

# A knowledge broker in the middle: making connections in the city

The case of Delft, the Netherlands

Reflections on the role of  
the knowledge broker



City Deal on Education

Perspective of the municipality

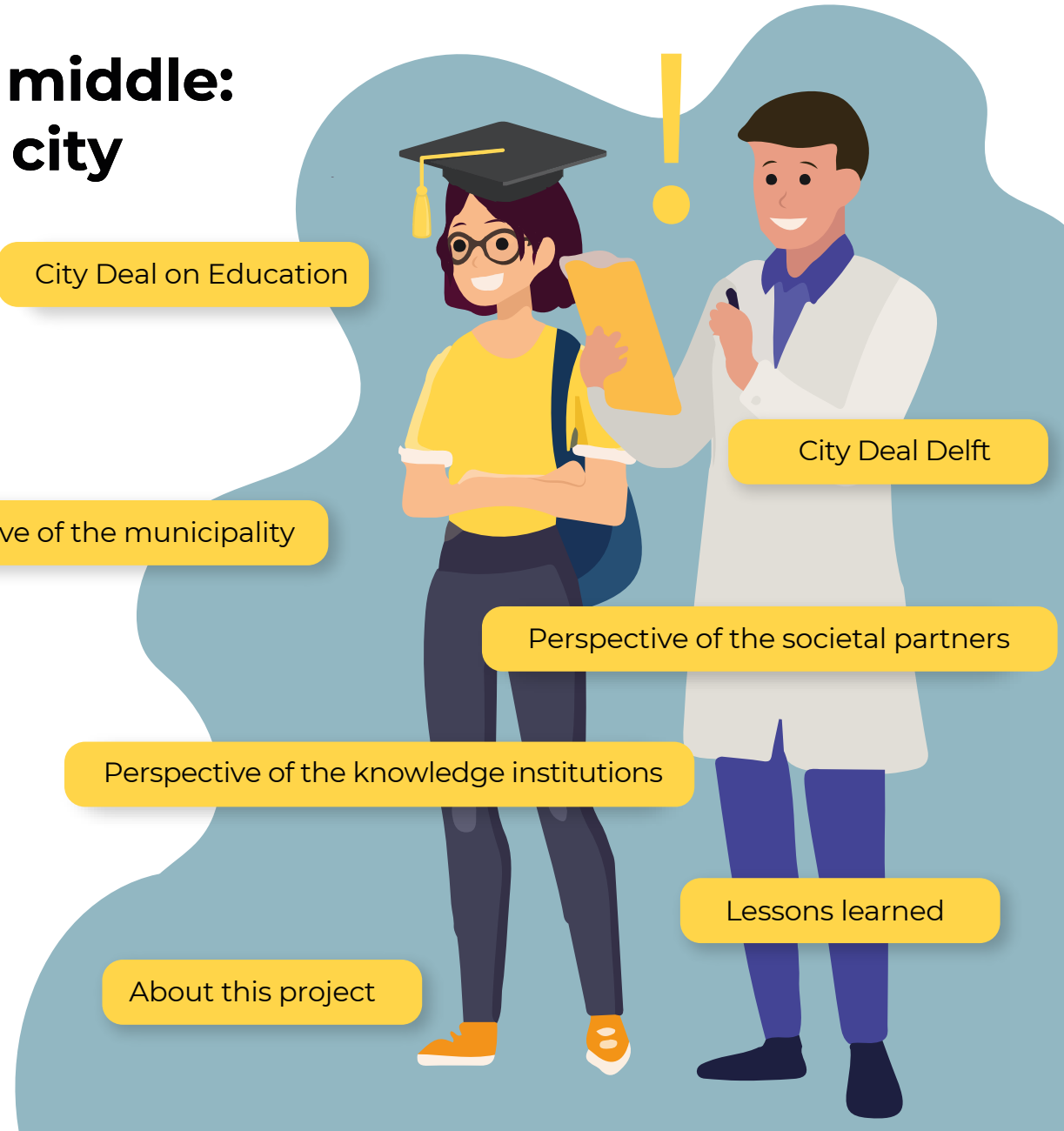
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# CITY DEAL ON EDUCATION

A Dutch City Deal is an agreement between a select number of cities, national government departments, civil society and the private sector to tackle a specific and self-defined problem. This new, intensive collaboration must ensure evidence-based urban policy. There are 19 City Deals in the Netherlands, among which the City Deal on Education 'City Deal Kennis Maken'. The City Deal on Education is an important and innovative way in which cities, research universities and universities of applied sciences collaborate on an equal basis in finding solutions for major social and urban challenges.

With the City Deal on Education, partners aim to accelerate the solution of social challenges in cities through large-scale involvement of researchers, lecturers and students. The partners regard this on the one hand as a form of making use of knowledge and on the other hand as making the city available as a learning environment for students ([www.agendastad.nl](http://www.agendastad.nl)). Ultimately, it must yield a proved and proven good method of partnership between knowledge institutions and the city of which students will benefit in particular.

The City Deal on Education started in 2017 and will end on December 2021. In 2018 the City Deal on Education managed to get funding from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.



## A KNOWLEDGE BROKER IN TANTHOF

With the goals of the City Deal in mind, the Municipality of Delft and the knowledge institutions in Delft have employed a knowledge broker in the Tanthof neighborhood.

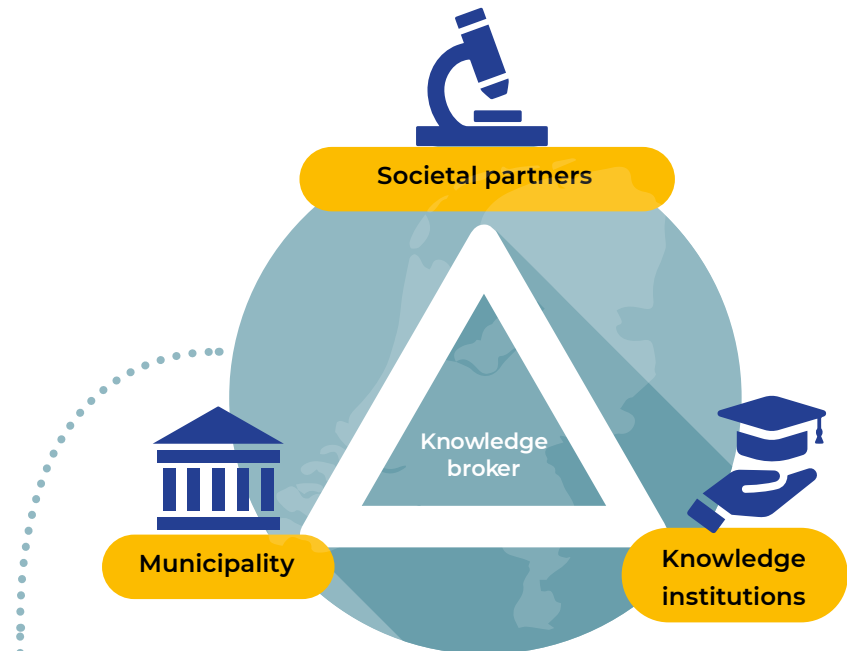
Tanthof is a 1980s neighborhood with residential areas in Delft. It was set up as a neighborhood for young families, but nowadays it has an ageing population, with concerns about the livability and facilities in the neighborhood for elderly.

The City Deal on Education Delft consists of the municipality of Delft, The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), Delft University of Technology (TUD) InHolland University of Applied Sciences

The aim of the knowledge broker is to create connections between the community of Tanthof, the knowledge institutions situated in Delft and the municipality; connecting them around societal issues to create new knowledge and possible (policy) solutions to societal community challenges. The knowledge broker explored questions and issues with people of the community and defined a research agenda together with the municipality and inhabitants.

## RESULTS THUS FAR

In 2020, 12 student projects involving 200 students from different knowledge institutions were conducted in Tanthof.



*The knowledge broker's task was to connect the different partners: municipality, societal partners, and knowledge institutions. He was seen as the link between all involved.*

Project	Students
Energy efficient housing stock	30 students, THUAS
Energy transition Tanthof	30 students, TUD
Managing public space	20 students, InHollandUAS
Roadmap energy transition	40 students
Natural playground manual	5 students, InHollandUAS
Kick off meeting on aging	4 students, InHollandUAS
Research project Abtswoudehuis	12 students, THUAS
Exploratory research aging	20 students, THUAS
Mobility among elderly	5 students, THUAS
Exploratory research senior friendliness	30 students, THUAS
New housing concepts	5 students, TUD

# PERSPECTIVE OF THE MUNICIPALITY

In August 2020, two strategic advisors of the municipality were consulted about the role of the knowledge broker. They described the benefits and challenges of working with a knowledge broker as experienced by the Municipality.

## BENEFITS

- The knowledge broker is **embedded and connected** in the municipality and all knowledge institutions in Delft. He has **connections** with the different parties which is beneficial for collaboration.

*“The knowledge broker enabled us to focus. He could connect the themes and the residents, as well as student projects and courses of the different knowledge institutions.” (R3)*

- The **independent and intermediary position** of the knowledge broker is valuable: even though he is connected to all parties, he can function as an independent broker and coordinator.
- With a knowledge broker, there is potential for **continuity and long-term commitment**. The knowledge broker has the time and position to actively advocate for connections in place and time.

*“You need somebody to organize it all. You need good matching and counseling.” (R8)*

## CHALLENGES

- The **integration of the local questions** with programs of knowledge institutions is complex. Local questions can pop up at any time, knowledge institutions have curricula that are determined beforehand.
- **Managing expectations** of the different parties concerning student research can be difficult: students are learning, and cannot be seen as professionals. Their attitude and the results of the study may not be as expected.
- Demonstrate that the collaborations have **impact on society**. The impact on society needs to be demonstrated for the longer-term. The collaboration cannot just exist of short term projects.



# PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIETAL PARTNERS

A main task of the work of the knowledge broker was to connect residents, civil society organisations, and entrepreneurs in the neighborhood to knowledge institutions and student projects.

Two of the **societal partners** involved in student projects gave their perspective on the activities of the knowledge broker. One of the partners is a representative of the neighborhood association of inhabitants of Tanthof. The second partner is the director of a care home in Tanthof.

## BENEFITS

- For the civil society participants, the knowledge broker was a **matchmaker** between them and the knowledge institutions. Working with knowledge institutions was a new experience for them.

*“The knowledge broker had an active role in thinking of different forms of reporting for different audiences. He was a sort of director, without being too dominant.” (R2)*

- The knowledge broker not only **connected** students to these civic questions/issues (input and output) but also **translated** these questions/issues for student research.

## CHALLENGES

- If there are different projects in the neighborhood, it may become too **time-consuming** for the inhabitants to be involved in the work of students.

*“You have to discuss the expectations of the different parties. Make sure that people realize it is student research – and students are learning to do research.” (R2)*

- **Expectation management** of the residents may be based on what they expect from professionals, there need to be a continuous emphasis on what they can expect from students.



In Delft, three knowledge institutions are located. We spoke to three lecturers and two strategic advisors of these institutions. The following challenges and benefits are formulated based on their input.

## BENEFITS

- A knowledge broker can function as a **linking agent** between students and the other parties.  
*“It was great that the knowledge broker knew the setting. [...] The added value of a knowledge broker was that he knew the local context; he could support me in managing the field.” (R9)*
- A knowledge broker knows the local contexts and has a **local network**. This greatly improves access to the neighborhood and the people involved.
- The knowledge broker is **independent** of all parties and can manage all interests.
- If the position of the knowledge broker is formalized, there is a great potential for continuity in research projects.
- Knowledge broker helps to **streamline** projects and to support students in their work.

*“We have 13, 14 assignments in which we work with students. [...] It takes a lot of time to manage that properly. And the knowledge broker helps a lot with that. Partly to streamline things.” (R9)*

## CHALLENGES

- The **time demands** of the research questions of the neighborhood or municipality do not always match the curricula of knowledge institutions.  
*“The knowledge broker has a question from the neighborhood and looks for students. But he has no idea about the teaching schedules and curricula. So, he may come with a question that I could use half a year later. Not directly. So that would be a shame. It really needs to be a careful mix and match, and careful collaboration between knowledge broker and lecturers.” (R5)*
- There is a need to manage the **expectations** of the end results of student projects. The results are the outcome of a learning process.
- It is highly complex to **integrate** different educational tracks from different institutions and to combine them with themes that are of interest for the municipality or the inhabitants.  
*“Looking back it is a shame that themes important for the city of Delft, were not easily transferred or applicable to the themes we work on as InHolland, Delft.” (R4)*
- Knowledge broker needs to **understand** all parties involved.



# LESSONS LEARNED



## TIME

Time is needed to **build relations**. The current knowledge broker was already very familiar with the neighborhood and the different parties involved.

Time to **set up projects**. A multi-disciplinary approach is complex, it takes time to connect the different parties. Longitudinal studies demand continuity and time.

Project based financing does not set a base for continuity in collaboration. A knowledge broker must be able to **commit long-term**.

**Stay involved** in the project, do not just participate at the start and finish.



## CONNECTIONS

Do not stay on the neighborhood level but connect the findings to other studies in other cities and neighborhood. **Connect to other projects** outside of the area.

Keep a clear **topic focus** in multi-disciplinary collaboration (judge your students based on the requirements for their part of the assignment, not necessarily for the whole of the project).

A neighborhood cannot be involved in multiple projects over many years. The knowledge broker will need to **carry and connect** projects to different neighborhoods and other knowledge brokers.



## EXPECTATIONS

The research is done by students, who can pass or fail their assignment which is inherent to **learning**. The partners need to be very aware of this.

Try to allow for **flexibility in assignments**, geared towards the target group while keeping in mind the demands of the study (ie a report for a council of inhabitants can be in a different format than a report for the municipality). Good research is a process, not just an end product.

**Collaboration between all partners involved improved**

**Independent position and match maker role of knowledge broker highly appreciated**

**Time, structure and continuity great advantages**

**Governance and future financing greatest challenges**

# ABOUT THIS PROJECT



The Erasmus+ funded project Socially Engaged Universities (SEU) is aiming to explore different models of community university partnerships (CUPs) and to share experience and expertise of how European Universities can work with and for their local communities through “Third Mission” activities in addition to their core teaching and research tasks.

Within the framework of City Deal on Education Delft, the knowledge broker was appointed to develop the City Lab Delft (Tanthof). Reflections on the role of the knowledge broker in its first 18 months of functioning are presented here. Different parties involved in two projects (cases) were interviewed to assess the benefits and challenges that were experienced with the position of the knowledge broker. We spoke with strategic advisors of the municipality, professionals from the neighborhood, and different representatives of the knowledge institutions. These parties were recommended by the knowledge broker. The question we tried to answer was: “What are the benefits and challenges of working with a knowledge broker, according to the three involved parties?” Different partners of the knowledge broker were interviewed between June 2020 and April 2021. For more information about the project please visit: [www.seuproject.eu](http://www.seuproject.eu).

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## Colofon

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