed by external experts on a regular basis.
Research – policy dynamics:

The Planbureaus make their independence operational by providing impartial analysis, rather than advice, to all actors involved in the policy making process as well as the wider public (Van de Haar, 2015). In practice, this means that instead of determining ‘what should be done’ regarding specific policies, the Planbureaus seek to point to certain issues and put forward a number of options through their research. This allows them to stay clear of being associated with particular political political parties or political agendas. As a result, the Planbureaus enjoy high levels of public trust which occasionally allows them to raise issues on the political agenda. For instance, 10 years ago, the CPB conducted a series of studies on ageing which helped to raise this issue at the top of the political agenda. The CPB also conducts analyses of the potential impact of political party programmes during electoral campaigns. These analyses substantially influence political debate during the campaigns, as well as the building of political coalitions after the elections.

Beyond informing policy making, the Planbureaus thus seek to inform public deliberation by providing information to all parties involved in political debate. In this respect, the Planbureaus seek to promote an evidence based society in which research serves the purpose of improving democratic processes and political contestation. For instance, the SCP has played an important role in informing recent debates on immigration in the Netherlands when it published an analysis showing that there were twice as many asylum seekers related to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s than asylum claims in 2015 as a result of the migrant crisis.

Engagement with the scientific community:

Both the CPB and the SCP have very close contacts with the academic community in the Netherlands. They both have members of staff that are part time professors at different universities and all the newly employed researchers are required to have PhDs and fully participate in scientific circles. While academic publications are not a requirement for researchers to be promoted, they are regarded as a sign of research quality. Academics are also very keen on cooperating with Planbureaus as this gives them the opportunity to establish links with policy makers.

The Scientific Council for Government Policy

Institutional setup:

The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) is an independent government agency that sits within the Ministry of General Affairs which corresponds to the Prime Minister’s Cabinet. While the WRR is effectively a research institute akin to the Planbureaus, there are nonetheless important distinctions between these institutions. First, unlike the Planbureaus, the WRR does not focus on a specific area. It is an interdisciplinary research unit with scientists from different backgrounds whose role is to produce research for strategic planning and forecasting. Second, unlike the Planbureaus which seek to provide impartial analysis and refrain from giving advice and recommendations, the WRR gives concrete recommendations in addition to creating knowledge. Most importantly, the government has the obligation to respond to all the reports of the WRR, which is unique to this institution.
The structure of the WRR is also different from that of the Planbureaus. The WRR is headed by a Chairman who is appointed by the Prime Minister and a Council formed of 7-8 professors that are selected by the Chairman. The Chairman and the members of the Council are appointed for 5 years. However, the members of the Council are not appointed at the same time so that their mandates do not expire at the same time for the sake of continuity and stability. Usually, the professors stay within the Council for two mandates. The WRR employs approximately 40 people, out of which 20 are researchers and the others are communication and administration staff. The researchers work in project teams that are led by Council members. Most of the research topics are defined by professors that sit on the Council. However, research projects can also be put forward by researchers or commissioned externally. Ultimately, the decision on which research projects will be pursued is made by the WRR Council which sits twice a year to consider new research topics. Since the WRR can only run 7-8 projects at a time, the Council has to be selective when choosing the projects that are going to be pursued because there are always more proposals than they can handle.

### Research – policy dynamics:

As for the Planbureaus, the independence of the WRR is guaranteed by law. The WRR carries out consultations with the Prime Minister and other parts of the government when developing their research agenda to make sure that their research corresponds to the needs of the government. However, politicians and policy makers cannot impose any research topic on the agenda of WRR. The WRR only accepts external requests for research when they find the research topic relevant, feasible and when they have the capacity to do it. The WRR is relatively insulated from daily politics as most of its research concerns long-term planning and forecasting. The implications of their research, which often takes years, will only be relevant for governments in the future. Furthermore, in order to ensure a fair balance of political views, an effort is made at selecting professors from different political backgrounds to sit in the Council of the WRR.

The WRR usually undertakes big research projects that take 2 or 3 years to be completed. The quality of the research is ensured through an internal peer review process: every two weeks the staff read and discuss the reports of their colleagues. At the end, there is an external peer-review carried out by academic experts in the field. The research is disseminated through books, reports and policy letters which seek to communicate research in a condensed, reader-friendly format. The length of the research has drawn criticisms regarding the value added of the WRR, which is why they also runs short projects and publish interim reports to make their research findings more timely. The WRR is also making efforts at presenting information in a more user-friendly way trough presentations, movies and other types of visual infographics. The reports are presented either to ministers or directly to the Prime Minister. The Government’s response is usually drafted by the ministry or ministries that are specifically concerned by the topic of the report. The WRR undertakes an evaluation of the impact of the research one year after the publication of the report and there is an external evaluation of the work of the Council and of the whole WRR every 5 years.

### Engagement with the scientific community:

Since the Council of the WRR is staffed with university professors, this institute has a very close collaboration with the academic world. Almost every project involves the participation of academic experts who either directly take part in the research or act as peer reviewers. The WRR thus constitutes an essential link between government and the scientific community in the Netherlands.
Conclusion

The objective of this research was to map out different models of government research and policy analysis units in various European countries. While it is impossible to give an exhaustive typology of evidence based policy making institutions in one country, let alone the whole of Europe, this report has identified the following models of institutions in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands:

1. **Research Analysis Units within Government Departments**

Research and analysis units within government departments are the basis for any evidence based policy making. These analysts have a very close interaction with policy makers whom they provide day-to-day assistance in the development of policies. The research produced by these analysts is narrowly focused on particular ministry-driven questions. Due to the time pressure and tight deadlines associated with policy making, analysts have a flexible approach to the type of evidence used in their research. The dissemination of research mostly occurs through regular interaction with policy makers. In some cases, research is externally commissioned. While there is some engagement with the academic community, this mostly occurs on an ad hoc basis.

2. **Scientific Advisors**

The institution of scientific advisor is a characteristic feature of evidence based policy making in the UK. It is important to note that scientific advice is not limited to the role of the Government Chief Scientific Advisor, but that it consists of a network of Chief Scientific Advisors spread across government departments. Their role is to feed scientific advice to policy makers by acting as intermediaries between government and the scientific community. As stated above, the task of the scientific advisors is to know what is researchable and whom to ask for specific types of evidence. Scientific advisors are recruited from academia and are thus fully embedded in the broader research community.

3. **Advisory Councils and Committees**

Advisory Councils and Committees are the most direct links between government and academia as they are generally staffed with academics that hold permanent posts at universities. The Councils are permanent bodies whose role is to assist government departments in their research by horizon scanning and bringing new perspectives on the evidence used by policy makers. The Committees are mostly ad hoc bodies that provide expertise on specific issues. Both the Councils and the Committees play a critical role in building mutual understanding between government and academia.

4. **Knowledge Brokering Institutions**

Knowledge brokering institutions seek to collate existing evidence on specific issues through rigorous systematic reviews in order to determine which policy interventions and practices are the most cost-effective. Systematic reviews were first conducted in the field of medicine before being applied to different areas of social policy. The UK’s What Works Network is a unique example of state funded, and yet independent, knowledge brokering institutions that provide analysis and advice to central government, local authorities and practitioners. These institutions sit in between government and the research community, which sometimes makes it challenging for them to build their audiences.
5. Government Research Institutes

Government research institutes, such as the Planbureaus and the WRR, can be seen as ‘a half-way house between a think tank and a university institute’ (Van de Haar, 2015). These institutes conduct primary research close to the highest standards of academic excellence. While they formally sit in government departments, these institutes are fully independent with regards to their research agenda. This allows them to raise issues on the political agenda and influence public debates. Besides providing impartial analysis to policy makers, these institutes seek to inform the wider public and thus contribute to democratic processes. They constitute the best example of evidence informed policy making institutions.

The analysis presented in this report suggests that there is a trade-off between the ‘embeddedness’ and relevance of government research units on the one hand, and their independence and scientific excellence on the other. The more a research unit is embedded in policy circles, the more it will be able to produce policy relevant research with a direct impact. However, the tight deadlines and narrow confines of policy driven research may reduce the unit’s ability to produce high quality and innovative research. On the other hand, a research unit that enjoys full independence may produce groundbreaking research that has the potential to shift the political debate and the choice of policy in a specific area. The downside is that this research unit may find it more difficult to convey the evidence to policy makers and have a tangible impact on the ground.

Most government research units fit in between these two ideal type scenarios: they are embedded in policy circles to a certain level and enjoy different degrees of independence. In addition, while it is tempting to regard these two ideal type institutions as substitutes, they are very much complementary to each other. The research analysts that are embedded within a policy team need the evidence produced by the more remote and independent research units in order to perform their daily tasks. At the same time, the more remote research units need to interact with research analysts working in policy teams both to define the knowledge needs of the ministries and to disseminate and put into practice the results of their research. Evidence based and evidence informed policy making thus requires a variety of well-connected institutions operating at different levels.
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