ANALYSING KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

UNCOVERING THE POWER OF NETWORKS IN THE FINLAND–EU CONTEXT

Edited by Katri Eeva and Jaakko Kauko

"This book about higher education policymaking networks operating in and between Finland and the European Union is a wonderful read from beginning to end. It provides a refreshing approach to the complex relations between knowledge, power and networks, making a compelling case to study policy making from a relational perspective. Furthermore, the book advances research in education policy through a series of insightful methodological moves that should be key for anyone studying policy networks in the future."

– **Jason Beech**, *Associate Professor of Global Policies in Education, University of Melbourne, Australia*

"This is an exciting book about higher education policy and knowledge networks in the European Union (EU) and in one member state, Finland. Based on extensive and solid empirical research, the volume brings new insights about how policy making works in 'in-between networks' in a policy field where EU competencies are vague and which, as a result, has been too little studied to date. The chapters generate novel findings both at the EU level and in a national context, Finland, as well as the interplay and interactions between them. The research is based on solid theoretical and conceptual work on knowledge, power and networks, approached through a perspective that combines discursive, institutional and everyday analyses. The volume is highly recommendable to all scholars and students of European integration in general and higher education policy in particular."

– **Johanna Kantola**, *Professor of European Societies and their Politics, Centre for European Studies (CES), University of Helsinki, Finland*

"This book is an original, empirical, and innovative study of the networks of power and knowledge that structure higher education in Finland and Europe. Based on a mixed and demanding methodology, it reveals the unsuspected institutional and epistemic relationships of this brokering activity beyond classic policy-making analyses."

– **Romuald Normand**, *Professor of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Strasbourg, France*

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Analysing Knowledge Networks in Higher Education Policymaking

Looking at higher education policy actors connecting the Finnish and the European Union (EU) contexts, this volume explores the power and influence of networks on decision-making and the utilisation of knowledge within higher education policy. It is unique in providing a new understanding of how European higher education policies are shaped and implemented in day-to-day policymaking.

Building on existing literature and robust empirical work to focus on EU–Finland knowledge networks, the book develops a novel methodological approach that combines social network analysis, network ethnography, interviews, and observation data to capture how networks can significantly affect the way higher education is governed. Understanding how policy is shaped through knowledge networks is crucial as the EU faces political challenges to its cohesion from internal and external pressures through authoritarian and populist ideologies. This book represents a critical starting point for considering how to theorise, understand, and question the interdependence of knowledge and policy.

The topical book will be of interest to scholars, researchers, and postgraduate students involved with education policy and politics, higher education studies, and international and comparative education more broadly.

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Uncovering the Power of Networks in the Finland–EU Context

Edited by Katri Eeva and Jaakko Kauko

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Contents

List of contributors *ix*
Foreword by Sotiria Grek *xi*
Editorial notes *xiv*
Acknowledgements *xv*

1 Knowledge, power, and networks in higher education policymaking 1
KATRI EEVA AND JAAKKO KAUKO

2 Studying knowledge networks in higher education policymaking 20
JAAKKO KAUKO, KATRI EEVA, JARMO KALLUNKI, JONI FORSELL, AND PAULA SILVÉN

3 Inside the knowledge networks 38
PAULA SILVÉN, JONI FORSELL, MAIJA SALOKANGAS, TAINA SAARINEN, AND KATRI EEVA

4 National and European systems intertwined: Higher education policymaking in the EU context 56
KATRI EEVA AND JAAKKO KAUKO

5 Finland–EU higher education policy network: Structure, formation, and characteristics 82
PAULA SILVÉN, JARMO KALLUNKI, AND KATRI EEVA

6 Organisational knowledge network 102
JARMO KALLUNKI, KATRI EEVA, AND JAAKKO KAUKO

7 Policymakers' norms on knowledge: Credibility, reliability, and holism 119
JONI FORSELL AND JAAKKO KAUKO

8 Navigating higher education policymaking in the European Parliament 137
KATRI EEVA, JAAKKO KAUKO, JONI FORSELL, AND CHERRY MILLER

9 Conclusion 157
JAAKKO KAUKO AND KATRI EEVA

Index *165*

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Foreword

Long before the European Union (EU) was founded, universities in Europe were beacons of cosmopolitanism, science, and cultural exchange spanning borders, people, and languages. It was therefore no coincidence that higher education should play a prominent role in the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957 (and later the European Union). The two devastating wars on European soil in the first half of the twentieth century added impetus to education and culture as pillars of European peace and prosperity, with higher education occupying a privileged place within this collective ambition. More recently, the transformation of European universities' role in the era of knowledge economies has led to the signing of the 1999 Bologna Declaration, the flagship process that fundamentally reshaped European higher education to create mobility, compatibility, and quality for universities in Europe.

One of the most significant dimensions of the change associated with the Bologna Process has been the European Union's role in and influence on higher education. The subsidiarity principle restricts the European Commission's scope of action in education, but the Bologna Process has provided a means for the Commission to fulfil its supporting obligations and to work around such limitations. Despite being initially positioned outside the Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Commission (and by extension the European Parliament, as Chapter 8 discusses) has come to play a key role in driving the agenda through the Commission's involvement in European research policy, its alignment with the Lisbon Strategy's economic agenda, and its ability to allocate funding to support activities that adhere to its own conception of what the EHEA should look like. Thus, either directly or indirectly, higher education policymaking in Europe has become a key Europeanising force, not merely in the field of education but, given its role in promoting mobility, the European project as a whole.

As with higher education itself, however, Europeanisation is a living organic entity, taking root and growing in unexpected ways. No matter how the gardener tries to tame and sculpt its growth and diversity, the EU's governance is shaped by a project that develops multiple roots, takes different directions,

and is becoming increasingly complex and difficult to disentangle. *Analysing Knowledge Networks in Higher Education Policymaking* addresses the difficult challenge of examining the growth and complexity of knowledge networks in higher education in Finland and Europe to offer us a valuable window into the multifaceted and continuously developing process of Europeanisation and the role of knowledge networks within it.

This book's focus on knowledge networks in Finnish/European policymaking is therefore as challenging as it is pertinent. The last 30 years have seen a major shift in the production of education knowledge for policy, which now draws on diverse knowledge actors, from international organisations to expert brokers, research consultants, civil society, and – occasionally – academics. As this book's chapters eloquently demonstrate, changes in policymaking and developments in knowledge production (increasingly including algorithmic knowledge and artificial intelligence) converge symbiotically in the Finnish case and several others: changing governance creates the conditions for new kinds of knowledge production, and the production of expert knowledge for policy thus becomes a key resource for governing.

Indeed, the compounding "poly-crises" of climate change, global pandemics, inequalities, migration, and more recently, European security and defence have created an explosive mix of challenges university leaders and both national and European decision makers appear increasingly powerless to handle. Populism and authoritarianism are on the rise globally, and Europe is slowly waking up from the dream of achieving the global dominance of liberal democracy to a polarised and uncertain world: to add another dimension to Donald Rumsfeld's famous triptych,[1] previously well-established "knowns" and certainties have become "unknowns," questioned not only by the just demands for decoloniality and degrowth but also by the rise of newly competitive authoritarianism – regimes that are democratic in appearance but wholly authoritarian in nature. Fundamental values and norms such as multilateralism and education for all are questioned. Higher education institutions in Europe and beyond have fallen prey to bitter culture wars and the distrust that has arisen from their intense commodification over the last five decades.

It is for these reasons that knowledge and its complex flows and networks are drawn more than ever into supporting the legitimacy and authority of the social and political processes of governing an ungovernable world. Policymakers suggest that social cohesion and effective government now depend on integrating knowledge and accommodating and managing different interests. *Analysing Knowledge Networks in Higher Education Policymaking* applies theoretical and methodological tools that greatly advance our understanding of the intricate webs of education actors and knowledge flows and networks that have strengthened the emergence of a European education policy space. At a time when there are significant calls for education researchers to stand against authoritarianism, inequality, and the climate catastrophe, this book represents a critical starting point for considering how to theorise, understand, and question the interdependence of knowledge and policy, and how to transform its

future towards the more truly democratic, progressive, and radical agendas that both planet and people desperately need.

Sotiria Grek
University of Glasgow

Note

1 I am referring to a phrase from a response of the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to a question at a US Department of Defense (DoD) news briefing on 12 February 2002 about the lack of evidence linking the government of Iraq with the supply of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups. Rumsfeld stated, "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones" (source: Wikipedia).

Editorial notes

The book has gone through Routledge's standard peer-review process for edited volumes, which is based on the evaluation of synopsis and acceptance of the full manuscript.

Additionally, for Chapters 6 and 7, which are potentially part of a dissertation, we have arranged a separate double-blind review process, externalized to Professor Taina Saarinen. We chose an external editor for this purpose to avoid conflicts of interest. As additional quality measures, we have discussed versions of different chapters in different academic settings, learning from the critique.

All quotations of interviews and observation diary notes have been language edited. This is to protect the identity of our interviewees.

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1 Knowledge, power, and networks in higher education policymaking

Katri Eeva and Jaakko Kauko

Researching the making of higher education policy: The European landscape

This book is about the making of higher education policy in the European Union (EU) context. Much has been written about European policy in connection with higher education from various perspectives underscoring higher education reforms (e.g. Bleiklie et al., 2017) and their national variations (Jungblut & Dobbins, 2023), finances and funding (e.g. Kivistö & Suprun, 2024), accessibility (e.g. Weedon & Riddell, 2016), for example. As higher education is connected with various domains and fields, researchers, spanning economics to social policy, have been interested in explaining higher education institutions' role as drivers of the knowledge economy and boosting European economic growth (e.g. Birtwistle & Wagenaar, 2020); others have focused on the processes of higher education governance (e.g. Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023), international organisations, and institutions.

Less attention has been paid to the preparatory venues of higher education policymaking in national and EU settings. This book seeks to understand the actors, scenes, and locations of higher education policy and their relationship with knowledge and power. Importantly, for emphasising this book's motivation, we focus on the social arrangements – networks – surrounding the politics of European higher education that structure and shape power and knowledge. We argue that knowledge exists in the relationships between actors, and that it is embedded in power relations and authority. To capture power in policymaking, we must therefore better understand the dynamics and locations of knowledge making in networks that operate within European policymaking structures.

Our focus is Finland and the Finnish higher education policymaking system as part of EU policymaking. Of course, the context we describe here is neither unique nor limited to a single geographical location. We have recently witnessed higher education undergoing various policy developments across Europe and beyond. We deem that one way of conceptualising these changes is to examine them through the network structure in which knowledge and power operate. Moreover, we consider how the knowledge network

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is connected with a global political narrative, and how EU decision making engages national governments and higher education institutions. We do not focus on a single policy process or reform but analyse higher education policy's broader landscape in the European context, initiating a scholarly discussion of the accounts underpinning contemporary higher education policymaking that often remain obscured.

New configurations of knowledge making

Knowledge production's global landscape has implications for education policymaking and the conditions in which policymakers operate. The work of contemporary governing occurs in a networked environment in which transnational organisations have gained more prominence, while domestic institutions attempt to maintain their authority. In *The New Production of Expert Knowledge* Grek (2024) argues for the evolving role of international organisations and their growing confidence in providing not only data but also expert guidance on policy decisions. National policymakers often need to operate between domestic and European decision making. Trondal and Haslerud (2024, p. 476) suggest that these multilevel executive orders "create systematic biases in the behavioural perceptions of bureaucrats" by directing attention to specific problems and solutions, structuring conflict and cooperation, and guiding policy coordination in certain ways. Networks can operate as intermediaries in interpreting and communicating technical or theoretical knowledge into a policy process and mediating policy between the different locations, policymaking elites, and policy actors (Maxwell & Stone, 2004).

This book explores higher education policymaking actors' various conceptualisations of knowledge and their deliberations concerning the political framing of educational knowledge and its use. Emerging approaches to knowledge formation in public policy have led to a vigorous study of evidence in policymaking. The blending of "traditional" policymakers with a growing number of experts and numerous transnational, national, and local actors highlights the importance of unravelling knowledge production and use in everyday policymaking practices – what Bandola-Gill et al. (2024) refer to as "boundary policy work," which has led to a "growing focus on the actors 'in-between' knowledge production and policy" (p. 135). Simultaneously, the changes between society and knowledge have hybridised knowledge formation: the knowledge of 'non-scientists' – end users, citizens, and professionals – is incorporated into new knowledge or policies (Delvaux & Schoenaerts, 2012).

The policy work of higher education policymaking actors is embedded in epistemic authority and its function in decision-making processes. The capacity to influence stems not only from scientific evidence and technical expertise but also from the representativeness and legitimacy emerging from the alignment between policy advisers' technical solutions and policymakers' diverse needs (Galanti, 2023). Studying policy subsystem interactions such as the preparatory venues and working groups that we will introduce in Chapter 4 and

further analyse in Chapters 5 and 6 – from a combined approach of network analysis, interviews, and observation – can therefore inform us of how different knowledge and expertise influence decision making.

Although the EU institutions need external academic experts and their academic capital, especially that of social scientists, to "shape and produce economically and politically exploitable knowledge" (Kauppi, 2018, p. 167), academic epistemic authority has also been challenged. Its ability to provide evidence for justifying scientific statements is at risk of being compromised by politics and the market, blurring the line between knowledge, opinion, and beliefs, and weakening democratic debate (Normand, 2016). The availability of data has changed the nature of political systems. This has had profound consequences for policymaking and higher education governance, which is increasingly data-driven (Erkkilä et al., 2023).

Statistical data are essential for any state to function, and organisations that provide statistics have gained relevance with the development of the state's responsibilities – a development also visible at the European scale. Big data and indicators are reshaping the European higher education field. They are systematically used for governance, channelled and modified by international networks and expert organisations, and also by the European Commission to govern (Normand, 2016). The broad availability of data and their computing has also enabled the emergence of new private actors offering data-driven advice for policymakers (e.g. Barber & Ozga, 2014). Collection, use, and evaluation of data are expected for any political entity to function (Dahler-Larsen, 2012; Kauko et al., 2018; Ozga et al., 2011). Data are thus a prerequisite for policymaking. The data lifecycle is full of political choices that are seldom openly discussed (Piattoeva et al., 2018).

The focus of our enquiry is the European policy ecosystem, but we acknowledge that evidence production and expertise may take a different shape in other geographical locations or political environments (e.g. Jungblut et al., 2023). For example, private actors, interests, and agendas have taken a prominent position regarding education policymaking in the United States (Lubienski et al., 2024; Ness & Baser, 2023). This privatisation of public policy has led to privatised knowledge brokering, making it challenging for policymakers to assess empirical and research evidence, and encouraging reliance on subjective value judgements and ideological perspectives. Chapter 7 analyses how norms frame knowledge formation in the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network, identifying shared norms reinforcing existing power relations and reliance on established and prominent actors and organisations and their sources.

The EU's limited power in education policy and Finnish higher education polity characterise the policy space in which we situate this book. The latter has a long tradition of negotiations and working groups between the main actors for developing policies. Such a modus operandi opens opportunities for various policy entrepreneurs, lobbyists, stakeholders, and interest organisation's representatives to participate in policymaking alongside public officials,

administrators, and higher education representatives. This governance constellation operates in networks. The network metaphor captures how policy actors negotiate cooperation and competition among education institutions and policy actors, with the central government using performance agreements, indicator-based funding, contracts, and recommendations instead of rigid legislation. This political system enables various actor networks to emerge, giving rise to the involvement of a broad range of actors in policymaking (e.g. Ball & Junemann, 2011; Rhodes, 2011).

We next turn to a discussion of the main concepts underpinning this book: networks, knowledge, and power in the context of higher education policymaking. First, however, we examine the conceptual foundations that shape contemporary higher education policymaking in the EU framework, introducing our primary research contexts, the EU and Finland. We shed light on the Finnish and EU political systems and their political institutions, helping readers navigate the chapters and their analyses.

Setting the scene: higher education and the politics of European integration

This book encourages reflection on the normative foundations underpinning European higher education. Historically, higher education has been a key area since the 1970s for the EU to address global competition. It has contributed to the development of a knowledge-based economy and society in Europe (e.g. Lawn & Grek, 2012). The Erasmus programme has been the primary tool for supporting internationalisation and cultural integration in higher education since the 1980s. Although national governments in Member States legislate and implement their own education policies, they also engage with European steering through various policy initiatives, programmes, and, more recently, funding instruments (e.g. Eeva, 2021).

In the mid-2000s, the Bologna process accelerated the joint coordination of higher education across Europe. This intergovernmental initiative strove to ensure higher education systems' compatibility and comparability within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Mattei, 2014). The Lisbon Strategy in the 2000s set common indicators for achieving the knowledge economy, making education data calculable and comparable (Lawn & Grek, 2012). Education policymaking has been framed since Lisbon Strategy by the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a soft governance mechanism that directs national policies towards common targets and objectives (e.g. Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004). Quality assurance and accountability measures initiated a new paradigm after Lisbon of "governing by numbers," in which numerical data steered education governance (e.g. Grek, 2020; Ozga, 2015; Paananen, 2019). This set the stage for an increased emphasis on benchmarking education performance, a prevailing orientation in EU higher education policymaking.

European integration in higher education has evolved in tandem with globalisation and technological change to enhance European economic and social integration (Dale & Robertson, 2009). This has underpinned the

importance of bolstering knowledge and skills to contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy and society (Pepin, 2006). The Bologna process and its common target setting for converging higher education systems in European countries have set the pace for the development of the EHEA since the turn of the century. More recently, the European Commission has proposed ambitious new policy initiatives in the European higher education sector. An example is the EU's European University Initiative, which draws on President Macron's 2017 speech following the "New American University" model (Crow & Dabars, 2015). There are now 64 European University alliances that include higher education institutions from various EU Member States. Under the 2021–2027 Erasmus+ programme, a sum of €402.2 million has been directed to support European university alliances. In responding to international competition, these alliances are regarded as the cornerstone for overseeing and managing the "Europe of Knowledge" (Maassen et al., 2023).

Despite the issue of competence, higher education policymaking is juxtaposed with research policy, in which the EU wields greater authority (further discussed in Chapter 4). EU funding policies therefore appear to affect the steering of higher education policy through funding programmes and instruments such as the Horizon Europe programme and European University alliances. Higher education and universities are now subject to EU-level targets enforced through a complex set of regulatory instruments – a development that takes the shape of "creeping competence" (Pollack, 2008).

Much has been written about the EU's institutions, governance, and policymaking. Briefly, the European Commission initiates policy; the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (hereafter referred to as the "Council") negotiate and decide on the EU's legislative agenda setting and policy coordination (Treaty of Lisbon 2007.[1]). The European Commission is responsible for initiating policy. It is organised into departments, or Directorates-General (DG), according to policy areas. Each DG is overseen by a commissioner and their respective cabinet, elected by the European Parliament. All commissioners collectively exercise the Commission's political authority under the President's leadership. The President and commissioners[2] constitute a decision-making body known as "the college," which directs the Commission's political and strategic orientation. The DGs develop, implement, and manage EU policy, law, and funding programmes. The Commission's work programme is a key instrument for determining the Commission's political priorities' future direction, which the Commission President outlines publicly in their annual State of the European Union address. These priorities may include new policy initiatives and legislation, but they may also indicate the withdrawal of pending proposals.[3]

The ordinary legislative procedure, known as co-decision, is the most common instrument for legislation at the EU level (European Parliament, 2012, p. 5). Co-decision was shaped by the Lisbon Treaty. It made EU's decision making more democratic because the European Parliament strengthened its position in relation to the Council. The Council adopts EU policy frameworks and work plans, setting out the priorities for cooperation between Member

States, and the European Parliament adopts the EU budget, which has become increasingly relevant for education policy, as we discuss in Chapter 4. The European Parliament represents "the people's" interests in Europe, as Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are directly elected by citizens of EU Member States. The European Parliament "shall work together with the European Commission and the Council to determine the legislative planning of the European Union" (European Parliament, 2010, pp. 42–43). This means that when the Commission proposes legislation, the Parliament directs the policy matter to the relevant committee in accordance with the Rules of Procedure (European Parliament 2024). The committee allocates reports to political groups according to quotas, which can then appoint one MEP as a rapporteur. Chapter 8 zooms in on the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT), discussing its role as a European higher education policymaking actor.

Increased competition and opening up internationally, including Europe, go hand-in-hand in Finnish higher education. Until the 1960s Finnish higher education was an elite system available to a few in core urban areas. Between the 1960s and the 1990s the system expanded, with universities becoming political tools for societal and regional equality and economic growth. (Kivinen et al., 1993) From the 1990s international cooperation, global trends, marketisation, and global competition led to a more complex system through the establishment of universities of applied sciences (Lampinen, 2003; Rinne, 2010). A hallmark change was the 2009 law (Välimaa, 2012), which reformed universities' legal status and coincided with an emphasis on marketisation and education export (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016; Schatz, 2016), which Risto Rinne (2010) interprets as marking a new era of neoliberal Finnish higher education.

The Finnish higher education system is based on universal provision without tuition fees for EU and European Economic Area (EEA) citizens. It is also state-centred because of historical reasons and funding strings (Kauko, 2011). During the history of higher education, recurring policy themes are regional policy importance, influences derived from international cooperation that are adopted without strong policy debates, and the growing importance of innovation-driven and technological research, as well as the difficulty of aligning policy and budget decisions (Kauko, 2013).

The Finnish higher education system has a binary structure. There are 13 universities in Finland. Eleven function under public law, and two under private foundation law. There are also 22 universities of applied sciences, organised as public limited companies, mainly owned by public-sector stakeholders. Additionally, there is the Finnish National Defence University. Higher education institutions are active on European platforms. Eleven universities and eight universities of applied sciences are in European university alliances.[4] Some have memberships of established European university associations like the Coimbra group[5] or the League of European Research Universities (LERU),[6] and all universities and their national rectors' council, Universities Finland (UNIFI), are members of the European University Association. Only

two universities of applied sciences are members of the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).[7] All universities of applied sciences, however, are members of ARENE, the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences.

We have attempted to provide a concise overview of the field of higher education as part of EU and Finnish policymaking. Europeanisation education scholarship (e.g. Dale & Robertson, 2009; Lawn & Grek, 2012) illuminates the tensions and dynamics surrounding Member States' and non-state actors' agency in responding to the EU's policy involvement and activity, and the pressures for Europeanisation. The next sections scrutinise these interactions through the concepts of network, knowledge, and power – and their interrelation in higher education policymaking.

Policymaking in networks: Power to shape knowledge

> To look for the foundation of the normative force of the factual in its conscious or unconscious reasoning would be quite wrong. The factual can be rationalised later, but its normative significance lies in the property of our nature[.][8]
>
> (Jellinek, 1914, p. 338)

Policymaking attempts to shape reality based on political beliefs and norms. The seeds of this description are as old as the discipline of political science: it was first presented in the legalistic-positivistic tradition by Georg Jellinek (1914) in his book *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (originally 1900), in which he discussed how social practices and shared facts could become legislation. In the American functionalist tradition David Easton (1965) described politics as the "authoritative allocation of values," referring to how policymaking was a matter of policymakers' power and normative starting points. A more recent belief-emphasising tradition is the Advocacy Coalition Framework, which draws on the idea of how political actors form coalitions based on shared beliefs (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993). A long tradition of political science has established that beliefs, norms, and political ideologies are policymaking's foundational forces.

Networks play an increasingly important role in policymaking, shifting from the traditional authority of states and involving more diverse groups of policy actors (Bevir, 2013). This trend is also evident in European higher education policy, which is becoming more closely linked to EU policy developments. Education policy research has increasingly focused on networks operating transnationally, not necessarily following states' or other regions' borderlines and legislative restrictions but working in and between them (e.g. Verger et al., 2012). Studies have investigated how networks channel knowledge (Carvalho, 2013; Fenwick et al., 2014) and how experts create infrastructure for data flows (Lawn & Segerholm, 2011). Education policy research has identified the role of networks as a key aspect for understanding policymaking, and a

relevant object of research: “the international orchestration of policy spaces and the interdependent matrix of processes between various knowledge providers, deserve researchers’ attention in future research” (Karseth & Sivesind, 2022, p. 425). The increased interest in networks has also been seen in the steady flow of literature on social network analysis in education policy (Kallunki et al., 2025).

Networks tie knowledge and power to policymaking. Simply expressed, power is policymaking’s basic means; knowledge is its result. Strassheim and Kettunen (2014) argue that what becomes a “policy-relevant fact” requires a complex political struggle. The changing scheme for policymaking related to knowledge and power has been analysed through concepts such as post-bureaucratic governance (Ozga et al., 2009) and experimentalist governance (Sorensen & Graf, 2024). However, we focus on policymaking rather than governance in the EU’s context – sometimes described as technocratic. These terms tend to intertwine sometimes.

A notable tradition that has studied networks, knowledge, and power is that of epistemic communities. We do not draw on this concept here, but we find the research on it helpful for understanding the policymaking networks that shape power and knowledge. The concept of epistemic communities discusses how expert networks play a role in the interpretation of how the world functions for policymakers (Haas, 1992). European studies (Cross, 2011) and education policy research on international organisations (e.g. Kallo, 2009) and transnational networks (e.g. Menashy, 2016) have also drawn on the idea of epistemic communities, but the approach originates in international relations, and it therefore emphasises state actors (Adler & Haas, 1992). A review of epistemic community studies notes that most research involves single-country studies, and that a comparative and transnational perspective would benefit the research tradition (Cross, 2013). We have already argued that networks do not respect national borders, and this premise seems more than fair.

The epistemic community literature has also had a narrow perspective on networks and their knowledge. The review finds that the

> …epistemic community literature thus far has focused too narrowly on scientists because of the misguided notion that scientific knowledge is somehow superior to other forms of knowledge. Instead, I have suggested that the recognition and legitimation of expert knowledge is socially constructed.
>
> (Cross, 2013, p. 159)

When studying policymaking networks, we find this starting point important. We should not expect knowledge hierarchies before we can find them through empirical analysis.

In this book we study policymaker networks. Like Menashy (2016), we see their roles’ social construction in interrelations as an important factor; like Cross (2013), we think it important to see that epistemic communities

draw on many types of knowledge. However, our interest is in studying policy networks, which, as Menashy (2016) notes, have been unnecessarily defined apart from epistemic communities. In the context of EU and education policy especially, we believe this borderline to be inaccurate. We define knowledge as disseminated and used in policy networks, and these actions are not limited to any actor group. Knowledge varies, but it is always linked to questions of power through its political and normative dimensions.

Knowledge and other epistemic content in policymaking

We have yet to define what knowledge is. As this question is one of the cornerstones of philosophy, this is not an easy task. We define it first by reflecting on our epistemological choices and examining how knowledge is related to some close concepts which in turn are related to other epistemic content. Our epistemological choices have a foundational effect on how we understand change (Capano, 2009). It is therefore important to clarify what our epistemological premise is. In existing education policy research, it is possible to distinguish some of the main approaches to knowledge from various perspectives.

There is an influential poststructuralist approach in education research that often draws on the concept of governmentality, following the works of Foucault, and Rose and Miller (e.g. Ball, 2010; Lewis et al., 2020). Neo-materialist approaches drawing on Latour, Barad, and Desrosieres are increasingly popular. These approaches study how power creates and limits spaces (Saari, 2012), or how policies create new actor constellations (Koyama, 2011), where power is held by human and non-human actors (Williamson, 2016). A postcolonial view of knowledge is prominent, studying questions of colonialist discourse (Shahjahan, 2011) and policies (Takayama & Lingard, 2019). Our book's view is closest to the ideas of poststructuralism, with some nuanced exceptions in different chapters (e.g. normative institutionalism in Chapter 7). Within the postructuralist tradition, instead of the idea of steering at a distance and governmentality, which connote a centre-periphery structure (Kauko et al., 2018), we focus on the broader conceptualisation of knowledge and power as allowing room for different networks. The main thread throughout the chapters is our premise for understanding knowledge's socially constructed nature.

Knowledge is related to other types of epistemic content such as data, evidence, or information. In its basic English definition,[9] data are used to describe statistical items or facts that are available for further analysis. Information describes facts about someone or something. Evidence provides proof of whether something is true. Knowledge can be seen as adding a theoretical or practical dimension to information. Each of these epistemic content terms has been used to analyse policymaking.

According to our understanding the word "information" is often used in its everyday meaning and is seldom defined in education policy research. In the field of library and information science, however, coinciding with the trends of evidence-based policy and the first steps towards big data, the "information

policy" subfield began to receive more interest in the late 1990s. This field focuses on how the change from data to information and information to knowledge occurs (Rowlands, 1997). Epistemic content is observed here to gain more context as it changes on the data–information–knowledge–wisdom pathway (Bawden, 1997). For our purposes, understanding information's context or its lack is relevant. For example, in education policy uncontextualised information has been approached to study how "international elements" from international large-scale assessments or other information from other systems can provide methods of political reasoning and simplification in a national context (Santos, 2022). We use the word "information" in this book to describe uncontextualised knowledge.

The word "evidence" connotes that a piece of information has a political dimension, as it makes a normative claim concerning how things should be done. The evidence-based medicine movement, where there are enduring problems in converting evidence into practice (Claridge & Fabian, 2005) and policy (Masood et al., 2020), spills over into other sectors and the challenge of its incorporation into policymaking (Sanderson, 2011) and education policy (Kauko, 2022). Cairney (2015, p. 130) crystallises the problem's core as a useful dichotomy of a normative unrealistic understanding of evidence-based policy that fantasises about a lean process from scientific evidence to political action, and a realistic one, where "policymakers find simple ways to make decisions after weighing up a wide range of evidence." Our interpretation is the same: policymaking evidence can be basically any epistemic content, and we do not normatively expect policymaking to draw on scientific evidence. Drawing on our poststructuralist understanding, we argue that once policymaking has adopted any epistemic content, it is defined as knowledge through various elements of power, including ideational power, as we propose in Chapter 8.

Relational and normative power

Power theories vary, and there have been various attempts to summarise them. Lukes's (2004) three faces of power in decisions (Dahl, 1961), agenda setting (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962), and controlling preferences (Lukes, 2004) have been influential. Heiskala (2001) roughly divides power theories into views of power as a resource (Weber, Parson) and views of power in structures (Foucault, Heiskala). In many accounts Michel Foucault's work is seen as a clear break from earlier power theories. Hindess (1996) argues that Foucault (1977) was able to discuss power without the need for a sovereign. This means that as with past power theories, Foucault's ideas cannot be tied down to the power of the state and its borders. We regard Foucault's work as capturing three aspects of the interlinkage of knowledge and power: relationality, normative effects, and power effects (Foucault, 1977, 1986). Epistemologically, this has consequences for how we approach higher education policymaking in Europe.

Thinking that knowledge is relational and shaped by power and vice versa (Foucault, 1977) combines the analysis of knowledge formation with our key

focus, policymaking, which is essentially the exercise of power. Knowledge formation for policymaking in relation to other knowledge and power also underlines the importance of studying networks. In this regard the knowledge–power–networks triad of key concepts for our introduction is derived from the understanding of knowledge's relationality. A good example of how an understanding of relationality works in shaping knowledge is Eyal's (2013) argument for understanding expertise as occurring in networks instead of among experts as an individual attribute.

By creating the conditions for expected behaviour, knowledge has normative effects (Foucault, 1977). Knowledge in policymaking is both a product and a building block of policies which discursively build what is normatively presented as right. This highlights the importance of trying to understand what knowledge is in this context. The researcher must tread carefully, as many concepts and phenomena intersect. For example, it is well established that evidence-based policy with the expectation of achieving an optimal solution through scientific knowledge is impossible. Instead, evidence works as an instrument for ideological aims (Stehr & Grundmann, 2012). Klees and Edwards (2014, p. 38) take the argument to its extreme: "The ubiquitous call for 'evidence-based policy' always means 'my evidence.'" Understandably, "evidence" or knowledge usually means research-based knowledge for researchers. This sometimes leads to knowledge being implicitly defined (e.g. Wirthová, 2022) or not at all (e.g. McKnight & Morgan, 2020), even when it is the object of research. As the previous section discussed, knowledge is a broader concept for policymakers. It can certainly be derived from sources other than scientific research (Head, 2008), as long as they help promote an agenda (Kingdon, 2003). Understanding normative effects in the policy process means we accept a broad definition of what counts as knowledge in policymaking.

In Foucault's (1977, 1986) thinking, power is a productive force that builds reality. Knowledge's *power effects* have been conceptualised as discourses that describe and shape actor positions and the normative assumptions of the hierarchies between them. In education policy there are many studies of the discourses of international organisations and national education policies. Much research has focused on EU and OECD discourses in setting a global competition agenda, or on how discursive power forms a lightly regulated, persuasive, and self-managing form of governance in the European context (e.g. Henry et al., 2001; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Walters & Haahr, 2005). For example, OMC has developed into a more heavily regulated EU-wide soft power mechanism (Blomqvist, 2007), and economic policy coordination in the European Semester changes higher education policy at the national level (Eeva, 2018). We understand that to study power effects, we must examine how power shapes knowledge and the conditions of its use in policymaking. This means studying both discourses, understood as reflecting actors' power relations and positioning, and the networks in which they are built.

The plan of the book

This book consists of nine chapters following the research focus and principal themes the book covers. Chapters 1–2 discuss our conceptual and empirical framing; Chapter 3 outlines our conduct of higher education policy research in practice; Chapters 4–8 use our empirical material to provide an analytical account of researching higher education policymaking.

Chapter 2 describes our research's empirical conduct and our mixed-method approach as the analytical framework. It scrutinises our research data collection through the methods of network analysis, thematic interviews, and observations. It addresses methodological questions related to data collection, interviews, and observations, including the importance of access and its facilitation. It also discusses the conduct of analysis and the collective process of coding interview and observation data. The degree of description in this chapter, however, remains at the level of method and data introduction, while case studies in Chapters 4–8 give a more detailed account of the analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the potential benefits of using a new combination of methodology to deepen understanding of knowledge networks.

Chapter 3 offers a hands-on account of the collective conduct of higher education policy research and the unwrapping of the empirical nature of fieldwork interviews and observations in European and Finnish policymaking venues. By complementing Chapter 2, it broadens the methodological account, providing transparency to our research practices. We outline the research journey from the researcher's perspective, sharing insights into our conceptions of knowledge and the formation of our research process. Our reflexive account draws on the research project's internal group interviews and fieldwork material. The findings lead us to conclude that our research process has benefited from the various perspectives, positions, and experiences the research group members embody.

To understand the policy space in which knowledge networks operate, Chapter 4 conceptualises the Finnish and EU political systems in relation to higher education policymaking. It provides a detailed account of how higher education policymaking occurs within these political systems. We discuss the existing research on Finnish higher education policymaking as it concerns EU decision making, providing a review of Finland–EU higher education policymaking and its networks and focusing on day-to-day policy work. Finland has a distinct system for coordinating EU-related affairs: the government and its special ministerial sub-committees are responsible for the national preparation of decisions to be made in the EU, but parliament participates in the preparatory work and approves decisions. At the European level, education policymaking consists mainly of recommendations and other soft law instruments, given the EU's limited powers in education policy in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. We suggest, however, that the higher education policy field is increasingly intertwined with research and innovation sectors, arguing

that the boundaries between these two policy sectors have become blurred in EU higher education policymaking. This chapter provides the context for Chapters 5–8.

Chapter 5 analyses the higher education policymaking network operating in and between Finland and EU. The focus is on the structure, formation, and characteristics of the Finland–EU network. We analyse the data with a network ethnographic frame and qualitative content analysis. Our network analysis reveals that the main component is divided into the Finnish national and EU Member State blocs. This examination suggests that network formation in principle follows official structures, deliberate network building, and interest coalitions, and that the trust between different actors affects it. The network's most prominent characteristics seem to be the blurry boundaries between network actors' informal and formal relations, and the importance of physical presence in building trust and a sense of belonging between actors. Chapter 6 follows this analysis by drawing on quantitative network data, interviews, and ethnographic data. We conclude that these organisations, through the individuals representing them, can be collectively described as a knowledge network that creates, transforms, uses, and disseminates knowledge to shape higher education policies.

By drawing on new institutionalism, Chapter 7 investigates how norms frame knowledge formation in Finland–EU higher education networks and subsequent policymaking. Based on qualitative content analysis, we find that politicians', officials', and stakeholders' conceptualisations of knowledge are diverse and fluid, exhibiting role-specific articulations of shared norms. In Chapter 8 we examine higher education policymaking in the European Parliament. We focus on CULT, analysing its role as a European higher education policymaking actor. This chapter builds on policy ethnography through observations and interviews conducted in CULT. Following discursive institutionalism, we study how CULT's actorness is constructed and negotiated through ideational power.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, draws conclusions on our main findings and considers our methodological approach. It reviews the theoretical development of the concepts we employed and deliberates on how the research process can help understand the studied phenomenon.

Notes

1. *Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community (2007) Official Journal C* 306, 13 December, pp. 1–271.
2. The current Von den Leyer Commission (2024–2029) has 27 commissioners.
3. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategy-documents/commission-work-programme_en
4. https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/map
5. https://www.utu.fi/en/university/international-networks

6 https://www.helsinki.fi/en/innovations-and-cooperation/international-cooperation/networks-and-strategic-partnerships
7 https://www.eurashe.eu/members-directory/
8 The original text: "Den Grund der normativen Kraft des Faktischen in seiner bewuBten oder unbewuBten Verniinftigkeit zu suchen, ware ganz verkehrt. Das Tatsachliche kann spater rationalisiert werden, seine normative Bedeutung liegt aber in der weiter nicht ableitbaren Eigenschaft unserer Natur, kraft welcher das bereits Geiibte physiologisch und psychologisch leichter reproduzierbar ist als das Neue" (Jellinek 1914, p. 338).
9 Following the Oxford Dictionary of English 2025 provided by Oxford University Press and accessed through Tampere University licence of MOT Kielipalvelu: https://www.sanakirja.fi/.

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2 Studying knowledge networks in higher education policymaking

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Focus on knowledge networks

As we described in Chapter 1, we share a poststructuralist view of power and knowledge. Our premise is derived from Foucault's idea that power and knowledge are interlinked: knowledge is relational, normative, and it has power effects (Foucault, 2003, 1986, 1977). We understand knowledge as both an object and resource of policymaking (Cairney, 2015; Grek, 2013). This fluid approach to knowledge and power affords further elaboration before it is empirically applicable. The conceptual groundwork for this was also laid in the first chapter, where, based on previous studies, we discussed our understanding of our research's basic concepts: networks, knowledge, and power. Using these concepts, our idea for the research design has been to gradually deepen the understanding of knowledge networks. Chapter 1 introduced our view of knowledge networks, which highlights how they facilitate a collective definition of politically relevant knowledge. These networks operate transnationally and are intermingling official (organs that are set in documents) and unofficial (freeform activities around official activities or in free time) fora. We see knowledge networks as constituting the core of the policymaking process: they link the actors and define the epistemic foundations based on which decisions are framed and formed. This chapter presents the methodological tools we use to understand knowledge networks.

We have chosen a mixed-method approach categorised as convergent design. Convergent design is a process in which qualitative and quantitative analyses are advanced in parallel, and the results of their analysis are then combined (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Our research design combines network analysis, thematic interviews, and observations.[1] The combining of their results takes place in different ways described in Chapters 4–8 of this book.

For a convergent mixed-method design like ours, Creswell and Plano Clark (2017, p. 69) recommend (scientific) philosophical coherence. To achieve this in our empirical work, we use an analytical framework adaptable to different complex settings: Comparative Analytics of Dynamics in Education Politics (CADEP) (Kauko, Takala et al., 2018; Simola et al., 2017). CADEP has been used in comparative education policy research as a broad frame to focus on

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three dimensions of selected policy questions within a political system (e.g. Kauko et al., 2015, Kauko, Takala, et al. 2018). The framework builds on analysing actors' room for action.[2] Key questions of CADEP concern structural opportunities, political discursive possibilities, and the use of political space. These aspects fit well with our view of knowledge and networks in this book: intertwined and changing through power.

The CADEP analytical framework focuses on three dimensions of contingency: political situation (what is opportune); political possibilities (what is politicised, and what is not); and the use of political space (how actors can capitalise on the existing situation and possibilities) (Kauko, 2014; Palonen, 2006). It builds on a synthesis from theories of the policy process that have highlighted the build-up of moments of change (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Sabatier, 1993) and the importance of actors that are ready to facilitate existing possibilities as they emerge (Kingdon, 2003). CADEP has helped us focus our empirical work on essential general political features. We have adjusted the broad categories to fit our theoretical understanding of knowledge and networks. The three dimensions and their relationship with our empirical work are described in Table 2.1.

In relation to the political situation, we argue that knowledge networks are relevant phenomena in the political arena's structure. To understand political actors' opportunity to contribute to policymaking, we need to contextualise how networks are formed, and who their main actors are. To this end, we collected databases on actors, using them to conduct social network analysis and network ethnography to understand the relationships of relevant people and organisations in the Finland–European Union (EU) network. We deepened this aspect in our interviews by asking for descriptions of collaboration and sources of knowledge.

Table 2.1 CADEP framework for analysing knowledge networks in this book

Dimension	*Questions*	*Relation to knowledge networks*	*Methods*
(1) The political situation	What is opportune in a specific sociohistorical and transnational situation?	Analysing knowledge networks as a structure of the political arena	Network analysis, thematic interviews, observations
(2) The political possibilities	What political possibilities do prevailing discourses open?	Analysing knowledge networks as a source of power in politics	Thematic interviews, observations
(3) The use of political space	How do the relevant actors exploit the existing situations and possibilities?	Analysing everyday practices in knowledge networks	Thematic interviews, observations

Source: Adapted from Kauko, Takala, et al. (2018) and Kauko, Centeno, et al. (2018).

In relation to the political possibilities, we see knowledge networks as an important source of power in politics. To understand what kind of evidence is available, we need to understand how knowledge and actors promoting different kinds of knowledge become politicised or depoliticised, and how this frames the choices of epistemically relevant content. To achieve this, we interviewed network members about the selection and use of knowledge and observed their work in working group and political committee settings.

In relation to the use of political space, we regard everyday work as important. To understand how actors capitalise on the available epistemically relevant content, we need to establish an understanding of everyday practices in knowledge networks. To this end, our interviews probed the everyday practices of evaluating knowledge and involving actors. Our observations also focused on the use of knowledge in these political spaces.

This chapter addresses how we gathered our empirical material, the kind of choices we made, and the kind of limitations these data have. We do not zoom into broader questions of trustworthiness and reflexivity, which is the topic of Chapter 3. Here, we discuss our main methods of network analysis, thematic interviews, and observations, as well as the data we collected. We also describe how they helped us collectively code and analyse the interview data. The description in this chapter remains at the level of method and data introduction, while Chapters 4–8 give a detailed account of how the analysis was conducted.

Network analysis: Understanding the structure of the political arena

Education policy research has recently become more interested in studying networks (e.g. Hodge et al., 2020; Menashy & Verger, 2019). Although we discuss networks, the concept we employ is more precisely "social network," which refers to a set of actors (or nodes) and ties (relationships among the actors) (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 9; see also Marin & Wellman, 2011, pp. 11–12). Actors are often persons or organisations, but they can be other entities. Ties can be any meaningful relationships that connect actors, such as influence, hierarchical power relations, or the exchange of ideas or resources (Borgatti et al., 2013; Marin & Wellman, 2011; Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

The main approaches to networks in education policy research can be divided into social network analysis (SNA) and network ethnography. While SNA is mainly a quantitative approach, network ethnography, as understood in education policy research, is mostly qualitative. Both SNA and network ethnography seek to understand the structure, formation, and change of networks, and their influence in policymaking and policies. The defining difference between SNA and network ethnography is that SNA requires a uniform definition of nodes and ties to keep them constant in a single analysis, whereas network ethnography allows variation in what counts as a node or tie in a network. While the visual representations of networks drawn with the aid of

SNA or network ethnography may therefore look the same, their construction's logic usually differs. This also affects the conclusions they permit.

SNA draws on the idea that actor relations, instead of actor attributes, are important for understanding social phenomena (Knoke & Yang, 2008; Marin & Wellman, 2011; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Borgatti et al. (2013) formulate networks as a "way of thinking about social systems that focus our attention on the relationships among the entities that make up the system." We see this approach useful in the context of the partly unarticulated and overlapping structures that make up higher education policymaking in Europe (see Chapter 4).

Borgatti and Ofem (2010) list several types of relationships that can be described with SNA, of which our study focuses on social relations and interactions. In education policy research, our review notes (Kallunki et al., 2025) that SNA has potential, but it has boundary specification challenges. The boundary specification problem is common for large networks; the question is where the limits of the network are, and how we can uniformly define them. Without clear boundaries we cannot cross the border into meaningful analysis. All our networks are co-membership networks: when two individuals are members of the same working group, we assign a link between them. We then visualise these networks with the aid of graphic SNA techniques and use basic descriptive network statistics (e.g. node degree) to enhance this analysis. UCINET and NetDraw software (Borgatti et al., 2002) offer tools for this.

One early mention of "network ethnography" is by Howard (2002, p. 570), whose approach is a careful combination of SNA and ethnographic field methods: entering a field site to identify a sample community (to address a boundary question); setting up a survey for centrality analysis with SNA methods; and identifying new subgroups for closer qualitative study. However, network ethnography has entered education policy research through the prominent work of Ball (2008) and Ball and Juneman (2011), who refer to Howard among other relevant literature. Ball's (2008) data on philanthropic networks in the United Kingdom differs from Howard's, drawing on "detailed and extensive internet searches." In a further elaboration of the education policy variant of network ethnography,[3] Ball and Juneman (2011, pp. 12–13) build on "extensive and exhaustive internet searchers," as well as interviews with key actors, "mapping […] the form and content of policy relations in a particular field." They explicitly avoid "giving too much attention to network-mapping technologies" (Ball and Junemann, 2011, p. 13), emphasising the anthropological approach to networks (Ball and Junemann, 2011, p. 13, referring to Knox et al., 2006, p. 128). This interpretation of network ethnography, emphasising the theoretical interpretations made by the researcher of a network based on internet searches and further qualitative analysis, is somewhat popular in education policy research (e.g. Avelar, 2021; Oldham, 2017; Olmedo, 2014). It allows flexible qualitative analysis of relations and network members but has weaknesses in its opaque methodology, especially in the black boxing of internet searches and thus the network description logic.

Our network ethnography approach differs from the education policy tradition described earlier. In the desktop research for internet-sourced data, we applied a systematic approach, focusing only on certain types of documents in defining our study's sample population. These include information about organisation and group memberships on webpages and in working group appointment and meeting documents, as well as public descriptions of organisational networks. This network-formation logic is close to SNA two-mode networks, as we employ network ethnography to investigate co-memberships. Our understanding of link establishment is thus closer to SNA than network ethnography in education policy. In this respect our approach is more alike to Howard's (2002) than Ball and Junemann's (2011). However, we have resorted to researcher-based interpretation in setting the networks' boundaries. This differs from SNA approaches that prefer clearer boundary specification rules.

Table 2.2 describes the two databases that we have collected for understanding networks. The first database contains all Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) working groups between 2010 and 2021 (MEC database). This database does not present any boundary specification problems, as we can include all existing working groups. Working group data were sourced through data requests from MEC in 2018 (analysis in Kauko et al., 2021) and 2021 (analysis in Kallunki et al., 2023). The 643 working-group database we received from MEC did not entirely match the data available on the MEC project database website, and we thus manually completed

Table 2.2 Network database description

Database description	*Data origin*	*Database size*	*Data items*	*Analysis in this book*
MEC database: Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland) working groups 2010–2021	Public documents (nomination letters, project memoranda, etc.) and Finnish government public project register	924 working groups	Group name, type, term, abstract Member names, terms, background organisations[a] Other data (e.g. technical identifiers)	Selection of all 179 higher education working groups
Finland–EU organisation database[a]	Public documents (organisation webpages, EU webpages, and meeting minutes)	702 organisations as members in 149 organisations or working groups	Organisation or working group name Member's background organisation	Entire database

Note:
[a] Data added manually.

it to contain 924 entries. For this book's analysis, we separated 179 higher-education-related working groups and working groups with a general orientation that could be linked to higher education. For these working groups, we additionally coded the members' background organisations based on desk research (mainly drawing on nomination letters found on the MEC website). Working groups were listed in different types of projects in the received data: body, legislative project, strategy project, and general project. We omitted projects categorised as body or strategy projects for consistency with our previous analysis: the former were largely education committees working on vocational education work-life relevance, and there were only two higher-education-related groups; there were no higher education groups in the latter. For clarity we use "working group" for both general and legislative projects, as it describes their actual setup. The MEC database is analysed with the aid of SNA methodology.

The second database contains organisational membership data from 2022 (Finland–EU organisation database). It includes information from 702 organisations and working groups in the Finland–EU network. Setting the boundary for how organisations and working groups belong to the network draws on our interpretation of network ethnography. The inclusion of organisations and working groups was guided by an understanding of higher education policymaking's established mechanisms within and between Finland and the EU. Our initial framework was informed by the existing literature (see Chapter 1) and documented procedures involving the actors we interpreted as relevant for the network. Chapter 4 describes our rationale for the inclusion of specific actors. This provided a foundational map of the key stakeholders and structures involved in higher education policymaking. To complement and expand this foundation, we undertook a comprehensive document analysis and conducted targeted internet searches. Membership data are thus sourced from open online sources: organisation webpages (e.g. political party, trade union, MEC, and stakeholder organisation websites); EU open-access resources (e.g., Commission's transparency register and Register of Commission Expert Groups, European Parliament's committee membership data); and meeting minutes (e.g. stakeholder organisation general assembly minutes and annual reports, meeting minutes from EU institutions' committees and working groups). This dual approach allowed us to identify relevant entities and trace their interactions and roles within the broader higher education policymaking landscape.

Additionally, we deepened our understanding of networks through interviews that provided insider perspectives on their functioning. These insights were crosschecked with a membership database collected from open data sources, meeting minutes, and the abovementioned official records found on EU and Finnish government websites, ensuring our findings' accuracy. Ultimately, defining our network's boundaries required careful deliberation. Our goal was to ensure that the network boundaries were both well informed and reflective of higher education policymaking's

actual structures. The Finland–EU organisation network database contains various entities: boards of higher education institutions and their national and European organisations and university alliances; political institutions and organs in Finland and the EU; and boards of stakeholder organisations and their European-level umbrella organisations. Chapter 4 describes key organisations from this database. As the second database's boundary logic is based on our interpretation of existing research, our analysis of the whole database is limited to qualitative methods, but where the boundaries are clear, an analysis of parts of this database is also possible using SNA methods.

Interviewing the network's powerful

When researching policymakers and people in powerful positions, interviews are a key method to obtain the specialist knowledge that is often in the hands of a few people, traditionally referred to as an "elite" (Dexter, 2006). The method is characterised by difficulties of access to research sites, identifying elites, and obtaining interviews (Walford, 2011, pp. 111–112). Moreover, both the interview technique itself and the interpretation of the data generated, as well as the ethical aspects of treating sensitive research material (Walford, 2011), make the method challenging. In our research the "elite" status revolved around those in influential positions in the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network and specialist contextual perspectives.

The interview data contain 45 interviews with 45 interviewees (Table 2.2). One interview had two interviewees; one interviewee was interviewed twice. A policy adviser, who sometimes contributed, was present at two interviews, but the two advisers concerned are not included in the count. A total of 26 interviews were conducted online via the Teams or Zoom[4] platforms, and 19 interviews were conducted in person. Between one and three, and usually two, interviewers were present at each interview. Thirty-five interviews were conducted in Finnish, and ten in English. In addition to this main dataset, we conducted four background interviews before data collection. The background interviews were with individuals in similar positions to our interviewees in the actual sample. The advantage of the background interviews was that we could discuss matters off the record to test our early research ideas. None of the background interviews was used as research data, and no background interviewees were included in the sample. For reflection purposes we also organised internal research team interviews during data collection (see Chapter 3), and these are of course omitted from the interview dataset count.

In the final interview sample (Table 2.3), the number of politician, stakeholder, and official interviewees was evenly distributed. Sixty-nine per cent of the interviewees were in Finland, and 31 per cent were in Europe, typically in Brussels. We thus see a slight emphasis on Finland as a base for officials and stakeholders, but all worked on European policy. Thirty-five per cent of interviewees were men, and 65 per cent were women. Eight of the politicians held or had held ministerial positions, most in the ministries relevant for our

Table 2.3 Main interview dataset description

Category	*Gender*		*Stationed in*		*Sum*
	Men	*Women*	*Finland*	*EU*	
Politician	5	10	9	6	15
Stakeholder	6	9	11	4	15
Official	4	11	11	4	15
Sum	15	30	31	14	45

study. Many also had key or chair positions in their party, parliamentary group, or political organ. If an official worked for a parliamentary party or a political group, or in positions at the European Commission that included political engagement, we counted them as politicians. Officials held key or senior posts in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the government, and parliament, and in the three main EU organs (European Parliament, Commission, and Council). Stakeholder representatives and their affiliations covered the main interest and lobby organisations in Finland and their EU umbrella organisations (see Chapter 4). Active or passive access denials were compensated for in our study by replacing the interviewee with another in a similar position.

We identified the relevant interviewees using three approaches, which we then cross-compared. The first approach relied on existing research and our knowledge of the European and national political systems. Education policy elites in the EU context have also previously been a research focus (e.g. Grek, 2011; Ozga, 2011), and we have previously studied the Finnish context (e.g. Kauko, 2011), which helped in this work. The second was snowballing. In the background and actual interviews, we asked interviewees to name participants who might be relevant for our research. The third was crosschecking with our network data (Table 2.2). When the interviews started, we were still compiling our network database, but we were nevertheless able to draw up lists of key people in the emerging network and to compare them to the list we had developed. We paid close attention to ensuring that enough people occupied different roles in protecting our interviewees' identities. We also succeeded in covering different political spectra to a reasonable extent: of the fifteen politician interviews, in broad terms six were from centre-right, two from centre, and seven from centre-left parties.[5] Most of the interviews were conducted before the Finnish parliamentary elections in April 2023, after which a centre-left coalition government was replaced by a right-wing coalition government.

Our preparatory work for the interviews was grounded in information gained during sampling and desk research (e.g. studying the documentation the interviewee and their background organisations produced). We tailored each interview, attempting to emphasise those questions that were most relevant for our research tasks. Personalising interview questions enabled a focus on interviewees' actual work history, raising rare topics that only a few could answer, and crosschecking views between interviews.

With a few exceptions we addressed core questions in each interview, which were thematically structured under the following topics: (1) the interviewee's current position and previous (professional) experience; (2) knowledge networks; and (3) their understanding and use of knowledge in the context of their positions. The first interview topic was intended to discuss the interviewees' role and position-specific responsibilities and experience. This discussion helped us grasp how well our existing understanding of the interviewees' positions in the Finland–EU network matched their perceptions. The topic helped us understand if the network analysis and interviews were aligned, and how the knowledge networks thus structured the political arena (see dimension 1 in Table 2.1). The second interview topic took us more deeply into identifying the actors and thus interviews focusing on understanding who the interviewee saw as the key actors, processes, sources of evidence, and knowledge. The second interview topic thus contributed to analysing both the political situation and the political possibilities (Table 2.1) by continuing to map the network and seeking to understand the qualitative formation of network relations. The third interview topic focused on the use of knowledge. Interviews probed how knowledge was evaluated, selected, and produced, as well as used to influence others; that is, we wished to depict what kind of practices existed in real situations in the networks we studied. This gave us an understanding of the third analytical dimension of the use of political space (Table 2.1). The closing sections usually included important personalised questions that we wished to save until last to enable the establishment of good communication with the interviewee. Examples of the interview protocol are in Box 2.1 and research information sheet together with the privacy note are published in Zenodo (Kauko et al., 2025).

We applied several strategies to overcome power asymmetries. Rigorous preparation was key here. As we usually worked in pairs, one interviewer would take the lead responsibility for conducting background research, constructing a tailored interview protocol, planning the interview schedule, and arranging any contingency plans. After this initial work, the interviewer pair would meet to go through the interview protocol and discuss its focus, timing, and potential pitfalls. If there was only one interviewer, comments were delivered in writing or discussed in team meetings. Interviewers were selected to match power asymmetries: when deemed necessary and possible, we chose the academically most senior interviewers with prior experience of interviewing people in elite positions for the most senior policymakers.

In interview situations, we first briefly introduced the project, confirmed agreement to research participation, and negotiated the terms and conditions for using the interview material if this had not previously been agreed. Importantly, after the first set of interviews, we noted that we needed to clarify our definition of knowledge further – something that we had already worked on based on the background interviews. We therefore adopted the practice of explicitly stating that we understood knowledge in broad terms as politically useful evidence.

Box 2.1 Interview protocol example

This is an example of the core questions that formed the basis for the interview protocol, which was then tailored for each interviewee. We inserted follow-up and other questions when preparing for the interviews.

Theme 1: Your work

- What does your work generally entail?
- How would you describe your everyday work with higher education policymaking questions, especially linked to Europe?

Theme 2: Policy networks

- We are interested in higher education policy networks. Which actors are most important for your work?

Theme 3: Knowledge and its use

- What sources do you [or your organisation] use to obtain information?
- How do you assess the quality or usefulness of the information you obtain?
- Who gets to choose or select the information that is used in decision making?

Theme 4: Tailored questions

Our original idea was to publish a list of interviewees. Some interviewees were more cautious and asked to check all quotations from them before publication; some were happy with the intention to publish their name as part of a list; and we agreed with some not to publish names at all due to recognised risks. Ultimately, we decided not to publish any names to safeguard our interviewees' identities. During data collection, we did not reveal names of other interviewees, though we did receive hints about relevant people to be interviewed. The decision not to publish names reduces the risk of recognition among people who are well networked and knowledgeable of others' opinions. Additional measures were taken to safeguard identities. Interview quotations were language edited to conceal which were translated. We made other edits to the quotations when necessary. For example, tenses or words may have been changed, and organisations or names erased, or altered to a more general form.

As "Researching the powerful" (Walford, 2011) can culminate in a power and status asymmetry between the interviewer and interviewee (see Conti &

O'Neil, 2007), it was essential to reflect on roles in the interviewing situation, and that they might switch so that the interviewers employed or embedded the agency of the one "asking" questions. Thus, the power dynamics in the interview situation are not only one-dimensional: as researchers, we may also use power as an expert (academic) in the field (Wicker & Connelly, 2014). Given their previous engagements in policymaking and personal networks, the interviewers had past and existing connections with some interviewees (e.g. as friends or former colleagues). Our research team had a policy of avoiding any even slight previous connection or acquaintance with interviewees. With five researchers on the team, we could avoid all such conflicts. In addition, as part of all data gathering, we attempted to maintain an open and reflexive research project, as Chapter 3 discusses.

Observing in institutional contexts

We used ethnography to access complementary knowledge of higher education policy networks. Interviews and observations were complementary (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014; Lamont & Swidler, 2014), and together they provided "the ethnographic sandwich" (Borgatti et al., 2013) for quantitative network analysis. We conducted observations in a team of two observers, and on some occasions there were more (Creese et al., 2008; Evans et al., 2015; Gordon et al., 2006; Erickson & Stull, 1998). Conducting team ethnography afforded us a means of improving trustworthiness in data collection, account sharing, account interpretation, and account theorisation (Evans et al., 2015; Gordon et al., 2006). During data collection the researchers conducting the observations had briefing and debriefing meetings before and after each session (see Erickson & Stull, 1998). As the main observation was undertaken by two team members, we held one general session for the whole team to observe a European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) meeting together and discuss impressions afterwards. For account sharing, in addition to traditional fieldnotes, we used an observation matrix to document each observation session's main points. These were not systematically triangulated during the observation period, but we used them in internal meetings to discuss the observations' main results, and they remained available to the research group as a reference point. In relation to account interpretations and theorisation, all our reporting of the observations was collective, aiming to strengthen the trustworthiness of theoretical accounts through collective discussion. In addition, as part of the larger research design, the interviews served as a further triangulation method.

Our observations' focus was developed reflectively in the early stages of the observation period. It was further developed drawing on experiences and through collective discussions that followed the general frame. Our way of working included taking fieldnotes and reporting a summary of them in an observation matrix. The matrix functioned as a protocol to discuss our focus during observations and ensure a degree of coherence in what was to be

observed. In the matrix we reported physical surroundings, meeting interaction, the constitution of actorhood through knowledge, using knowledge in politicising and depoliticising, evaluating knowledge, and using knowledge and its evaluation. The matrix thus follows the themes discussed in Table 2.1. At different observation times the focus could change or differ for different observers, based on decisions the researchers made in the briefing meeting before the observed meeting.

We observed three different institutional contexts over two years, from the autumn of 2021 to the spring of 2023: the EU30 sub-committee on education in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the EU29 sub-committee on Employment and Economic affairs in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE), and the CULT. We conducted observations in these locations both on site and online (Table 2.4). At least two observers were present at each meeting.

CULT committee meetings are livestreamed by default, and sessions are open if one succeeds in accessing the European Parliament building. We interpreted CULT as an open space and thus did not request permission for observations. The EU29 and EU30 sub-committees are closed meetings, but both granted us access to their meetings. All sub-committee members were asked to agree to being observed, and only members who gave permission were observed. With the help of the sub-committee's chair and secretary, we distributed information leaflets and privacy notices before the first meeting. At the first meeting we presented the project and revisited participant rights during observation, answering any questions or queries regarding the study. After the meeting we approached each member of the sub-committee by email for written permission for observation. For those who gave permission, we started

Table 2.4 Main observation dataset description

Target of observation	*Time period*	*Observed meetings (days)*	*Hours of observation*	*Fieldnotes*[c] *(number of pages)*
Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) (European Parliament)	2021–2022	9[a]	30	155
EU30 sub-committee (MEC working group)	2022–2023	7	11.5	186
EU29 sub-committee (MEAE working group)	2023	3[b]	4.5	38

Notes:

[a] Three meetings lasted two days.

[b] Three joint meetings with EU30 are not included in the count.

[c] Does not include observation matrices.

observation at the next meeting. Of our total of 66 requests 53 (80 per cent) gave permission, nine did not reply to the request, and four denied permission. Observations began during the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021–2022. We believe the pandemic's biggest consequences were that the first observed CULT meetings were organised only online, and that the EU sub-committees also had mostly hybrid meetings after the pandemic eased.

Collective coding

We coded interview data at different stages of the project with different purposes. All interview data were coded with structural codes that followed the interview themes, and additional descriptive codes that reflected the first theme from CADEP with the question "Who are the actors?" (Table 2.1). Further coding was then undertaken to facilitate the chapters' analysis. The first coding cycle was thus undertaken for the interview data as a whole; a second cycle was undertaken on a chapter basis to better account for the specific research questions of each. This chapter describes the first cycle; the respective chapters describe the second.

We used Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software tool, to expedite data retrieval, provide a framework for qualitative analysis, and help in validity checks (e.g. García-Horta & Guerra-Ramos, 2009). Using Saldaña's (2013) terminology of structural and descriptive codes, we built two different layers of codes for the interviews. Subsequently, we decided not to apply structural and descriptive codes to the observation notes, as they represented unique ethnographic material, and the codes applicable to the interviews did not fit such data.

During this first coding cycle, we created two structural codes and four descriptive codes. The first layer was structural codes, which included identifiers of who was speaking in what part of the text, to what part of the interview the text belonged, which excerpts were not to be used due to confidentiality, and which should be used only anonymously (this coding was done before the decision of not to publish a list of interviewees). The structural codes included two broader groups of codes:

- question codes (n = 751) to denote the thematic interview questions; and
- technical codes (n = 4,227) to denote data organisation and management matters, for instance, who was speaking, and which excerpts were confidential.

The descriptive codes identified and highlighted all instances when different actors were mentioned. In practice this meant highlighting not only the actor's name but also the context in which they were discussed. The descriptive codes included the following groups:

- actor code (n = 580) to denote actors' roles, job titles, and positions;
- country code (n = 338) to denote geographical locations, countries, and capitals;

- organisation code (n = 993) to denote organisations and institutions; and
- person code (n = 157) to denote real persons and names.

While the code groups categorised codes deductively, the descriptive coding within these groups was mostly inductive, as the phrases and terminology in the data were used to create subcodes and inform us of the category to which the excerpt was closest. For example, the actor code comprised subcodes such as administrators or members of parliament.

After the first coding cycle, the descriptive codes were reviewed and overlapping codes were recoded to reduce their quantity. We used memos to archive individual coding decisions so that we could examine our interpretations during the coding process later and provide transparency for others in the project (Reyes et al., 2024; e.g. Berthet et al., 2023). The first coding cycle involved mostly data organisation rather than robust analysis (e.g. Mazzei & Jackson, 2012), but we recognised that early coding decisions could have consequences for the data analyses made in the respective chapters. One of the challenges in creating and applying descriptive codes consistently was that our data were in both Finnish and English. Moreover, some organisations in the two different political contexts (Finland and the EU) shared the same general name (e.g. secretariat) but were different entities, as one was in Helsinki, and the other in Brussels. Coding conversations in which a person might change topics or use terminology creatively also needed conscious choices and interpretation. Accounting for the possibilities and limits of Atlas.ti in handling a diverse set of codes, as well as our bilingual interview data, required us to be reflexive about our coding decisions and their interpretability (Woods et al., 2015) and to use codes to examine and interrogate our data from different perspectives rather than taking them for granted (Berthet et al., 2023).

Reflection on methodology

Our initial plan was first to describe the network, then identify its key hubs, and only then start observations and interviews with key actors. However, we encountered problems in mapping the Finland–EU network, as we could not access data. The EU institutions did not provide us with access to names of people in the key higher education working groups because of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policy. The interviews therefore spanned a longer period than planned. We were also denied access to observe some central hubs. Our data gathering taught us some lessons.

First, early in our analysis we found that the networks described in public documents gave us insufficient information to understand their composition. This showed the benefit of a mixed-method design. We attempted to use data in various ways. In Chapter 4 we use snippets from interviews and observations to help understand the network's everyday work. In Chapter 5 we combine network ethnography on the Finland–EU network, supplemented by interviews to discuss its structure, formation, and characteristics. In Chapter 6

we use SNA, interview, and observation data to discuss the organisational knowledge network. In Chapter 7 we use interview content analysis to understand policymakers' normative views on knowledge in policymaking. In Chapter 8 we discursively analyse both interviews and observations to understand the work of the CULT committee. It is hoped that the variety of these perspectives can reveal the processes behind the public documentation.

Second, in dealing with the complexities of practical research work, we agreed with Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) that a coherent convergent mixed-method design was essential. Thematically all analysis follows the dimensions described in the analytical CADEP framework (Table 2.1), but there is some leeway in theoretical concepts. For example, in Chapter 5 we use network governance, in Chapter 6 we discuss knowledge brokers, in Chapter 7 we draw on normative institutionalism theorisation, and in Chapter 8 we discuss discursive institutionalism. For practical empirical and theoretical work, both the epistemological starting points and the understanding of the research's focus need to be shared.

Third, methodological work required constant discussion within the research group. We therefore upheld collaborative ways of working in the research project. Each part of the data collection involved discussions, negotiations, and decisions about where to focus. The resulting tangible implications of these discussions were the formation of the network analysis database, interview protocol, and observation matrix. Our research team worked intensively, seizing many alternative ways of developing our thinking (e.g. reading circles, workshops, team meetings) and probably consciously or unconsciously opting out of other opportunities. Reporting methodological trustworthiness is always a balancing act between clarity of expression and the messiness of reality. We therefore reflect further on our work in the next chapter.

Notes

1 Interestingly, Berthod et al. (2017) have combined ethnography and SNA, calling it network ethnography, in a similar parallel design to study interorganisational networks.
2 CADEP draws on the idea of contingency. Contingency is often defined with Joas' (2004, p. 394) interpretation of Niklas Luhmann and William James as something "neither necessary nor impossible." Kauko and Wermke (2018) summarise this as follows: "Contingency is essentially about understanding available alternatives, facilitating understanding of the complex possibility structures, and the fluid construction of this reasoning." Contingency can be seen as compatible with poststructuralist ideas, though in Kauko, Takala, et al. (2018), the epistemological approach is complexity.
3 In the first definition of network ethnography, Ball and Juneman (2011, p. 13) refer to the classic book *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills (1959). On the referenced page 20, Mills discusses the informal and formal communication of the elite, but this is the only connection to networks or ethnography.
4 Teams and Zoom environments are under the Tampere University licence, which follows the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation, including having EU-based servers.

5 We consider the European People's Party and the Finnish National Coalition Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Finns Party as centre-right parties, the RENEW group and the Finnish Centre Party as centre parties, and the S&D group and the Finnish Green Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Left Alliance as centre-left parties here.

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3 Inside the knowledge networks

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Introduction

In providing accountability to our research practices, in this chapter we offer a hands-on account of the conduct of higher education policy research and reflect on our research process, including empirical fieldwork in the European Parliament and in Finnish governmental and parliamentary bodies. We thus aim to outline our research journey from the researcher's perspective and share insights about how we understand knowledge and trustworthy research. In this reflexive account we analyse the research project's internal group interviews, fieldwork notes, and project members' research diaries. We draw on the literature concerning trustworthiness in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), the messiness inherent to research (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and the role of research paradigms in education contexts (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

To establish our research practices' trustworthiness, we follow Guba and Lincoln (1985) in approaching our research journey from the perspective of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Regarding trustworthiness, we draw on Guba and Lincoln's (1985) field-defining work on qualitative research methodology and its further applications (Amankwaa, 2016; Stahl & King, 2020). Hence, trustworthiness refers here to the research findings' credibility, reliability, and authenticity. As qualitative researchers, we acknowledge our different positions as project team members, considering it vital to establish trustworthiness to ensure the results' credibility, and that they accurately represent the participants' experiences.

More specifically, to discuss our findings' trustworthiness, we consider the four criteria Guba and Lincoln (1985) introduce, which many other authors have further developed: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. Credibility refers to the confidence that the research findings are an accurate reflection of the participants' experiences or the studied phenomenon. To enhance credibility, we discussed our findings as a group throughout the project, drawing on the research project members' expertise and experience as both researchers and policymakers. In combining three different types of data – network analysis, interviews, and observations – we were also able

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to crosscheck our findings. Many of our observations were apparent in all our datasets. Our prolonged engagement and time spent in the field helped us understand the context and build a rapport with the participants, further enhancing our project's credibility. In this project we collected an extensive dataset, spending many hours in the field to observe the phenomena closely (see Chapter 2).

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts, settings, or populations (Stahl & King, 2020). While our project focused on policymaking networks between the European Union and Finland, descriptions of the study's context and participants allow readers to assess whether our findings are relevant or transferable to other situations. Throughout the project, we reviewed the literature on knowledge, power, knowledge networks, network analysis, and network ethnography to understand how policymaking networks had been studied before. This enhances the possibilities to evaluate our findings' transferability.

Dependability emphasises consistency in the research process and transparency in documenting methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To enhance dependability, we produced a comprehensive trail for our decision-making process, using detailed fieldnotes and clear protocols for data collection and analysis, including meeting memos, notes, reflexive discussions, and detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis processes. We also involved multiple researchers in data collection and analysis to ensure a consistent approach (Amankwaa, 2016). For example, we agreed to write down our initial observations and reflections before and after policymaking interviews, which would be shared with others. All the observation data were collected in pairs, and we also conducted most interviews in pairs.

Finally, confirmability emphasises researchers' reflexivity in engaging with researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The data documentation described above helped us establish confirmability, as did engaging in reflexivity, actively reflecting on our biases independently and as a collective, and getting other researchers to review and confirm our findings. For example, we cross-examined our fieldnotes from two perspectives: researchers in our project with policymaking experience could attest to the situations' authenticity; those without that experience could cross-examine those interpretations from an outside perspective. Furthermore, two of this chapter's authors, Salokangas and Saarinen, were not involved in the empirical work, injecting an element of reflexivity.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability provide a framework for assessing our research's trustworthiness. Trustworthiness concerns how others evaluate and assess research and its merits based on commonly established criteria. This frame helped us ensure our findings were meaningful and reliable, and accurately reflected the studied participants' reality. Subsequently, we have engaged in numerous reflexive discussions about our theoretical framework, biases, assumptions, and position within higher education policy networks throughout the project.

In addition to trustworthiness, we require a broader discussion of the basic building blocks of interpretation in research. Paradigms can be understood as internalised beliefs and worldviews involving certain assumptions with consequences for how interpretations are made, what should be studied, and how (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). As Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) emphasise, the choice of research paradigm implies that it will follow a particular epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology that will subsequently influence research questions, participant selection, data collection, and analysis. Paradigms permeate even routine judgements – for example, pertaining to the importance given to the consistency of data and analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In addressing our paradigms, we provide the context for this research project, engaging in discussions of the evaluative and normative aspects of what constitutes "good" research (Abbott, 2004). For example, a poststructuralist paradigm leads us to view knowledge as socially constructed (Chapter 1). We have also paid special attention to policymakers' language and texts in our analyses, and how they enable and constrain possibilities of thought and action (Foucault, 1977, 1980).

As a paradigm, poststructuralism also worked as a lens for our research processes, during which power was at play in questions of access. When interviewing people in power, as researchers we must define a group that appears to embody an "elite" social status and is in a key position for understanding our research object. We therefore assume that society is organised in a certain way, that hierarchical power structures exist, and that we can identify an "elite network" (Williams, 2012, p. 65) that is the basis for determining whom to approach. Our researchers' personal histories and backgrounds facilitated access to institutions and policymakers that are often difficult to reach. Access to gatekeepers – often informal – helped make connections with other gatekeepers or even potential interviewees (Odendahl & Shaw, 2011).

To facilitate this discussion of paradigms, we turn to the concept of reflexivity as the "interpretation of interpretation" to examine our interpretations' background and context (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 12). We consider that the same set of facts can support different theories or views (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and that the validity of interpretation is always related to our knowledge interests (Heiskala, 2014). We also follow Addey and Piattoeva's (2022) proposal that we should be open to the "messiness" of research and take seriously how as researchers we interfere in the worlds we study, and how those worlds interfere with us. We therefore did not write this chapter as a reiteration of the methodology or as a critique of our theoretical approaches. Rather, we engaged in writing about ourselves in our study, less "evaluating" or "critiquing" than engaging with and learning not only what we did to the process, but what it did to us (Engman et al., 2023).

In this chapter we aim reflexively to discuss our research process for transparency and trustworthiness. By embracing messiness as "building blocks rather than stumbling blocks" (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 14), we consider the challenges and difficulties during research an integral part of the research

process. We wish to problematise some of the (often hidden) assumptions of research processes, particularly pertaining to the normative understandings that research processes should somehow be linear and clean, with the messiness and uncertainties of everyday life polished away (Rose & McKinley, 2017) – especially given that as researchers and project group members we constitute this chapter's research object, and that we come with our own histories and connections to the larger study context the project addresses (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). This is also an ethical issue: we do not wish to obscure our process or eradicate its uncertainties but to make the research relationships, positions, and hierarchies visible.

Research design: Research group as data

We attempt to provide transparency regarding the research process as a whole and to expose our analyses and interpretations to the scrutiny of others – our colleagues, participants, the communities we examine, and society at large. We do this to enhance our research's trustworthiness and to promote dialogue and acceptance of "messiness" with the academic community. We therefore ask the following research questions:

1 How have our conceptions of a trustworthy research process informed our interpretations?
2 How did this make us relate in specific ways to our research context and data?

To answer these questions, we analysed three datasets to provide a transparent description of the various power relations connected with collecting research data from settings like the European Parliament. First, these data included interviews with members of our research project: Paula Silvén and Joni Forsell interviewed Katri Eeva, Jarmo Kallunki, and Jaakko Kauko after their data collection in Brussels. Second, we conducted two semi-structured professional conversations among all our research project members to discuss our conceptions of trustworthy research, what was unexpected or surprising during the research process ("messiness," Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and what each found interesting or relevant during it ("trustworthiness," Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This was done to provide space and time to reflect on our experiences and emotions after the fieldwork, and again at the end of the project. In practice, our collective experiences and discussions as a research group constituted the data we seek to analyse here. Third, we drew on documentary data. We analysed notes made after research interviews (n = 74) and fieldnotes from observations (n = 37), and compiled observations matrices (n = 25).

We analysed the three datasets using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, we carefully read through our data, drawing attention to questions and topics we deemed important for understanding the

converging and differing beliefs and understandings of what trustworthy research was, what interpretations had been made, and the questions that most occupied us. This preliminary reading gave us a sense of the most important topics. This chapter's authors and all project members then discussed these topics. Second, we used these discussions to focus further on our analysis. Two members of our advisory board, this chapter's co-authors, Taina Saarinen and Maija Salokangas, supported these analyses and discussions, providing a much-needed outsiders' perspective on our research process, as well as challenging our interpretations of our research paradigms. As we were writing this chapter, we met several times, discussing the data and the analysis, and developing the chapter iteratively during and between meetings.

Our analysis is divided into three sections. We first discuss the fieldwork in Brussels as described by three research group members. We then turn to group discussions of trustworthy research. Finally, we analyse the interview and observation background material.

Brussels as a case of knowledge networks in practice

In this project we are concerned with normative and productive power effects (Foucault, 1977, 1986). Yet, during the fieldwork we recognised that power could not, and would not, remain an external study object (e.g. Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). Instead, the researchers exercised power in gaining access, and power was exercised over the researchers – for example, in how our backgrounds and credibility were assessed, how control was exercised over our physical bodies in security checks, and how monitoring technology like QR codes made institutional safeguards visible and felt. Institutional procedures were also present in the expectation that we should follow proper communication channels and know the process of establishing contacts. As one of our researchers reflected when participating in the fieldwork in Brussels, denying access was ultimately easy:

> The kind of negative feelings are related to what if this all falls apart, and what if we get a strict no. So that's related to the exercise of power because denying access is an easy thing to do.
>
> (Researcher 2)

These situations therefore posed a challenge to consistency during the research process, as one interview could quickly replace another (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Time spent on Brussels institutional procedures and bureaucracy was potentially deducted from interviews when meetings were agreed at a certain time. Yet being able to account for these rules and understanding the logic in which Brussels operated also opened access to speaking with powerful people. Relying on our own networks and personal contacts was thus paramount. One person we interviewed in our research explicitly mentioned that the only reason an interview had been granted was because one of our

researchers knew the right people. In relation to this, we reflected on how our networks, which made data collection possible, were the same as policymakers used to verify our credibility and gain background information (see Chapter 8). It subsequently became evident that for our research and data collection to succeed, we needed to fit into the policymakers' schedules and procedures, and to capitalise on their networks.

During the interviews we utilised various proven strategies for collecting data in policy settings (drawing on Walford (2012) and Williams (2012), for example): giving affirmative reactions and withholding those reactions to nudge interviewees to focus on topics in which we were interested; name-dropping people known in the network to establish credibility; preparing for interviews by conducting background searches; and securing recommendations from those whom we initially wished to interview but could not. We were in turn tested by the interviewees: abbreviations were used in quick succession; our reactions were observed to see if we were following what the interviewee was saying; and we were corrected if we made mistakes in naming or recognising institutions. Some classic challenges associated with "elite interviews" (Dexter, 2006) were therefore also experienced: the interviewee occasionally led the interview; challenged the researchers or the research project; and took control of the time with long-winded answers. Yet some also showed vulnerability in interviews or presented their work enthusiastically. These observations span all the interviews we conducted in the European and Finnish policymaking settings.

This back and forth between researchers and participants and navigating questions of access helped establish trust and ensure continuing access to interviews. When trust was established, we felt that interviewees were forthcoming and shared their work and papers readily. We strove in turn to cultivate trust by promising interviewees transcripts of our discussions or allowing them to double-check the quotations we planned to use in our final manuscript. Building trust was beneficial for enhancing our research's credibility: we managed to secure longer interviews, reflect with interviewees on questions that had arisen during the research process, and discuss our initial interpretations with them (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Interestingly, we observed that a shared national background helped establish trust between researchers and interviewees. For example, we found that Finnish policymakers were more open in their accounts: in Brussels one was always seen as representing one's nationality, whereas the researcher's image and the institutions to which we belonged had less impact in Finland.

This was again related to one aspect of fieldwork in Brussels: people's image and reputation were constantly worked on and established in discussions and through networks. Here we observed our entanglement with our study context (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and that our own professional network history carried some weight. During interviews we worked to convey our interest in all kinds of knowledge with which policymakers engaged in their work to prevent being associated with a strict interest in scientific research

as representatives of academia. Interestingly, when our interviewees also had an academic background, there was a sense that they understood the difficulties of research and helped us expedite data collection. We could in turn capitalise on this by emphasising our experience and history in various higher education institutions, and by referring to academia as a unifying factor during interviews.

The fieldwork in Brussels also exposed the "messiness" inherent in research (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022): merely being ushered into the meeting room could result in being positioned far away from the participants who were to be observed or interviewed. These instances could also work to our advantage, however. Waiting in the queue for security at the right time could be beneficial for establishing contact.

> We were aware that to bring in three persons to the parliament we'd have to contact the Member of the European Parliament's assistant. … And it just so happened that this assistant was also in the queue. And we agreed to think about this interview together, and they told their colleague to contact me. Well, we didn't get an interview, but we did get to participate in a discussion that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been at the security check at the same time.
>
> (Researcher 1)

Not only understanding how Brussels worked but also capitalising on such moments was thus important for our data collection. Yet our networks in Brussels and the Finnish policymaking context brought additional ethical and methodological challenges that required us to reflect on and react to our bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). If our researcher knew an interviewee personally or through their work history, we agreed they would not participate in the interview. We also took steps to ensure that our interpretations did not conform to our own experiences as policymakers by subjecting our findings and claims to the whole research group's scrutiny.

Our perceptions of what is considered trustworthy research

To better understand how our conceptions of trustworthy research influenced our research process and our interpretations during data analysis and writing this book, we arranged two reflexive group discussions with project members (Eeva, Forsell, Kallunki, Kauko, and Silvén). We pseudonymised our group members with numbers from 1 to 5.

The theme that entwined these reflections was the overall discussion of what was considered a trustworthy research process. This could be seen as an umbrella theme that combined all the other aspects. The discussion of what was considered a trustworthy research process was generally addressed from two perspectives: technical conduct; and the relationship between substance and values.

Our research group members saw trustworthy research processes as containing reflexivity, empiricism, systematicity, and a commitment to truthfulness. Our group also valued interdisciplinary approaches, emphasising the goal of producing new knowledge with an impact on the world. As a group we recognised that our perceptions of what we considered trustworthy research were affected not only by internalised and tacit assumptions of research processes as linear and systematic (see Rose & McKinley, 2017) but also by various traditions and conventions that could be difficult to untangle. Our perception as researchers today is influenced by our former studies, the literature we have read, research experiences, and our personal values, which can be difficult to articulate or analyse but are nevertheless compressed as individual perceptions of what is considered trustworthy research. We recognised that while research had consequences, there were reservations about what the actual societal impact of any research could be. Indeed, there was even a discussion of how this normative evaluation of research was out of our hands, as any reader would arrive at their own conclusions regarding our research's merits and societal impact. One member of the research group pondered on the difficulty of communicating the nuances and insecurities of research:

> I have this feeling, maybe a bit suppressed, that … we don't want anything vague. We want the vagueness to be gone. And then here is this knowledge claim and so on and so forth because it's much more impressive to present it in the research, because research has to be very clearcut. But when it isn't, how to get there is very difficult. I still don't really know because in my opinion the discourse is bigger – the power, everything.
>
> (Researcher 4)

The discussions also acknowledged research's critically transformative potential to produce views that could challenge pre-existing notions about gender, power relations, and policy, for example. From this perspective trustworthy research was evaluated through its intentions and consequences. In the group discussions our joint understanding was that despite surface-level differences in our onto-epistemic views and what we considered trustworthy research, the overarching perceptions were remarkably similar. Everyone's primary goal was to understand the research phenomena from a fresh perspective and to generate new knowledge that could lead to new insights and novel applications. We mentioned social constructionism and complexity thinking as onto-epistemological starting points or inspiration. However, there were also more pragmatic veins of thought, in which research was about results supported by data.

> My thought is more that it's quite empirically oriented in the sense that what we bring out with data – that's the science. And then how it's

> dressed up with different language games and positioning and all that – that's a different matter. And less interesting, actually.
>
> (Researcher 5)

From the perspective of what is considered technically trustworthy research, our discussions touched on the importance of collecting data systematically, examining the data from various perspectives, maintaining theoretical coherence, and defining concepts clearly. We identified these conceptions as stemming partly from our own histories and socialisation in academia, where as individuals we were initiated into certain discussions and values in specific times and places. However, we also seemed to share an understanding of our research's messiness, complexity, and context-dependency. This suggests that the specific nature of the research problem and research context needs to be considered when choosing appropriate methods, and also that the research's systematic and messy nature is not mutually exclusive but intertwined.

> And then here we perhaps have the assumption and norm, and what we've been trained to do, which is that concepts should preferably be defined clearly, unambiguously, and perhaps exclusively. And then when we start doing a literature review, they aren't defined. … We had a [visiting] researcher or a visiting professor, and my eyes were opened when they pointed out that a good concept doesn't exclude things but opens them up. Maybe I still prefer to exclude things by defining them rather than opening them up.
>
> (Researcher 2)

Methodologically, mixed methods and combining various data were appreciated. Indeed, one of the values seemed to point to a perception of methodological plurality as a richness. This methodological plurality was built into our project's combination of ethnography, network analysis, and interviews. While we recognised that different paradigms and questions would yield different perspectives as results, we all understood that these differences made research more interesting.

> I'm a bit of a borderline case in these matters, as I adhere to multiple scientific paradigms. … Even though I feel I'm a strong supporter of a very relativistic and subjective research approach, there's also a pragmatist in me. And methodologically, I see that mixed methods, not in all research topics of course, but often, are perhaps the best way to get the most information about the studied phenomenon.
>
> (Researcher 1)

Our ontological view seemed to favour understandings of reality as something stable and shared, not subjectively constructed. Epistemologically, the

understandings were close to social constructionism and socio-materiality approaches (Fenwick, 2015).

Furthermore, we discussed the reconciliation of different backgrounds, working methods, and their impact on our research and writing process. The discussions highlighted the richness of diverse perspectives, as well as how different approaches could create friction when the accustomed and internalised ways of conducting research differed. It was generally acknowledged that these different perspectives enhanced our research's trustworthiness and produced a richer understanding of the subject.

> So, the basic point was just that somehow when I know that we're pleasantly different, there are different combinations. And when we put different combinations to work, then different results come out. So, I think that in itself brings diversity to the examination of the material.
>
> (Researcher 4)

We observed that it would have been important to have had reflexive discussions on different onto-epistemological perspectives in our research project's early stages. This left us wondering whether addressing conceptual, theoretical, and methodological "frictions" through dialogue could have helped us avoid some of the issues we faced during the research process. For example, we had long and complex disputes which might have been avoided had we had a better understanding of each other's perspectives earlier.

> What I myself thought was, what is the perspective related to writing analysis or writing processes that I'd like to share? And it's precisely a reflection of our way of working. And in that way, what I have myself, or how can I put it? That there are many hidden operating models that we can never fully explicate. That is, we have such familiar operating models – how we do research, how we write articles, what our perspective on the scientific world is.
>
> (Researcher 3)

Despite apparent differences in our onto-epistemic views and preferred research methods, we tended to agree on many aspects in practice. This consensus was evident in our group discussions. Paradigms are not a rigid package deal; rather, researchers can selectively adopt elements that resonate with them at any given moment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Indeed, one discussion involved the question of which elements oriented the researchers' gaze. We seemed to agree that approaching data head-on provided a good starting point, while we also identified theory-driven approaches. We also discussed the intuitive nature of research. Following this, it could be questioned if research was ever strictly data- or theory-driven, or whether in practice we repeatedly moved between data and theory rather than linearly (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022).

We also reflected on how our preliminary conceptions of the research phenomena in question, as well as our interests, worked to privilege some views and marginalise others. While we recognised this as a general trait of research, we also discussed how much emphasis should be placed on this possibility of the unknown in research. We agreed here that our research team members' various backgrounds and experiences as a whole would benefit our research and our interpretations' credibility. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that if a researcher is deeply connected to the research topic, there is a risk of confirmation bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1985): it is much easier to pay attention to what we "know" already based on our experiences. However, this is a double-edged sword: a deep understanding of the phenomenon we are researching simultaneously allows a better insight and a possible blind spot when things do not fit with this prior knowledge:

> Yeah, so that's exactly what I also want to address, … what it leaves unseen because we're the ones doing this research. So, I've been thinking a lot about that. And just, in that way, it's interesting how one's own background at the same time makes you blind, but then at the same time it helps you see more. It's somehow really paradoxical. … So, of course, it's great that there are people from very different backgrounds here, that kind of also supports maybe the reliability, that we have five different set of eyes, five different backgrounds and experiences through which this is reflected.
>
> (Researcher 2)

Another major theme pertained to how our own preconceptions had been changed during the research process – if at all. One member of our research team discussed how their conception of evidence-based policymaking had changed during the interviews, with policymakers showing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between politics and knowledge as always involving a human element. For another member of the team, however, this was less surprising, yet we discussed whether these conceptions of evidence-based policymaking were ever real or merely a fabrication that largely inhabited specific research literature. Similarly, another member found that their understanding of research as something "purer" or detached from politics and power struggles differed little from the world of politics. In relation to this perspective, a member raised the view that researchers had their own stake in power: for example, privileging research knowledge and expertise in research was also a way to promote researchers and academia themselves as something distinct.

We wish to emphasise how difficult or even impossible it is to analyse these group discussions "objectively" or separately from what we already know about these individuals and ourselves. It is intriguing to consider why we strive for such rigorous "objectivity" as researchers when examining ourselves in the reflexive part of the process (Addey & Piattoeva,

2022). We assume this may be connected with the internalised and normative views of what is considered a methodologically sound research process. We therefore acknowledge the value of people outside our research group being involved in the reflection process and questioning our interpretations of the data.

In conclusion, it was evident that we all shared the view of the importance of everyone striving to understand the phenomena we researched as deeply as possible and ambitiously pursuing new knowledge. Although we had different routes for achieving the research project's overall aims, we all shared an understanding of the necessity of reflexive discussions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) throughout the project and addressing any possible biases (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) we might have because of our experiences and backgrounds. We noted that our research's overall trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) benefitted from our research group's methodological plurality and various perspectives.

Evaluating knowledge, ruptures, and atmosphere

We identified three themes in the research interview memos and observation notes: knowledge evaluation; insecurities and ruptures; and describing the atmosphere in interview and observation situations. The memos and part of the notes we use here were means of personal reflection and method development. We therefore do not indicate researchers but simply show quotations in this subsection.

One of the most prominent and repeated themes in the interview notes was the evaluation of knowledge, as well as whether that knowledge was useful to us. As researchers we seemed interested and sometimes considered whether the interviewees gave us useful or relevant content. This evaluation was continuous, as suggested by descriptions such as "In passing they could mention interesting observations in subordinate clauses and, after general chitchat, end up discussing things that interested us," and "In my opinion the interviewee approached the topic very straightforwardly and provided useful answers. It became clear in several instances that we did not have the same understanding of the terminology."

The same topic was present in the observation matrices. This concern with trustworthiness had less to do with observations as a method and more with us as researchers trusting ourselves to notice the right things, and if we would be able to connect the flotsam of observational data with the larger question of knowledge networks – the extent to which our observations would hold true to reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Observing the European Parliament on site especially, where interpreters were depended on, raised the question of reliability of observations:

> I don't like simultaneous interpretation: it's difficult to follow what speakers are saying because interpreters translate and fix translations on the go. I can follow a speech in English and make some observations – but that's small consolation. I'm unsure how worthwhile observing is.

> Yet I don't know how that would differ in situ because there too interpretation would be challenge.

It seemed we asked ourselves whether the policymakers we observed were genuine in their actions, and if what we saw was indeed representative of what regularly occurred in meeting halls and parliamentary debates. By extension, we evaluated our observations based on their alignment with our understanding of policymaking's realities and necessities.

This evaluation of knowledge is understandable and natural: our interviewees were senior higher education policymakers. The stakes in every interview were high, as there would be no opportunity for another interview in some cases. We also conjecture that our preoccupation with a theoretical framework partly explains this, leading us to focus on the aspects arising from our project's theoretical backbones during our interviews. Another influence here may be intuitive insights prompted by experience.

Another theme in these notes was descriptions of events during interviews. These small ruptures can be interpreted as inconveniences that disturb research interview rituals. They are often described neatly in research articles (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). In research reports' methodology sections, interviews and interview situations are described as rational, strategic, well prepared and controlled. Research interviews can be all this, but they also contain moments of uncertainty, unplanned events, and the need to improvise (see Kosunen & Kauko, 2016). These messy disruptions are often eradicated from our academic writing, yet embracing these uncertainties and bringing them out openly can enhance the research process's trustworthiness and transparency (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These ruptures can also reveal interesting aspects of conducting research that are seldom expressed. Here is an example from an interview memo:

> The interviewee also expressed some opinions quite boldly, then glanced at the recorder and said something to the effect that perhaps they shouldn't have said it so provocatively. The same boldness continued until a woman with a Marimekko bag sat at the table behind us: we guessed the woman was probably Finnish, and the interviewee apparently guessed the same thing (and as [the other interviewer] noted, the interviewee possibly knew her as well), and after that the interviewee spoke more generally and cautiously. However, this happened only towards the very end of the interview, so the potential harm of an inquisitive ear was minimal.

The interview notes also revealed uncertainties we navigated as researchers. Some interviews did not proceed as planned because of technical difficulties in online interviews, or because we lacked the time to prepare for one granted at a moment's notice, for example:

> We'd tried to arrange this interview for a month. However, the interview was only confirmed a few days before, and the meeting room became the

> interview location, even though I tried to suggest a quieter place. We were able to anticipate that the meeting room might be noisy, and that there could be interruptions or even a cancellation.

Although we tried to tackle these uncertainties with well-prepared interview frameworks and thorough studies of our interviewees' backgrounds, we occasionally needed to resort to improvisation. This could arouse unpleasant feelings. Improvisation and intuition play an important role in the research process, however, and bringing out the research process's natural messiness (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022) demonstrates that high research ethics are being followed. It is uncertain what added value acknowledging this messiness gives to our methodological considerations, but we see transparency as crucial for our research's overall trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). At least in action research, acknowledging the messiness can be considered "a vital element for seeing, disrupting, analysing, learning, knowing and changing" and a place where our internalised, naturalised, and long-held beliefs can be questioned (Cook, 2009, p. 277). It is also a reminder that researchers are human beings who make mistakes.

Third, in most of the interview notes at least a couple of lines described the overall atmosphere and social interaction between the interviewee and interviewer or interviewers. A positive atmosphere and interaction in interviews was considered an important factor in their success. A relaxed and easy atmosphere combined with trust was seen as a way to obtain more information. In the great majority of interviews, the interviewees had a generally positive attitude to the interviewers. They wished to help and engage in open discussion:

> We'd tried to conduct the same background research on the interviewee as we did on others, but no information was available from public sources. … The preliminary information suggested the interviewee would be reserved, but on the contrary, the interviewee was very talkative and open. … The interview was extremely informative and valuable compared with expectations.

Many of our interviewees were eloquent speakers and skilful discussants. They were thus able to steer the discussion. This required the interviewers to remain alert and have substantive knowledge to redirect the conversation to keep within the interview's planned framework. Interestingly, the interviewees sometimes created an impression of exerting power over the researchers, and some seemed to attempt to convince us of the importance of their knowledge. Indeed, as researchers we were part of the higher education policy network we were researching.

We also analysed the atmosphere in the observation matrices from another angle. We were emotionally invested in fieldwork and observations. A prominent topic in the observation matrices therefore concerned

researchers' reflection on their own emotional states and interpretation of others' emotions. For example, an observation note discussed how "the increase in formality can perhaps be simply explained by the fact that it was a joint meeting, and not all the participants necessarily knew each other." There was relief among researchers when it was understood that they were free to conduct their observations without policymakers paying any explicit attention to them. When policymakers drew attention to the researchers' background or history, this in turn produced a sense of unease. This underlines how difficult it is for researchers to remain separate from their research contexts (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). Rather than dismissing researchers' entanglement with the context, however, we recognised its importance for data collection and exploited it to challenge our findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Sensing the atmosphere was implicitly visible in the observation notes and in the presence of our previous experiences and histories. For example, when describing what was happening, observers used words and phrases like "usually," "normally," and "familiar to me," indicating a personal connection with the context. This is reflected in the following note:

> Even though the context was familiar to me, the observations were a challenge. We had a new observation matrix that was piloted for the first time at the Monday meeting on 24 October. In addition, observing was interrupted because I was discussing interviewing practicalities with a policymaker.

Although the fact that our researchers belonged to the networks we were studying made our study possible, it also introduced the potential for bias in observations. Undertaking observations together was thus well received by everyone in our project. Having at least two interpretations of the same situation was seen to add to our research's credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and to ease an individual researcher's discomfort concerning their observations' trustworthiness.

Conclusions and discussion

Our group reflections lead us to conclude that our different perspectives, positions, and experiences add to our study's trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The chapter also highlights how seemingly incompatible theoretical approaches and research paradigms work together, reinforcing our understanding of how important it is to engage in dialogue between research group members to address the tensions that may arise from different methodological backgrounds and epistemological approaches, thus enhancing our research's credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Trustworthiness was built on extensive dialogue to challenge our beliefs and conceptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) about how

to study education policy, and how to engage with tricky concepts like power, knowledge, and networks. Indeed, our research group's biweekly meetings were a stage for intense reflexive discussions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) of topics such as the best way to observe knowledge and networks in committees, how interviews should be conducted and who should be involved, how to operationalise concepts like power and knowledge, and how we could approximate and construct a network of policymakers based on open data.

These continuous discussions, their intensity and difficulty, and our literature review point to the inherent difficulty and complexity of concepts like knowledge and networks. Instead of arriving at clearly defined conceptions of knowledge and networks, they have been and remain a point of contestation (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022) during the project. In some respects this goes against the smoothed-out narrative in which we first define concepts, operationalise and apply them, and in a sense close that branch of enquiry (see Rose & McKinley, 2017), instead emphasising how the very concepts on which we have built this project are themselves a point of enquiry and contestation. Drafting and redrafting our (individual and collective) conceptual framings on paper, returning to them, and discussing and redrafting them again are both a sign of the importance of these conceptualisations for our research and of the necessity to allow for reiterations and new interpretations as we challenge our own understandings and expectations of our research context.

A key element of this ongoing reflexivity concerned how power and access were entangled with our researcher positions as part of this knowledge network. In a sense we could see the network come alive here: previous contacts provided access to the network. This underlined the idea that as researchers we belonged to this knowledge network, instead of the network being a separate and external object of research. The project researchers' networks provided access in practice to otherwise inaccessible policymakers. Our position as part of these knowledge networks, combined with our discussions and negotiations of theoretical concepts and our empirical observations, enhanced our research project's dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Reflexive discussions enabled us to challenge our own and each other's interpretations of the phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Reflexivity continued throughout the building of our empirical framework, where our previous discussions and negotiation of our project's main theoretical concepts were operationalised as our interview questions and observation matrices. During these discussions our personal connections illustrated how the same topic appeared different from a policymaking outsider or insider perspective. Some interactions and events seemed noteworthy and relevant to the outsider, whereas they were contextualised as part of everyday work for the insider, perhaps resulting in an emphasis on specific knowledge and information (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). Having two researchers with insider perspectives thus enabled us to produce rich data and to cross-examine them from both perspectives, strengthening our project's dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and ensuring consistency in data collection (Amankwaa, 2016).

One of the consistent themes, and a connecting thread running through all our reflexive data, was the constant evaluation of what was considered important knowledge and its usefulness from our research project's perspective. We need to ask what this constant evaluation tells us about the research process in general. If we instantly deem some data more valuable, we may miss some key information hidden more deeply in the data. We should also be aware that the knowledge we produce in this project is entangled with the creation and continuation of power structures. The knowledge we produce ourselves represents the phenomena we study in a specific light.

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4 National and European systems intertwined

Higher education policymaking in the EU context

Katri Eeva and Jaakko Kauko

Understanding higher education policymaking in and between Brussels and the national capitals

Higher education policymaking in the European Union (EU) is complex due to the ambiguity created by its broad yet blurred role. EU integration scholarship and European studies (e.g. Wallace et al., 2020) have tended to overlook the study of education because of the EU's lack of legislative power over it. Higher education policy scholars, however, have noted the increasing importance of the EU's role in higher education since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in 2009, and the EU gained supporting competence in education (Vukasović et al., 2019). The Lisbon Strategy of 2000 had previously made it possible to address education questions via economic and social policies. This generated a complex interplay between institutional structures and policy ideas. It also created tension within and across EU institutions (Novoa & Lawn, 2002).

The growing research interest in higher education in the EU context is justifiable: we can observe a piecemeal change that is drawing the sector closer to the EU's core questions. Indeed, education has generally become more closely aligned with key EU frameworks and strategies, illuminating the idea that education, lifelong learning, and skills development play a crucial role in addressing a wide range of social and economic challenges (Sorensen et al., 2021). The EU increasingly features 'governance' activity over education, suggesting its capacity to enact authority in the field has increased since the 2000s (Sorensen & Eeva, 2024). The EU incentivises benchmarking in education through various policy and funding instruments such as the European Semester (Eeva, 2021). EU education policymaking is generally becoming quite complex because of the increasing number of initiatives (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2024; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018), and the involvement of national policy actors (e.g. Lawn & Grek, 2012) and non-governmental stakeholders (Milana, 2024). In alignment with previous research, we therefore argue that higher education has obtained a more common role in EU policymaking.

This chapter seeks to analyse Finland's higher education policymaking within the EU context, focusing on day-to-day policy work. To do this, we

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need to navigate the complexity described above, as well as the ambiguity derived from higher education's broad role in EU countries. Higher education institutions have a dual function as education and research organisations. These two functions – higher education, and research and innovation – are divided into different policy sectors in national and EU policymaking. Studying higher *education* thus also requires an examination of its interaction with research and innovation policy. As we explain next, institutionally and politically, these policy sectors are steered differently, falling into different EU legal competences.

In relation to the education sector, the EU Treaties, as per the Lisbon agreement, limit the EU's legal competence and allow only a coordinating and supportive function.[1] This occurs mainly through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) instrument, which aims to boost competition and benchmark national education systems (Lawn & Grek, 2012). Walters and Haahr (2004, pp. 114–115) describe the OMC as a decentralised decision-making mode. First, education policy objectives and their schedule are often constructed at the central level, prepared by the European Commission (hereafter referred to as the Commission) and agreed by the Council of the European Union (the Council). Second, measuring the achievement of OMC objectives involves a comparison of member countries' performance. This often requires the creation of metrics that help quantify performance and connect the policy objectives with global indicators such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022).

The implementation of objectives in the education sector is decentralised to Member States. They are encouraged to achieve regional and local objectives voluntarily. Educational performance measurement is a powerful resource for steering, creating pressures for Member States to conform to common EU objectives (e.g. Ozga et al., 2011). However, the degree of national implementation varies (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019). The Commission provides support through peer learning activities and best practices in the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), but there are often no clear implementation methods or tools.[2] Member States must submit national progress reports to the Commission. They must also undergo constant and strategic evaluation of education outcomes, which is often depicted in comparative visualisations in the Commission's and Eurostat's databases. The increasing collection and comparison of educational performance data can appear subtle and detached from politics, limiting political debates about education's goals and content (Ozga, 2023).

The EU treaties allow more powers to regulate the research and innovation sector through shared competence between Member States and the EU.[3] In higher education, this increased policymaking authority is evident in Horizon Europe programme funding, for example. Indeed, the EU has a significant capacity to finance science: in 2023–2024, the EU's Horizon Europe research and development fund amounted to an annual €12–13 billion, and the Erasmus+ mobility and learning catalyst fund around €3.5 billion (European

Parliament, 2023). Research on the content and implementation of the Horizon 2020 frame has examined its economic bias in education research funding (Parreira do Amaral, 2019), and how network centrality facilitates access to funding (Enger, 2018). Moreover, an analysis of higher education policy debates in relation to the European Parliament's budget reveals this funding instrument's importance (Vukasović et al., 2019).

We believe there is still ground to cover to fully understand how the education and research and innovation sectors are intertwined in the steering of higher education policymaking. In this chapter, we therefore argue that the boundaries between these two policy sectors have become blurred in EU higher education policymaking. This enquiry occurs within the institutional frames, but understanding everyday practices may reveal how policy boundaries become obscured. In our research, we have identified descriptions of everyday work and policymaking practices within the broad EU–Finland polity through both official documents and our interviewees' perceptions. In this analysis, we draw on the interview and observation data collected as part of our research project (see Chapter 2).

We begin with an introduction to the two interconnected policy sectors and the actors involved in each, both in the EU and Finland. We argue that only a few policy actors have the formal capacity to influence both research and innovation and higher education. These two policy areas are usually institutionally separated, but we have identified interconnections between the different policy actors. We then examine each of these actors and propose that the fora where combined discussion is possible, questions of higher education, and research and innovation, are not the priority, but that other policy sectors dominate the agenda. We also examine different stakeholders, suggesting that the coordination of EU-related topics is often outsourced to the European rooftop organisations. In the conclusion, we argue that despite the institutional setup, there is no clear distinction between the conduct of national and EU affairs in the education field. Drawing on our data analysis, we suggest that higher education is deeply embedded in European structures, and that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what is "national" and "European." The borderline between higher education and research policies is also sometimes unclear.

A tale of two policy sectors: Higher education and research and innovation in the European framework

European polity is based largely on the working of the EU institutions, which all play their own role in forming laws, policies, and regulations. Decision making in education differs greatly from the traditional core policy areas and competences like agriculture and finance. For example, despite its increasing capacity to use funding mechanisms in steering, the EU has no legislative authority in the education field. Yet higher education policymaking spills over into research and innovation, as well as economic affairs and employment policies, where the EU has more power to implement regulation (Alexiadou &

Rambla, 2023; Eeva, 2021). The policy work conducted in EU institutions consists mostly of recommendations and other soft law instruments.

However, the EU – often in the name of the Commission – can greatly influence policy ideas and debates that may initiate policy processes targeting national education (e.g. Rinne et al., 2008). Table 4.1 shows the responsibilities of different EU policy actors. The presented data do not encompass all the policy actors involved in higher education policymaking but focus on describing the main actors, which draw upon our research data. In the European Parliament, the main committee dealing with research-related policy matters is the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE), while higher education-related topics are dealt within the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT). In the Council, the division is the same: different ministerial arrangements discuss these two policy tracks, and either the Working Party on Research or the Education Committee undertakes the preparatory work separately for each policy sector. The Commission Directorates-General (DG) establish a sectoral divide between topics of research and innovation – DG for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) – and education policies – DG for Education and Culture (DG EAC). Dedicated Commissioners have typically led these DGs, but von der Leyen's first Commission (2019–2024) was an exception: the Commissioner for Innovation and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, led both DG RTD and DG EAC. The Commissioners for the second von der Leyen term (2024–2029) follow the earlier practice. Chapter 1 describes each organisation's roles and tasks in more detail.

Finnish polity is divided into policy sectors under the responsibility of various political and administrative organs (Table 4.1). This division differs slightly from that of the EU institutions. Research-related questions are divided into innovation policy with strong connections with industrial policy; science policy is considered a separate entity; and education policy follows the EU policy divide. As in the EU institutions, higher education topics are therefore distributed under different policy sectors and ministries. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Parliament of Finland's Grand Committee is designated for EU-related topics, relying on sector-specific committees' expertise in innovation (Commerce Committee) and research and education policy (Education and Culture Committee) questions.

Innovation policy and science and education policy do not have a separate ministerial committee in the government, but all EU-related topics are discussed in the Ministerial Committee on EU affairs. The prime minister's office is the secretariat for this committee, and it also coordinates the Committee for EU Affairs. The Antti Rinne (2019) and Sanna Marin (2019–2023) governments initiated the post of Minister of Research, which Petteri Orpo's government (2023–) has continued. There are, therefore, dedicated ministers responsible for innovation (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment), science and culture (Ministry of Education and Culture), and education (Ministry of Education and Culture). The ministries' sub-committees work under the Committee for EU affairs, and they are separate for both sectors. There are 36 sector-specific sub-committees; the Ministry of Economic Affairs

Table 4.1 Policy actors in the EU and Finland in higher education-related sectors in 2019–2024[a]

Policy actors in the EU		
Higher education-related policy sectors and EU legal competence	Research: Shared legislative competence between EU and national governments	Higher education: EU has only supportive competences; national governments have the legislative power
European Parliament	***Plenary*** Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE)	***Plenary*** Committee on Culture and Education (CULT)
Council of the European Union	Ministers for Trade, Economy, Industry, and Research and Development Working Party on Research	Ministers of Education Education Committee
European Commission	***College of Commissioners*** ***Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth (Cabinet)*** Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD)	***College of Commissioners*** ***Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth*** Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) For example, Working group on Higher Education
Policy actors in Finland		
Higher education-related policy sectors	Innovation policy	Science and higher education policy
Parliament of Finland	***Plenary*** ***Grand Committee*** Commerce Committee	***Plenary*** ***Grand Committee*** Education and Culture Committee
Finnish Government	***Ministerial Committee on EU affairs*** ***Prime minister's office*** Minister of Economic Affairs (Ministry of Work and Employment) Minister of Science and Culture (Ministry of Education and Culture) ***Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), e.g. Research and Innovation Attaché***	***Ministerial Committee on EU affairs*** ***Prime minister's office*** Minister of Education (Ministry of Education and Culture) ***Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), e.g. Education and Culture Attaché***

(*Continued*)

Table 4.1 (Continued)

Policy actors in Finland		
Ministries	***Committee for EU Affairs*** Sub-committees, e.g. EU20 sub-committee for research and innovation EU29 sub-committee for employment	***Committee for EU Affairs*** Sub-committees, e.g. EU30 sub-committee on education

Note:

[a] ***Bold and italicised*** entries indicate policy actors that work in both sectors.

and Employment is responsible for seven, and the Ministry of Education and Culture for three (Valtioneuvosto, 2025a).

To summarise, although research, innovation, and education form the core for any higher education institution to function, their political steering is divided into multiple actors, organs, and policy sectors in the EU and Finland. In the rest of this chapter, we will examine the everyday work of these organisational actors more closely.

The Council of the European Union and the Finnish government: Intertwining national and European policy interest?

Education policy work is prepared and coordinated in the Council through various stages and levels in practice. The Education Committee, formed by education specialists from national governments, functions as a preparatory body for Council meetings with Ministers of Education. The Working Party on Research prepares for the Council with ministers responsible for trade, the economy, industry, and research and development, respectively. Our interviews reveal that the Council formations' everyday work involves various informal groups and networks which further the policy process by negotiating and identifying any tension or conflict concerning particular policy issues before ministerial meetings. For example, a group of countries with a similar view of the agenda or a specific policy proposal can sometimes form networks based on small countries' national interests (Bunse & Nicolaïdis 2012). This enables a majority to drive the interests of like-minded countries. Indeed, Johansson et al. (2023) found that the similarity connecting certain Member States stemmed from similarities in politico-economic systems, government ideologies, and the size of a Member State's population.

Practical policy work is conducted by education attachés – education specialists based in each Member State's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels. They typically attend Education Committee meetings with a national representative from the respective ministry. However, national governments try to manage policy activity to avoid the overstepping of

competences. The Council's political form resembles the functioning of the EU:

> So the formal negotiations with the education committee, with all the education attaches and the commission, … I think they were often quite tough at times, with Member States getting quite concerned. I know informally then that a lot of Member States were meeting outside that process. … They were meeting informally to try to block certain proposals, and if you get a blocking majority, you can generally scare the Commission in some ways. In the education field it's generally by consensus rather than voting. … So although it's always officially done by consensus, it doesn't have to be, so we always knew exactly how many votes we had. … So I know that for the person sitting in the chair, who's from the Presidency, I know they'll be counting all the time and will be worried.
>
> (Official)

The Finnish government and the Committee for EU affairs and its sector-specific sub-committees coordinate and prepare EU-related policy; the Ministerial Committee on European Affairs agrees on Finland's policy guidelines. However, education issues are rarely included in the Ministerial Committee's agenda (Hyvärinen & Raunio, 2014). This is also confirmed in relation to EU higher education topics:

> In my experience the content of [European] education policy in domestic decision making seldom creates any debates or political passion inside the government. I think you can see the lack of [legal] competence directly here. … [T]here's seldom any content that causes internal discussions in the government.
>
> (Politician)

Education-related European topics seldom score highly for the prime minister:

> [I]n the prime minister's office how often is research and innovation policy [dealt with]? … Horizon is negotiated and always emphasised as important for Finland … but otherwise, less so. They're whole other sectors, where staying in line is kept secure before the EU Ministerial Committee.
>
> (Official)

The preparation work on EU higher education policy is conducted in the Ministry of Education (MEC) by a sector-specific sub-committee, the *EU30*. This education sub-committee meets in camera; it is chaired by the MEC, which also sets the agenda for meetings. In the government's lexicon, the EU30 meets in an extended composition, meaning the sub-committee includes representatives from various interest groups and stakeholders (Valtioneuvosto 2025a). The EU30 sub-committee consists of state officials

from several ministries, including the MEC, and stakeholders representing various organisations, including representatives of university rectors, student unions, employers' unions, and trade unions. The EU30 is responsible for all education policies, not just higher education. When the issues under consideration transgress policy domain boundaries, the EU30 sometimes arrange joint meetings with other EU policy preparation sub-committees, responsible for research policies (the EU20 sub-committee) and employment policies (the EU29 sub-committee), for example. Our interviewees perceived the system of sub-committees as reflecting Finland's governance framework because it was deemed to be based on trust and transparency, as well as a high level of stakeholder participation:

> [A]s there's discontent about the idea that decision making is elitist, that it's disconnected from citizens and stakeholders, this sub-committee system mitigates these problems. It may not work everywhere, but as Finland has a trust-based society, it's possible to share information openly without it being misused.
>
> (Official)

The EU30 committee's work has become quite routine:

> Today, I'd say the sub-committee's work has become quite commonplace, and it may be it's regarded as a safety net given that some policy matters may have been discussed and coordinated among a smaller group, and then the [policy issue] is passed on to the committee itself.
>
> (Official)

Hyvärinen (2015) suggests that stakeholders regard sub-committees as information channels rather than as a genuine channel for exerting influence. Stakeholders, therefore, opt for other opportunities to influence the Finnish negotiating position in the national preparatory process, such as hearings on EU issues organised by parliamentary committees (Hyvärinen, 2015, p. 34). Stakeholders can also influence European policy by directly contacting the civil servants responsible for formulating Finland's positions on EU policies and their European rooftop organisations to lobby in Brussels. Our interviews indicate that while Finland's position is formally discussed with stakeholders in the EU30 committee, civil servants and ministry officials responsible for specific policy dossiers conduct the preparatory policy work in cooperation with the Permanent Representation in Brussels (Official). When relevant, ambassadors negotiate national positions at the weekly meetings of the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the EU, or "Coreper" (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) Article 240).[4] Moreover, MEC departments have their own contacts in the Commission who are themselves well-networked. This

structure helps in obtaining up-to-date knowledge about the field. The contacts enable the MEC to monitor the development of higher education policy issues. Formally, after initial preparations by sector-specific sub-committees, Finland's position is negotiated by the Finnish Ministerial Committee on EU affairs.

The officials we interviewed described intense work between Brussels and the "capital [city]" to form the national position on Council matters. This was visible in the Council's two preparatory bodies. According to national officials, the Council's Education Committee work was a weekly activity, and the Working Party on Research convened twice a week for all-day meetings, and during the most intensive framework programme negotiations (Horizon Europe) as much as four times a week (Official). The work was quite independent, and the officials drew on the long-term aims contained in the Government Programme or the Government Report on EU Policy (Official). European questions seemed secondary for ministers, emphasising the importance of officials' role in shaping policy.

The European Parliament and the multifaceted nature of higher education policy

Vukasović et al. (2019) analyse the plenary debates in the European Parliament, focusing on higher education between 1999 and 2014. They find an increase in the topic's frequency. Veiga and Magalhães (2017, p. 208) suggest that MEPs are interested in increasing legislative powers by changing EU treaties, underlining the importance of higher education for the European Parliament. Nevertheless, the general voting pattern reflects the limited legal competence: the European Parliament seldom votes in plenary on questions directly related to education topics. The VoteWatch Europe database (Hix et al., 2022) records 13,459 roll call votes (RCV) in the European Parliament's ninth legislature, from 2019 until February 2022. Of these plenary votes, 2,756 dealt with legislative resolutions, of which 62 per cent (1,717) were accepted, with an average of 537 votes.

Of the total votes, only 117 were in the culture and education policy area: only 8.7 per cent of all votes in the European Parliament dealt with culture and education topics. Of these policy sector votes, 21 were draft legislative resolutions issues; the remaining 96 were non-legal votes, mostly motions for resolutions. All draft legislative resolutions were accepted by huge majorities, averaging 608 out of a total of either 696 or 697. Thirty of the 96 motions for resolutions were clearly rejected (average no votes 485); the rest were accepted by clear majorities, with an average of 549 yes votes.

Using the same database (Hix et al., 2022), we see the same patterns emerging in industry, research, and energy policy. Compared with culture and education votes, almost triple the number of votes were taken (372), but there were only twice the number of draft legislative resolutions (45) of those in the culture and education sector, and only little more than half (55%) were accepted (25),

with huge majorities (average 595 votes), compared to 100 per cent in education and culture. Rejections had clear majorities of an average of 499 no votes. A total of 182 of the 327 non-legislative votes were accepted (yes vote average 542), and 145 were rejected (no vote average 469). It seems the industry, research, and energy sector follows the same pattern as culture and education: legislation is rare, but majorities are clear. Legislative resolutions in the education and culture policy area seemed uncontroversial: they were always carried. Industry, research, and energy sector votes, however, were closer to the general voting pattern: only 55 per cent passed, while the general average was 62 per cent.

In the European Parliament, the Committee on Education and Culture (CULT) is responsible for all the Union's cultural aspects such as the dissemination of culture, cultural heritage, and cultural and linguistic diversity, and for education, audiovisual policy, information and media policy, the cultural and educational aspects of the information society, youth, and sports (European Parliament 2024, Annex VI). Most of the work is non-legislative and based on the Commission's proposals, but a number of proposals are own-initiative. Some reports are legislative, however, receiving interest from all political groups, and may result in negotiations and contestation (Politician). According to CULT's activity report for the ninth legislature (2019–2024), the committee produced seven legislative reports under cultural policy, education policy, media and digital policy, youth policy, and sport policy (CULT, 2024). Only one legislative report was in the education policy field ("Erasmus+ programme for education, training, youth and sport 2021–2027"); five out of 13 non-legislative (own-initiative) reports fell under education. The voting data observations show that education policy formation in CULT is somewhat consensual due to the European Parliament's structure, where various voices, interests, and values converge.

> We don't have this kind of government–opposition dualism, you know. We have simply, we are … we need to, to find, to come together and, and form a stable majority. Otherwise, we're lost in the legislative process. And also, if, if in any report, you know, the resolution only gets, you know, just a very narrow majority, it's less taken into account by other institutions than if the parliament with a huge majority is, is going for this.
> (Politician)

Political group cohesion appears lower in CULT votes than in overall voting (Hix & Noury, 2024), as we discuss further in Chapter 8. Roll call recorded CULT coalition pattern voting data reveal that the two biggest political groups in the ninth parliamentary term, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), voted the same way 99 per cent of the time. The former Identity and Democracy group on the right was lowest in cohesion with all groups except another right-wing group, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). The centre Renew Europe group voted in accordance with the EEP and S&D at a rate of 95 per cent. It also aligned with the Greens/EFA parliamentary group (G/EFA) and

the Left around 90 per cent of the time, suggesting that coalition voting patterns within CULT tended to be more centre-left. The fact that the EPP and S&D groups share the chairing of CULT in two-and-a-half-year intervals also illustrates this.

CULT offers the official framework for education policymaking in the European Parliament, yet there are other internal venues within and without the committee structure. Political groups have their own preparatory meetings before CULT meetings, often led by each group's Coordinator MEP in CULT. The Coordinator MEPs form their own group, also meeting regularly – officially, as part of the committee meeting but in camera. Under the committee chair's leadership, the coordinators set the CULT's working priorities for the parliamentary term (Politician). Our interviewees' perception was that they also held an authoritative position compared with other MEP committee members because they could use their position to claim rapporteurship on a policy dossier aligned with their own and political group interests, for example. A politician reported that one coordinator had the opportunity to "use the power to be a rapporteur" by suggesting themselves to other coordinators, seeing this "as a privilege coordinators have" (Politician).

Political groups have the right to appoint a shadow rapporteur to keep track of the rapporteur's acts and guarantee that their (political) views are considered in the draft text (European Parliament, 2024, Title VIII, Rule 211). The committee with the main responsibility for drafting a report can ask other competent committees for their views. To include amendments in the report, such competent committees must submit their final opinion before the main committee votes on their draft report. There is a vote on this text and any amendments that the designated shadow rapporteurs and other committee members table. The report or opinion is adopted in the plenary in most cases, and this text constitutes the European Parliament's official position.[5] The European Parliament and the Council jointly adopt the vast majority of European laws: "The two co-legislators adopt legislation jointly, having equal rights and obligations – neither of them can adopt legislation without the agreement of the other" (European Parliament, 2012, p. 5).

According to two politicians we interviewed, policy work also includes "backstage preparation" (Wodak, 2015, p. 21) by virtue of various "technical meetings." For example, the rapporteur MEP organises meetings to discuss their policy report or opinion with CULT members from other political groups and the secretariat, while shadow rapporteur MEPs meet to discuss the same policy text among themselves. A politician describes the preparatory meetings' function:

> Before the votes we always have a preparatory meeting to discuss the voting list and the agenda of the plenary and the agenda of the coordinators' meeting because the coordinators' meeting is where a lot of decisions are taken about what the committee should do, the files are

allocated, and so on. … Members tend to be more open because this is a closed meeting, and they're in their own group.

(Politician)

Higher education policymaking extends to other committees in the European Parliament. Indeed, CULT has adopted 19 legislative opinions within the scope of other committees such as the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO), and the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE). ITRE occupies a key position in research and innovation policy. Almost 40 per cent of its work was legislative in the ninth parliamentary term (2019–2024), with 13 ordinary legislative reports out of 42 focusing on research and innovation policy (ITRE, 2024). Group cohesion in plenary voting was highest within G/EFA at 90 per cent, and it was 63 per cent in the Left group, in contrast with the lower cohesion levels usually observed (Hix & Noury, 2024). Interviewees regarded ITRE as having more power in higher education than CULT through science and research policy by financing schemes such as the Horizon Europe programme, as two politicians noted. The EMPL committee can also be involved in giving opinions, along with the Committee on Budgets, as it adopts the EU budget, which also covers the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes.

The Parliament of Finland: EU and higher education not a priority

The Parliament of Finland plays a formally large role in shaping Finland's political position on various EU topics given that many EU-related topics are directly linked to Finnish legislation (Eduskunta, 2013). When the government receives information about issues that would fall within parliament's jurisdiction were Finland not an EU member, it informs parliament with a "Union communication" (*U-kirjelmä*), and it sends a "Europe communication" (*E-kirje*) when the matter is otherwise significant (Valtioneuvosto, 2025b). The key player in parliament is the Grand Committee, which functions as its "EU committee," dealing with all EU-related topics apart from Common Foreign and Security Policy, which is dealt with in the Committee of Foreign Affairs (Eduskunta, 2023). The Grand Committee has a hearing with the prime minister or sector minister before and possibly after European Council or Council meetings.

Higher education matters arise quite rarely at Grand Committee ministerial hearings. We sourced data starting from the opening of the 2015 Parliament (Eduskunta, 2025). Between 29 April 2015 and 13 January 2025, the Grand Committee heard 3,157 experts, of whom 1,730 were ministers, and of them only 54 were Ministers of Education, and 18 were Ministers of Science. Ministers of Economic Affairs were summoned 110 times during the same

period. This also corresponds to the understanding of an interviewed minister, who did not recall providing hearings at the committee very often. One reason was that issues were less controversial (Politician).

A politician from the Education and Culture Committee saw this low participation as slightly controversial. Many Grand Committee topics were linked to higher education:

> Well, in the end we deal with [higher education] quite a lot in the Grand Committee – for example, when we discuss the European Union's money flows, member fees and so on, and where we use this funding. The green transition … includes things tangibly related to science and research policy, and university resources. A slightly different thing is the Erasmus programme and student exchange – how Finland fares at it[.]
> (Politician)

A politician from the Grand Committee thought it might appear to outsiders that the committee was less interested in higher education and science matters. The politician argued that this was due to time and prioritisation: "[The Grand Committee] should be the place for discussion, or it would fit best there, but the nature of the topic means people usually haven't spent time on it or emphasised it" (Politician). Instead, the politician argued that the Grand Committee relied on statements from specialist committees – the Education and Culture Committee, and the Commerce Committee (Table 4.1). This view also corresponds with more findings on other committees in previous studies of national parliaments' EU policymaking role (Raunio, 2015).

Although the Grand Committee consults with the other two committees and, in practice, delegates EU-related higher education questions to them, it has a small workload of such EU-related matters. A politician with an overview of the Education and Culture Committee's work noted, "Well, the Education and Culture Committee [in the Finnish parliament] deals mostly with national legislation and only gives statements on communications, and if there's a need to implement a directive." A politician from the Commerce Committee noted that there were many EU-related topics, but those related to higher education were in the minority, dealing with research and innovation questions.

A politician lamented that the division of work between committees in relation to higher education issues was unclear. This was seen to start with policies' division between the Ministries of Education and Employment and the Ministry of Finance. The Committee Guide did not help here according to the politician. It assigned "technology" to the Commerce Committee and "education, early childhood education, and science" to the Education and Culture Committee.

In both sectors, the policy questions seldom seemed controversial or a top priority. The institutionalised national coordination system could partly explain this: it seeks political consensus and stability (Raunio, 2021, p. 19).

The Finnish parliamentary process regarding EU education matters follows both the idea of the EU's legal competences and the division of research and innovation and education into two sectors. The Grand Committee could in principle discuss higher education topics, but other policy issues seemed more pressing.

Co-creating European higher education policy in the European Commission?

The Commission enacts only secondary law derived from the objectives and principles in the treaties in the education field (TFEU, Title 1, Article 2§, 5). Documents such as "recommendations" and "opinions" are considered non-binding legal acts, yet they can be influential in practice because they provide a way for the Commission, Council, or Parliament to express its views and suggest a policy direction on a specific topic. Member States can ask the Commission to conduct a study on a topic the Council considers necessary for achieving common objectives (TFEU, Article 241). These proposals accepted by the Council are called Council Recommendations. Recent Council recommendations include the following: academic careers (CEU, 2024a), learning mobility (CEU, 2024b), learning for the green transition (CEU, 2022a), European higher education coordination (CEU, 2022b), lifelong learning and skills development (CEU, 2021), and qualification recognition and mobility (CEU, 2018). All are tightly tied to higher education.

The Commission's education responsibility is divided into the political and executive administrative divisions. The Commissioner responsible for education matters and their cabinet leads the political division (see Table 4.1). Commissioners' responsibilities have changed during legislatures, and higher education policy has been various Commissioners' remit. The Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) plays the primary role in drafting policy initiatives and coordinating education programmes such as the Erasmus+ programme, working closely with the Commissioner's cabinet. Each cabinet has one official responsible for education policy topics.

The DG EAC is a hierarchical organisation, and higher education policy is managed under the "EAC.B.1" department. The Commission uses external expertise to form expert groups such as the Working Group on Higher Education, providing a forum for discussion. This forum brings together national representatives from ministries, stakeholders in the field of higher education, EU Agencies, non-governmental organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Council of Europe, and EU candidate and European Economic Area (EEA) countries. Meeting information is publicly available in the Commission's Register of expert groups. The working group is seen as a "technical stage for the more political work" of Commission initiatives agreed by Member States in the Council's Education Committee (see Table 4.1) or prepared for a

proposal for Ministers of Education (Politician). The working group monitors the Commission's work programme and the Council's conclusions in directing their work. European higher education policymaking is a co-creation process (Politician) that includes internal policy preparation in the DG, which is seen as less political than the Council's Education Committee, where national policy is to the fore (see Table 4.1). One official explains this relationship with the Council:

> The education committee is like the political working group that covers all education sectors. But the working groups do report to the education committee regularly. … So they're updated regularly, but there's no formal interaction. Well, I guess the updates are formal. But I think the idea behind the [omitted] working group is that it's education specialists, and that's it's really less political in a sense. We recognise that the final decision making is with the education ministers, and this is really more technically about working on proposals but not deciding anything. (Politician)

This interplay is reinforced in Council conclusions where the Council *invites* the Commission to present regular updates to the Member States on the progress of the implementation of the actions the conclusions describe. For example, the conclusion on the *European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe* (2022) states that the Commission should "submit a comprehensive overview on the European Education Area in 2025, also taking into consideration progress made on the implementation of the European Research Area" (p. 16). The Commission must therefore consider the Member States' views in the Education Committee (see Table 4.1), as according to the Treaty, the "exercise of that [supporting] competence shall not result in Member States being prevented from exercising theirs" (TFEU, Title 1, Article 2, §3). The Commission has a representation in each Member State; Member States can also be represented in the Commission policy-specifically: for example, a Member State can have a country desk, a civil servant who is responsible for a dedicated Member State (see e.g. Eeva, 2021).

Yet the DG level policy work adopts a political dimension through the drafting in the Commission's cabinets – and potentially the President's cabinet. One politician describes how education policy work obtains a political dimension and is connected with various policy sectors in the "Special Chefs" meeting,

> …where all the cabinets meet, and they discuss the text on the table, and we see how to improve it, how to modify it, for the College of the Commissioners then to endorse it unanimously because all Commission decisions are collegial, so all the Commissioners are responsible for them and need, of course, to be able to have ownership of them. … And then the final decision is taken together under the president's leadership. So

> I'd say it's a very collaborative effort. It takes a couple of months, it's quite a long process. But at the same time it enables everybody to know what's happening in other fields, and sometimes to get inspiration and influence for what we could do in our own policy field.
>
> (Politician)

Our interviews suggest that the Commission's work is largely structured according to internal policy coordination, which illustrates the hierarchical formation at the political level (Politician). Proposals from DG EAC are redrafted and negotiated into a political form in "Special Chefs," a working group which includes all officials responsible for education in each Commissioner's cabinet. The negotiated policy proposals are then directed to the Heads of Cabinet (Hebdo), which meets every week (European Commission, 2024). Finally, the College of Commissioners adopts the endorsed proposals, as Table 4.1 indicates.

To conclude, the Commission exerts significant political influence in the higher education field. The drafting of policy follows the Commission's political guidelines – namely, in the form of the Commission work programme, which paves the way for the "collaborative effort" in policymaking one politician described. The DG level is perceived as somewhat technical preparation for the political leadership of the Commission and the Commissioners and President's cabinets. The Working Group on Higher Education in DG EAC is one of the preparatory bodies in the higher education area, and it reports to the Education Committee, even though most Member States are represented in the group ex officio. However, their influence in the working group stage is not prominent in our interviewee data, and the working group is not seen as an impactful platform from the national policymaking perspective. The making of higher education policy follows institutional arrangements, in which policy is co-created through the Commission's executive and political levels. Yet the interviewees adopt informal ways of navigating these stages, gaining an "understanding of how far to push" as one official describes the reaching of consensus on political positions between the President's cabinet and Member States. According to the interviewees' accounts, there are no formal arrangements for the working groups to connect with other policy areas or DGs, but the Hebdo meetings bring all policy sectors together.

Lobbying by national and European stakeholders

Like other policy fields, the European higher education field is not short of actors. In introducing a special issue, Fumasoli et al. (2018) argue for the importance of transnational actors in European policymaking: understanding these actors introduces important nuancing against the "standardisation thesis." They argue that "transnational actors position themselves in the more networked forms of governance" (Fumasoli et al., 2018, p. 329). Such transnational organisations are the European student organisations involved in

shaping and legitimising the EHEA (Klemenčič & Galán Palomares, 2018), university alliances that further increase the degree of actors and complexity in European governance (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018), and the specialist expert ad hoc groups that can become institutionalised (Elken, 2018). The field can be seen as multi-actor and multilevel (Fumasoli et al., 2018) and as a multi-issue policymaking environment (Chou et al., 2017). We use the term stakeholder organisation for these various actors, while recognising their function as organised interests: interest organisations involved in lobbying and investing in Brussels (see Coen & Katsaitis, 2024, p. 1).

Higher education stakeholder organisations are typically structured into European and national rooftop organisations. In recognising the main stakeholders at the European level, we mainly follow Vukasovic's (2017) logic, who studied six stakeholders with a consultative status in the influential Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). There are some exceptions to Vukasovic (2017) in our analysis. We have excluded the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which, though an important organisation, is too specialised for our general focus. Moreover, while Vukasovic focuses on Education International, we focus on its European regional structure, the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE). Of BFUG members, we also exclude (as does Vukasovic, 2017) the Council of Europe and UNESCO, given our focus on only one transnational entity, the EU. The European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) should be in this document analysis, but we initially excluded it and could not include it later because of time constraints. We also included the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to allow symmetry with the Finnish organisations on which we focused. The selected Finnish stakeholder organisations are a match for the European rooftop organisations, as they belong to them and are listed below their rooftop organisations. Our study therefore focuses on the main European stakeholder organisations in the higher education sector and their Finnish member organisations:

- Business Europe, representing enterprises in 36 European countries[6]
  - Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), representing the Finnish business community
- European Students' Union (ESU), an umbrella organisation for student unions in 40 European countries[7]
  - the National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK)
  - the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL)
- European University Association (EUA), representing universities and national rectors' conferences from 49 European countries[8]
  - Universities Finland (UNIFI), representing all 13 universities and the National Defence University in Finland

- European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), representing universities of applied sciences, with 70 members from Europe and elsewhere[9]
  - the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE), representing all 24 universities of applied sciences in Finland
- ETUC, representing national trade union confederations in 41 countries[10]
  - the Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK)
- ETUCE, representing education trade unions from 51 countries[11]
  - the employee organisations of the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ)
  - the Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers (FUURT)
- The EFEE has member organisations from 26 European countries and from one at the European level[12]
  - the employer organisation Finnish Education Employers (FEE)

We analysed these organisations' work, starting with the assumption that the documents they produced indicated their work's volume and focus. This was based on the simple notion that to influence policy, the organisations needed written material for promoting or building policies. We downloaded statements, position papers, and plans of Finnish and European stakeholders between 2020 and 2023. In this period, the 25 organisations that Table 4.2 lists produced 3,448 documents. We conducted a rudimentary search in their titles for Europe or education keywords.[13]

This simple analysis shows that European rooftop organisations focus on European-level topics while the national organisations are more concerned with the domestic agenda. However, they also engage in EU-related advocacy work through their European central organisations. In the document titles, European actors focus more on European topics; Finnish actors focus on education topics. The notion that Europe or the EU does not feature in the title of the national actors' documents may indicate that it is not their main focus because their respective European umbrella organisation takes care of EU matters. The interview data supports this.

When the stakeholder organisations attempt to influence policymaking, whether at the European level or in Finland, the policy process's setup affects when an attempt makes sense. For example, in the European Parliament, the rapporteur is central, and they also rely on lobbyists as a source of knowledge. In the Finnish parliament, the same work is undertaken by committees that hear experts from different fields to prepare legislative work. An interviewed MEP, apparently accustomed to describing the difference, rhetorically apologised for their reputation as lobbyists in Finland and Brussels, using the example of being a rapporteur in a committee:

> An MEP must find [information]. And the stakeholders know that when someone's in a role like this [a rapporteur], you don't need to see that

Table 4.2 Stakeholder document production in 2020–2023 by topic (as in title)

Document source	*…Europe-related title*	*…education-related title*	*Total documents*
Actors in Europe	**588**	**215**	**1,452**
Business Europe	192	1	395
European Students' Union (ESU)	125	153	204
European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	224	6	637
European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE)	15	18	105
European University Association (EUA)	30	36	102
European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE)	2	1	9
Actors in Finland	**57**	**580**	**1,998**
Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE)	8	67	206
Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK)	23	18	324
Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ)	6	158	369
National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK)	2	81	186
Finnish Education Employers (FEE)	4	97	353
Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK)	2	6	113
National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL)	2	62	131
Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers (FUURT)		29	123
Universities Finland (UNIFI)	10	62	193
Total documents	**645**	**795**	**3,450**

much trouble to get it. And they'll let you know, which is necessary. I'll repeat this: in Finland there's often a shared understanding that lobbyists are a damn bad thing, but here [in Brussels] – though they deserve the "lobbyist" title – they mainly perform a valuable task.

(Politician)

While European Parliament rapporteur work is important, committee work in the Parliament of Finland is a somewhat late stage to seek to influence higher education policy. Indeed, Finnish stakeholder representation is embedded in working groups at the preparatory phase, and this is a strong tradition compared with many countries (Vesa et al., 2018).

In Finnish legislative preparatory work, recognised stakeholder organisations like trade unions are traditionally important in expert hearings and statements (Lampinen, 1998). This is also the case with the EU30 subcommittee on education, of which most of the stakeholders presented in Table 4.2 are members, including universities and student unions. Indeed, in the Ministry of Education and Culture working groups, most central actors come from public

governance, labour market organisations, universities and other education interest organisations, and cultural organisations (Kallunki et al., 2023). This is aligned with the Education and Culture Committee's work in the Finnish parliament. A corporatist tradition is visible in that a quarter of experts on the committee are from the business and industry lobby (8%), trade unions (7%), or occupational organisations (11%), while academic and research institutions together constitute only 12 per cent (Seo, 2017). The word "lobbyist" in Finnish (*lobbari*) is borrowed from English, which reflects the contradicting fact that in the Finnish context, many stakeholders are inside the meeting room, not waiting outside in the lobby.

Mikkonen's (2024) transnational approach to studying Helsinki- and Brussels-based lobbyists' EU lobbying shows that everyday practices constitute the power to lobby. She focuses on non-governmental organisations, trade unions, and professional, trade, and business associations during the period of the emergence of the European Green Deal (2017–2020), finding that the "feel for EU lobbying" is crucial in transnational EU lobbying: it not only entails an understanding of the surrounding politics but being able to time and anticipate specific policy actions by practices which, according to Mikkonen (2024, p. 163), combine public and closed-door interactions. Amidst the "legitimate demands for political institutions to facilitate more forward-looking policymaking" Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022, p. 2), lobbyists need to demonstrate their competence and ability to gain timely information. Transnational experience of EU lobbying is an advantage with those in-house lobbyists familiar with the Brussels context, in contrast to national EU lobbyists. Our research data suggest that trust is fundamental in gaining access to EU policymaking sites, as well as in building a reputation as a competent expert (Mikkonen, 2024, p. 187).

Universities are an interesting stakeholder group because they have traditionally been considered autonomous but are tied to public funding through the state to various degrees. For example, Finland has one of Europe's highest levels of performance-based and strategic research funding (Jongbloed et al., 2023). Universities also play a crucial role in shaping EU policies and promoting Europeanisation agendas because they receive EU funds directly from the Commission, especially in the context of the newly established European University alliances (Kanniainen & Pekkola, 2023). Several interviewees named universities as key knowledge sources for policy construction and used research results to leverage policy decisions. This places universities in a dual position in which they are both knowledge producers for policy but actively promote and advocate for their research agendas and knowledge to the EU and national governments. As research funding has become more targeted, research increasingly involves the validation of political decisions (Kauppi, 2019). Scientists participate in policymaking through their expert positions in stakeholder organisations, where their knowledge can validate policy by depoliticising political aspects (Normand, 2021).

To summarise, it is easy to see how the complexity in the stakeholder field forces both policymakers and stakeholders to find coping methods.

Stakeholders need ways to demonstrate their relevance: in our observation data, an organisation present at a CULT hearing typically argued for its importance based on the number of members or organisations they represented. In the Finnish context, stakeholders were embedded into the system and had a secure position as part of working groups and hearings. The amount of information produced also makes the question of where and how to focus in the selection of knowledge relevant.

EU higher education policymaking in an intermediary space

In this chapter, we have scrutinised the various institutions and policy actors dealing with higher education policy in the EU and in Finland through the lens of our interview data. We conclude that much higher education policymaking work happens somewhere "in-between." This is because of several factors we have identified in this chapter: the blurred boundaries of policy sectors; the emphasised role of technical and bureaucratic work; the formal and informal venues for doing policy; and many political players' lack of interest in investing time in the topic, mainly because of the perception that education is not within the EU's legal remit. The conventional idea that the EU's legal competences are the foundation of higher education policymaking potentially obscures policymakers' understanding of the EU's power and policy sectors' blurred boundaries.

There is a strong emphasis on the bureaucratic apparatus's technical work. Most officials see no difference between national and European policymaking: it is a common practice for them to reflect on national policies in relation to other Member States' policies while managing the tensions and pressures from both EU institutions and the Member States in their policy work.

Politicians' lack of interest or investment of time in higher education seems to be the sum of the two previous factors. Higher education in the EU context provides minimal authority in legislation. It may also be difficult to control the combination of education as it is related to learning and teaching, and research and innovation sectors with a stronger focus on science and innovation. Moreover, the questions are not so politically divisive that they force themselves onto policymakers' agendas. Technical and bureaucratic preparation also tends to occur at a high level and is so finetuned and automated in its everyday practices that it can feed most political needs.

In the Finnish case, with a subtly overextended and perhaps contested hypothesis, we could argue that EU higher education questions always seem to be a matter for someone else. The prime minister and the Ministerial Committee on EU Affairs deal with more pressing topics, as does parliament's Grand Committee – both organs afford places where Finland can seek to form a broader picture to influence higher education matters in Europe. Officials work daily to present Finland's position on different topics, but this seldom raises either stakeholders' or politicians' eyebrows. National stakeholders seem unconcerned with European affairs or follow their rooftop

organisation's views. However, this may reflect the somewhat closed system of sub-committees dealing with EU matters under the Ministerial Committee on EU Affairs in Finland, suggesting that any tension or conflict stakeholders voice remains behind closed doors – and is not echoed in Finland's official position papers.

In the case of the EU institutions, education has traditionally been seen as a consensus policy area (e.g. Eeva, 2021) where power remits have tended to be clear. Education seems unattainable from the perspective of the Commission and Parliament because of the principle of subsidiarity, as Member States in the form of the Council control the policy direction. Lesser-known policymaking venues, however, such as working groups, can be influential bodies, especially as their members represent a range of transnational, national, and local higher education policy actors. Yet the potential to influence higher education through research and innovation policy and more tangible steering mechanisms may introduce novelty to policymaking arrangements. This may also mean involving universities more closely in European policymaking.

Interestingly, the new von der Leyen Commission (2024–2029) has no dedicated commissioner for education, but instead three commissioners who share responsibilities within the policy area: the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness leads the core topics surrounding higher education, such as the European Education Area, the Erasmus+ programme, and the European Degree Label and European Universities Alliances policy initiatives. The other two Commissioners involved in education leadership are the Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation and the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport. Education itself is not included in any Commissioner portfolio; research and innovation are. Following our reasoning, this continues the trajectory where education issues are not seen as the priority, perhaps because of the limited scope of power, but are approached in a more obscure way that allows flexibility in education policy governance.

The unclarity, contestations, and attempts to enlarge EU power in higher education also raise an important question about how higher education policy is ultimately managed and steered – and by whom. As previous research has noted, the OMC plays a significant role in shaping higher education policies across Member States, promoting competition and benchmarking national systems. The EU's influence extends beyond formal legislative power through funding instruments like the European Semester and Horizon Europe, and the recently established European Universities, which have adopted Commission-led funding priorities. We have previously noted the steering that occurs in the intermediary area: in routine policymaking practices that may well be institutionalised but are unrecognised as official decision-making bodies. We have attempted to introduce new perspectives to studying how politicians', officials', and stakeholders' everyday work and practices shape EU higher education. This book's remaining chapters attempt to develop these insights, arguing that we can identify knowledge networks inside this policy arena that can further our understanding of this complex entity.

Notes

1. As enshrined in Article 6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.
2. Member States can also request tailormade support via specific policy instruments such as the Technical Support Instrument, which is attached to a wider EU policy instrumentation. However, this involves monitoring by the European Commission.
3. Based on Article 4 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.
4. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12016E240
5. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/powers-and-procedures/legislative-powers
6. https://www.businesseurope.eu/about-us/what-we-do/
7. https://esu-online.org/about/full-member-directory/
8. https://www.eua.eu/
9. https://www.eurashe.eu/members-directory/
10. https://www.etuc.org/en/organisation-and-people
11. https://www.csee-etuce.org/en/about-us/about-etuce
12. https://educationemployers.eu/team-members/
13. The keywords were "educa," "koulu," "univer," "yliop," "kasvat," "student," "opiskel," and "_EU," "EU," "Europ," "Euroop," "EU_," and "EU."

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5 Finland–EU higher education policy network

Structure, formation, and characteristics

Paula Silvén, Jarmo Kallunki, and Katri Eeva

Introduction

Education policy has been understood as a coordinative and collaborative effort of many actors (Rinne et al., 2008). Policy coordination in the European Union (EU) is described as complex. Hajer (2006, p. 43) refers to "multi-party, polycentric, transnational and inter-cultural networks of governance," which corresponds well to descriptions of the higher education policy context (Chou et al., 2017). We started to study this network in Chapter 4, where we found that EU education policy occurred in working and expert groups operating in Finland and in the EU organisations, but also at their interface. This reflects the legal framework of the policy sector under which Members States wield legislative power over their domestic education policy and for which the EU has a supportive competence. However, it is noted that the European Commission (hereafter Commission) and its working groups can influence decision making through the collaborative work of state actors and various stakeholders, and thus function "as a space for monitoring the environment, gathering information and socialising" (Milana et al., 2020). These policy networks at the interface of the European and national spaces can Europeanise education policy while simultaneously constructing domestic adaptation, circulating information, and establishing governing frameworks (Eeva, 2021). In other words, the state policymaking structure intertwines with policy networks, illuminating the workings of network governance at the Finland–EU policy interface.

These networks operate and form differently in each member country. The Committee for EU Affairs and its sector-specific sub-committees have the main responsibility for coordinating and preparing EU-related policies for the Finnish government (see further discussion in Chapter 4). An important feature of Finland is that universities, with their constitutional and legislative autonomy, play a central role in networks. Universities cannot be directly steered by the Ministry of Education and Culture or the Commission due to their lack of legislative competence. They are therefore involved in different working groups to allow "steering by information" (Kallio et al., 2021). Indeed, it is easy to argue that there is an analogy of steering universities at

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the national and European levels and with the EU's higher education policy steering: the lack of legislative power means softer, persuasive forms of governance are necessary, and networks offer a good tool here. In addition to universities' involvement in working groups, another conditioning factor for networks is Finland's corporatist policymaking tradition (Holli & Turkka, 2021; Rommetvedt, 2017), including in higher education policy (Vukasovic, 2023), which entails a long tradition of including various stakeholders such as trade unions in higher education decision making.

In this chapter, we focus on the structure, formation, and characteristics of the higher education policy network operating in and between Finland and the EU. To achieve this, we create a visualisation of the structure of the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network. We also analyse the possible underlying explanations for this structure, examining its characteristics and the logics of its formation. The next subsection begins with a theoretical insight into how networks are approached as tools of transnational governance. We then describe how we formed our understanding of network structure, formation, and characteristics based on network ethnographic data and the interviews' content analysis. Having described the results, we discuss our conclusions regarding the network's structure, formation, and characteristics.

Structure, formation, and characteristics of networks in transnational governance

Research has sought to describe governance's changing structure. Governance studies have long emphasised that public policymaking in a modern state involves various institutions and actors from both within and without state entities and public bodies. Policymaking and policy implementation occur through and are mediated by the complex of relationships between these various institutions and actors (e.g. Agranoff, 2007; Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1998). As Goodin et al. (2006, p. 12) state: "[G]overning is less and less a matter of ruling through hierarchical authority structures, and more and more a matter of negotiating through a decentralized series of floating alliances." The concept of "network(ed) governance" is specifically used here to emphasise policy networks' role in contemporary governance (e.g. Goodin et al., 2006; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016; Provan & Kenis, 2008). It has been a popular choice as the theoretical framework in higher education policy studies (e.g. Ball & Junemann, 2012; Donina & Paleari, 2019; Ferlie et al., 2008; Khelifi, 2019; Milana et al., 2020).

Policy networks are not hierarchically managed but are understood as self-steering and self-organising. Various central authorities such as national governments in the EU Member States can utilise these networks as tools for national steering. In addition to government bodies, higher education policy networks include non-governmental stakeholders such as private businesses, interest and advocacy groups (Milana, 2024), and local and international actors (Ferlie et al., 2008), all with their own aims and interests. We believe

the special characteristics of higher education and lack of direct governmental steering power in higher education policymaking mean network governance works well as our analytical lens. The network governance perspective is also well aligned with our choice of method – network ethnography (e.g. Ball & Junemann, 2012; see Chapter 2).

While studies of network governance describe the general change of governance structures, research on policy networks can assist in understanding their characteristics in the policymaking context. Policy networks are a key concept in political science, serving as a framework for understanding policy actors' relationships and interactions shaping public policy (Dal Molin & Masella, 2016; Knoke, 2011; Rhodes, 2006). Rhodes (2006) characterises policy networks as intricate systems of interplay among various actors, emphasising their roles in both the formulation and implementation of policies. These networks include formal institutional connections and informal associations among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (Capano et al., 2015). They are often characterised as being organised around shared beliefs and interests (Rhodes, 2006) that play a crucial role in influencing public policy. In this context, network ties act as pipelines through which various resources, including information, social support, and norms (Marin & Wellman, 2014), can flow. This interconnectedness may be crucial for the dissemination of ideas and practices within the network, affecting policy outcomes and governance's overall effectiveness. It is unclear whether the networks are cooperative and consensual, however. Policy networks can also be places of conflict and power struggles where some actors dominate agenda-setting and decision-making processes (Marsh & Smith, 2000).

Policy networks can be formed for various purposes, and they operate differently. They can work as important sounding boards for government agendas because they gather an extensive group of stakeholders and policy actors in the policymaking process (Kallunki et al., 2025). Such networks are instrumental in creating a participatory governance environment in which multiple voices enhance governance structures' legitimacy and responsiveness. The continuous negotiation and redefinition of public policies characterise this process (Dal Molin & Masella, 2016; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). Another important aspect of policy networks is the concept of multiple group memberships. Memberships in multiple working groups or organisation boards create connections between some groups while excluding others (Breiger, 1974; Feld, 1981; Marin & Wellman, 2014). Individuals who are members of multiple groups exist at their intersections, facilitating interactions across different sectors.

Understanding the structure, formation, and characteristics of these networks is a key objective in policy network research. This line of enquiry affords insights into governance structures' dynamics, helping elucidate how these networks are established and maintained, and evolve (Knoke, 2011). By focusing on these processes, researchers can form a deeper understanding of the underlying policymaking mechanisms and the factors that drive

change within these networks. We therefore focus on the basic features of the Finland–EU network by asking these research questions:

1 What is the structure of the Finland–EU network?
2 How do the interviewees describe the formation and characteristics of these networks?

To our knowledge, the Finland–EU higher education policymaking networks remain uncharted. Our study seeks to fill this gap, using both network ethnography and interviews to map the network.

Data and methods

We utilise network ethnography as a methodological framework and contribute to the existing network ethnography literature (e.g. Adhikary & Lingard, 2018; Avelar, 2023; Avelar & Ball, 2019; Ball, 2008; Ball & Junemann, 2011, 2012; Hunkin, 2016; Olmedo & Grau, 2013; Rowe, 2022; Viseu & Carvalho, 2018). Network ethnography combines different methods like internet searches, social network analysis (SNA), interviews, and observations to produce a description of a network and understand its operation. It attempts to answer a question that is often seen as difficult for SNA: "so what?". It does this by offering a broader methodological toolset. While SNA is a valuable tool for examining networks' structure, it may fall short in answering questions about the network characteristics or formation unless supported by other data types such as observations or research interviews.

According to our literature review (Kallunki et al., 2025), the earliest mentions of network ethnography were made by Howard (2002), who combines SNA and ethnographic field methods. Ball (2008) and Ball and Junemann (2012) further develop the method for education policy research (see Chapter 2). They add internet searches to the method's toolbox to assist in "following policy" (Marcus, 1995). Ball's (2008) and his associates' network ethnographic research approach is influenced by Rhodes' "government ethnography" (Rhodes, 1995, 1997; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992) and policy network analysis (Marinetto, 2003; Rhodes, 1995, 1997; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). The research series by Ball and colleagues (Avelar & Ball, 2019; Ball, 2008, 2016; Ball & Junemann, 2011; Ball & Thawer, 2018; Junemann et al., 2018) focuses on identifying and exploring the global education network's various education reforms around the world. Network ethnography research has recently focused on the observation of different events. Avelar and Ball (2019) argue that events represent the micro-scale policy spaces where neoliberalism is "done," and where past, present, and possible futures are present through network actors. Adhikary and Lingard (2018) share this view, arguing that these networks broaden our geographical imagination.

While network ethnography is flexible as a frame, providing researchers with an extensive toolset, clear boundary specification has remained an issue

in many network ethnography studies (Chapter 2; Kallunki et al., 2025). Our study attempts to offer the reader a detailed description of our dataset and methods to overcome this issue and to further develop network ethnography as a framework.

We chose to use network ethnography in this research because of the diversity of organisations and working groups belonging to the Finland–EU network. As these organisations differ, we could not justify the use of SNA, which has strict requirements concerning what can be considered a link between organisations. In network ethnography, this link formation and the inclusion of different organisations are more flexible. It therefore gave us a more fitting method for researching the Finland–EU organisation network. We utilised many qualities from SNA, however, using a systematic approach to which organisations we included in the study, and how we interpreted the link between them. We deepened the understanding of the network image through interviews. Our take on network ethnography therefore shares more features with Howard's (2002) research design than Ball's (2008). Network ethnography is also well aligned with the theoretical underpinnings that characterise the network governance perspective. We describe the conduct of our analysis, network mapping, and interview analysis in the next subsections.

Network ethnography mapping of the Finland–EU organisation network

We began mapping the Finland–EU organisation network by identifying the EU bodies involved in education matters. Information was gathered from official EU websites, organisational charts, and the minutes of decision-making bodies. We first started working without exclusion criteria and formed a very extensive network. We then gradually narrowed it down to specific entities directly dealing with higher education policy matters. Following this logic, we outlined the entire network of Finland and the EU, identifying the organisations and working groups that connected the national and transnational networks.

Having mapped the network, we collected the membership data of the organisations and working groups from public sources such as websites, policy documents, and minutes (e.g. the Finnish government's and EU institutions' official websites). While obtaining membership data from Finland was relatively straightforward, obtaining EU working group membership data was difficult. We could not receive membership data despite our research-based information requests, and we could access only member's background organisation data. We therefore converted the membership database into an organisational database in which individual members (nodes) were replaced by the organisations they represented. We listed each organisation only once per working group, even if multiple representatives were from the same organisation.

The data included only organisations belonging to working groups in 2022. However, many working groups like the EU30 sub-committee (analysed in Chapter 6) consistently feature the same organisations over the years. The

dataset contained 149 working groups or boards of directors, with 704 organisation members (Chapter 2, Table 2.2). We treated the member organisations as nodes. Two organisations formed a tie if they shared a working group or board of directors membership. This effectively produced two-mode data, which we converted into one-mode data for analysis (Borgatti et al., 2013). From here, we refer only to nodes and links. The types of organisations and working groups included universities and higher education institutions (both Finnish and EU networks), political decision-making bodies and other political organisations (e.g. the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education and the Finnish Parliament's Education and Culture Committee), and stakeholders and professional associations (e.g. the European University Association and the Union of Research Professionals in Finland), described in more detail in Chapter 4. For analytical purposes, we grouped nodes in five categories: (1) higher education institutions (universities or universities of applied sciences), (2) political decision-making bodies or organisations, (3) national and European stakeholders, (4) business sector actors, and (5) countries.

Content analysis of interview data

We also drew on the project's entire interview dataset: 45 interviews with politicians, stakeholders, and officials working with higher education policy in Finland or in the EU (Chapter 2). We used thematic content analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to identify patterns and themes within the data. We used ATLAS.ti to assist our analysis, especially to support systematic data coding. The analysis process underwent the following steps to ensure reliability.

We started with a round of test coding in which all the authors coded the same three interviews. This was to ensure consistency and mutual understanding regarding the coding process and categorisation of responses. In the data analysis, we focused on the interviewees' descriptions of functions, characteristics, or formation in their networks. Based on the test coding, we discussed our rationale for the coding and decided on the analytical questions we used for it. Through test coding we started to piece together which themes began to emerge and thus the main categories on which we should focus. These were network formation, network characteristics, and network functions. The analytical questions that guided the coding process were as follows: (i) How do the interviewees describe the nature of networks? (ii) What functions do networks have? (iii) What happens within networks? (iv) How are networks formed?

After the test coding we divided the remaining interviews between the researchers. Each researcher coded their assigned interviews, keeping a coding diary to document decisions and ensure continuity. This diary was important for preserving the context and rationale for coding choices, facilitating consistency and transparency among different coders.

Once we had completed our individual coding tasks, we reviewed and discussed the coded material and the diary notes. This phase involved merging overlapping codes whose meanings were very close into larger code groups. Through this process, we initially focused on three emerging themes: character, formation, and functions. These three categories were assigned to the researchers for further analysis. After the analysis, we decided only to focus on formation and structure, as they were more suitable for analysing with the network structure, forming a cohesive entity. This enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of our network analysis work.

We used these two categories to draw out detailed thematic patterns from the coded data. This entailed further work with various sub-codes. These sub-coded themes for network characteristics were active participation, blurry boundaries, the importance of physical presence, soft power, and informal networks as easier access to knowledge. The network formation sub-codes were formation based on interests and formal structures, gaining access, hierarchical networks, the importance of good relationships and trust, and informal networks.

This approach enabled us to work systematically as a team and to comprehensively and consistently analyse the interview data.

Analysis of the Finland–EU network

Core and peripheral actors

Figure 5.1 visualises the complete Finland–EU network database as a network. It consists of 149 organisations, represented by 704 members. Organisations are nodes, and they are connected with a link if they share members in the

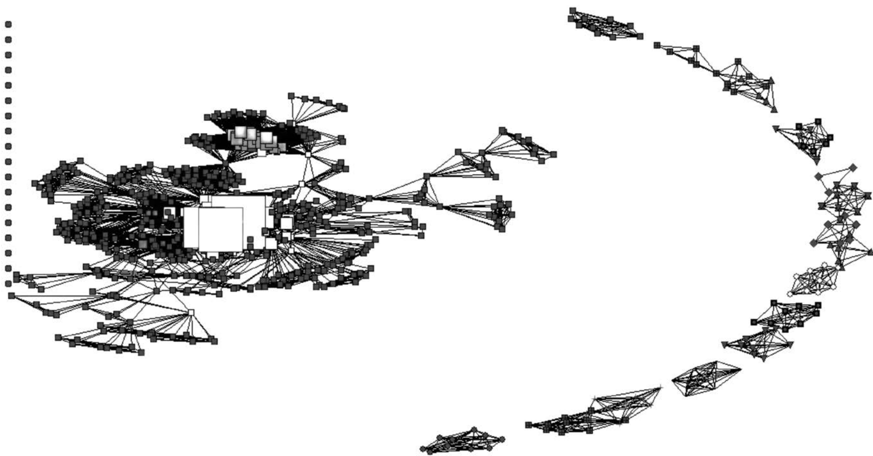

Figure 5.1 Finland–EU HE policymaking network.

same working group or board of directors. This was originally a two-mode affiliation network, which we transformed into one-mode data for analysis purposes. According to Borgatti et al. (2013), the database qualifies as a "large network."

In Figure 5.1, a node's size signifies the number of connections an organisation has within the network, indicating their centrality to the network. Meanwhile, a node's colour represents the type of organisation it is, providing a visual distinction between different categories of actors within the network. The white nodes are political parties or political organisations. Most are located as large nodes in the centre of the main component, and one isolated component is on the right of the visualisation. The medium-sized mid-grey nodes in the dangling top of the main component and connected only with two nodes from left and right represent the EU Member States. The medium-sized light grey nodes around of the large political parties signify higher education institutions. The stakeholders' nodes like labour unions and non-governmental organisations are visible only when we zoom in to the main component (see Figure 5.2). The small dark grey nodes represent the business sector. They are universal but not central to the main component, and they also form smaller isolated components.

The network did not appear very cohesive, as it consisted of 35 different components. Within the main component, the central and most prominent nodes were political organisations. There were also 18 isolated nodes that remained unconnected with the rest of the network. These isolated nodes belonged to only one working group and therefore did not establish links with other parts of the network, effectively placing them at the periphery. Based on Figure 5.1, we can see that the possibilities of influencing higher education policymaking varied greatly depending on one's position in the network. The large network reveals that almost all the isolated components represented the business sector, and this scheme suggests they were not very influential in Finland–EU higher education networks. When we examine the main component, we can see that although many organisations represented the business sector, they were mostly at the main component's outer reaches. The main component's core was mostly occupied by political actors, trade unions, EU Member States, and universities.

A well-connected core of two elements

We further analysed the main component in Figure 5.1. Here the shape and the colour of the node indicate the type of organisation. The white triangles represent political parties or political organisations, the dark grey squares with a black frame represent the EU Member States, the light grey squares signify higher education institutions, the mid-grey squares with a black plus mark represent the stakeholders, and the one black upside-down triangle signifies the business sector. The node's size signifies an organisation's number of connections within the network. In this analysis, we increased the threshold for the link

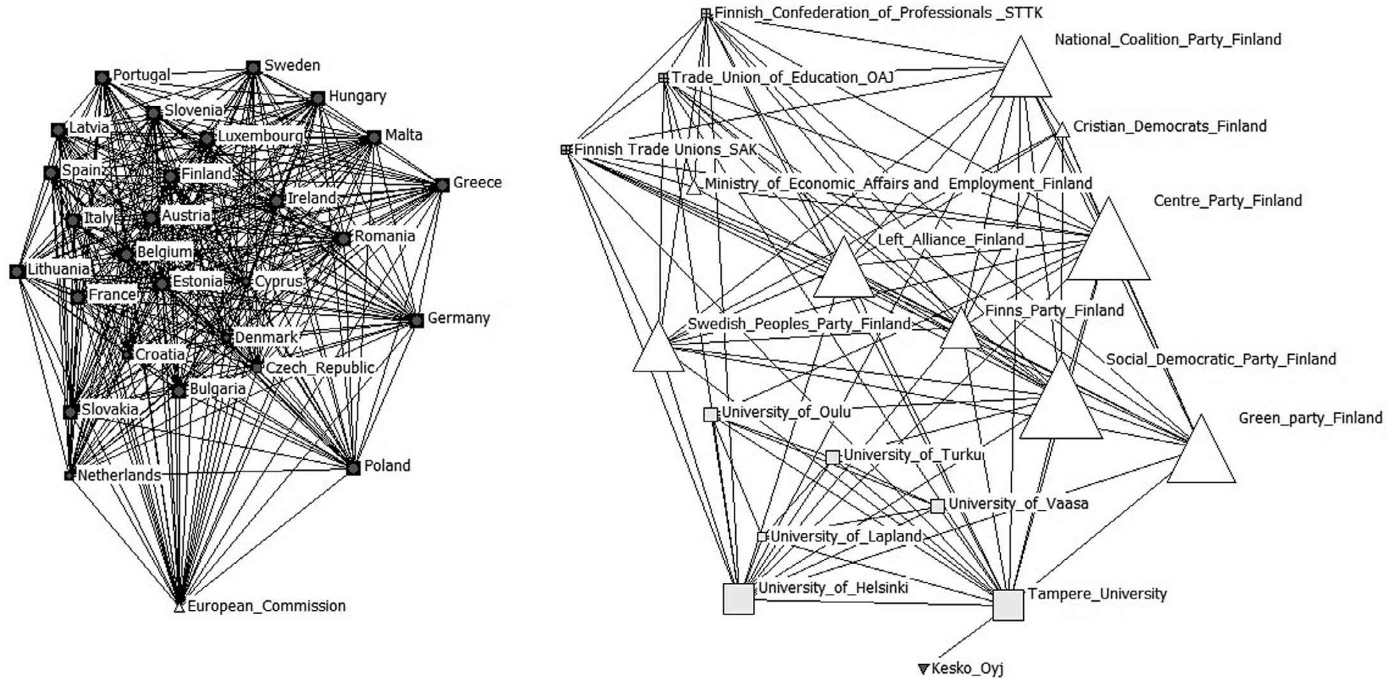

Figure 5.2 Two elements of the main component.

creation: the required number of shared working groups or boards of directors was now four. This led to the transnational network's main component splitting into two elements, including a total of 47 organisations. Concretely, in Figure 5.2, all 47 organisations participated in four or more working groups or boards of directors. With this threshold, each node had an average of one link, and the variation of links ranged from 1 to 18. We characterised the remaining two elements as the Finnish national bloc (consisting of Finnish political parties, universities, trade unions, and one business sector organisation on the right in Figure 5.2) and the EU Member State bloc (consisting of the Commission and all 27 EU member states on the left in Figure 5.2).

We can see more clearly here than from the whole network that universities and political parties are well represented in the national bloc. Interestingly, universities of applied science are completely absent from the national bloc. The EU Member State bloc contains only the Commission and all 27 EU Member States. These observations show that the two blocs are different, but that they also serve the same kind of functionality. Universities are well represented in the bloc, even though they lack any legislative decision-making power in higher education policy. We interpret their presence as crucial because of their high institutional autonomy. They therefore cannot be excluded from the core. Similarly, the EU Member State bloc consists almost solely of the Member States because they have the legislative competence in education policy that the EU lacks.

As we used public official sources, the structure of the network's core somewhat mirrors the power dynamics within the formal decision-making structure. However, it should be acknowledged that the researchers determined the network's boundaries. Part of the structure can therefore be explained by our decisions concerning the boundary specification of the key organisations in the network, which subsequently appeared central within the structure. When mapping the network, however, we meticulously cross-examined our data through different data sources and by comparing the network with the information garnered from the interviews. We continue this analysis in the next section as we seek to understand better the network's formation and characteristics with the aid of the interview data.

Network formation in the national and transnational contexts

Based on our interview analysis, there were differences and many similarities between the national and transnational contexts in network formation. The formation followed in principle the official structures, deliberate network building, and interest coalitions. Trust was also an important factor.

The national higher education policy's institutional setup shaped network formation. Government coordination in preparing Finland's position in EU-related education matters was organised based on the formal decision-making structure, including the Ministerial Committee on EU Affairs and the committee and sub-committee structure working under its auspices (for more

see Chapter 4). Network contacts in the Ministry of Education and Culture were somewhat departmentalised: public officials were connected with their European counterparts according to substance-specific policy matters, while liaison and coordination officials with relationships with their counterparts administered cross-sectoral policy files and processes.

> The ministry consists of departments and units according to policy areas. When a current matter requires domain expertise, the [processing] always takes place at the department. So they're responsible for the subject matter. But some policy matters need to be horizontally coordinated across the ministry. Indeed, there are policy matters that affect everyone in one way or another. That's when the policy file lands on my table.
>
> (Official)

Similarly, stakeholders had ties with public officials dealing with substance-focused policy issues in which they were interested, but less so with others. The network can therefore be seen as including sub-nets organised by institutional setup and organisational roles.

Government education policy coordination in Finland is connected with parliamentary coordination. The interviewees perceived domestic and EU policymaking preparation as functioning differently, however. It was thought that EU matters required fast processing and engagement with stakeholders and the third sector; the domestic policy coordination level had various existing networks that already contained the stakeholder organisations:

> If I compare EU-related policy matters with national policy coordination in Finland, when we prepare legislation, we want to hear stakeholder organisations through expert consultation services and stakeholders that are often sector-specific networks. But the main idea of the subcommittee systems is that stakeholders will hear what's happening at an early stage.
>
> (Official)

In our analysis of network formation, we found that network building in Finland could be understood through the narrative of a small country with strong and flourishing cross-sectoral political networks. The interviewees saw network formation between political, regional, and local contexts as collaboration rather than systematic networking. Finnish interviewees tended to report a low threshold for contacting other actors in the higher education policy field:

> Finland is a small country after all, and now that I've had this long career, I have direct contacts as required and according to the situation. Generally speaking … our civil servants, if a member of parliament calls or sends an email and asks for something, will quite quickly send a

> comment like "I'll get back to you as soon as possible." Of course, the other big level involves direct contacts with universities and related visits and meetings.
>
> (Politician)

For network structuration, the formation and upkeep of network ties were thus more flexible and effortless in Finland. The official described how contacts accumulated in their long career and because of the political structure's stability. Our interviewees reported that the network was more rigid in the EU sphere, requiring more systematic and strategic work.

> After all, Brussels is a relatively conservative professional environment in terms of working culture. The best way to gain information about what's going on in Brussels is to maintain good personal relations and contacts, go for coffee, attend seminars, and talk with people during breaks.
>
> (Stakeholder)

Moreover, policy-specific networks, often based on political coalitions, formed around different interests. Networks stemmed from divisions between governing and opposition parties at the national level. At the European level, there were different alliances in parliament and between member countries based on pro-Europe coalitions or issue-specific synergies. Our interviews with national and EU officials suggested that such network formations often occurred in parliamentary committees in both the domestic and EU contexts.

For example, stakeholder networks were formed around policy initiatives and programmes, some originating as bottom-up networks in which knowledge was seen to move faster and more predictably. One stakeholder described being part of the informal network as crucial because one obtained access to information more easily than through more formal structures like email, where people were more careful. In Finland, stakeholders such as universities coordinated strategic national networking to capture the international landscape of higher education.

Expert hearings in the Committee on Culture and Education in the European Parliament also generated networks around actors obtaining specialist knowledge. These expert networks gained access to policymaking situations because their knowledge was seen as useful and relevant for decision making. However, according to the interviewees, gaining access and belonging to an expert network depended on whether a politician knew the expert personally.

"Politicians' personal contacts are often key – that they just happen to know some people they want to hear [publicly], and then they're invited to the committee hearing" (Politician). Trust and mutual affinity were seen as key in forming networks – in both national and transnational contexts. Many

interviewees, especially at the EU level, stressed that it was important to know the source of information because it increased trust in it.

> And what you always have to be careful with is the transparency in knowing with whom you are speaking, to whom you are talking, or who's giving the information. That's important.
>
> (Politician)

Trust building was perceived as part of the work, a phase in which one systematically got to know one's colleagues, contact friends in the right networks, and understand one's network to exert influence. Several politicians mentioned the skills of evaluating who could be trusted and assessing the trustworthiness of knowledge as key factors in network formation.

To summarise, the analysis of the interviewees' accounts reveals a different type of networking. The official network, also described in the network analysis, established the frame for network positions. We also found that parts of the network differed: more effort was required in Brussels to find relevant contacts than in the close-knit and low-hierarchy Finnish policymaking networks. Networks were deemed useful if one knew the actors, and if they were identified as trustworthy sources of knowledge. Knowing one's network enabled specific knowledge to be obtained.

What characterises the network?

We analysed the interviewees' characterisations of the network in which they participated. The most prominent themes concerned switching between formal structures and informal relationships, the importance of physical presence, and the network's blurry boundaries.

Interviewees often said that the informal network arose from the formal network because those participating in informal activities and meetings were typically the same people, or a sub-set of them, who participated in the network arising from formal relationships. The formal structures thus offered initial contacts and platforms that enabled the development of informal contacts.

> The informal networks consist of the same actors [compared to official structures]. … It depends a little on how you define informal, but in my opinion the actors are the same – only the channels of exchange are more informal.
>
> (Stakeholder)

> I'm not sure how to draw the boundaries between the informal and formal. One way, of course, is to distinguish between those whom you hear officially and those with whom you go for coffee – there may be a

> difference there. But they often overlap – they aren't different actors but largely the same ones.
>
> (Politician)

When the interviewees characterised the network's operation, they tended to emphasise that informal or personal relationships developed over time when individuals participated in the formal network. The interviewees met not only in formal meetings but also in informal settings like lunches, dinners, or social events after or between meetings.

These personal relationships enabled deeper, more detailed, and confidential conversations to exchange ideas and elicit more sensitive and preliminary information in a way that would be impossible in formal or multi-participant meetings. They existed across the board – for example, among policymakers and between policymakers, stakeholders, and academic researchers.

Personal relationships also lowered the threshold for formal contacts, making personal contacts useful in everyday policymaking influencing. Personal contacts were often seen as even more pronounced in EU than in domestic policymaking. Most importantly, personal contacts enabled the acquisition of politically relevant knowledge before it was accessible to others, which was advantageous in influencing policymaking. It seemed to be widely agreed that personal contacts and personal meetings were still the best way to influence the policymaking process. Physical presence was key here, and several interviewees emphasised that information delivered in physical meetings was most effective, and arguments could be presented most compellingly.

> You can do most meetings online, but what we're missing in terms of knowledge is the knowledge you get from having informal contacts with people because once it's online, everything's formal, and you're only really talking to people you need to talk to.
>
> (Official)

> Personal connections are very important because the more people you know, the more people you have access to, the more information you can get. … And that's why [in] most of the organisations […] the daily policy [is] done by the staff, because they're hired for years and years, and they create a reputation.
>
> (Stakeholder)

We noticed in the interviews that the network boundaries were described as blurry or unstable. A recurring theme was the changes in people participating in the policy network because changes in personnel holding offices meant that newcomers needed to be trained, but personnel turnover also caused instability in relationships. Another common theme the interviewees discussed was whether the technical staff and the political secretariat should be included in

the policy network, and in which circumstances. There was a widely shared understanding that the network operated at multiple levels simultaneously. For example, public officials or secretariats tended to discuss their contacts with other public officials and what they saw as non-political secretariats, whereas politicians often discussed their relationships with other politicians and stakeholders.

Interestingly, public officials in Finland spoke of their contacts with European-level public officials, whereas domestic politicians discussed their European counterparts only occasionally. When we examine the everyday work reported in the interviews, established connections through official channels are paired with dense sub-nets working in and between official channels. Their boundaries are blurry, but there appear to be various dividing lines within the overall network.

Conclusion and discussion

In this chapter, we analysed the structure, formation, and characteristics of the higher education policymaking network operating in and between Finland and the EU. First, we asked what the structure of this Finland–EU network was. Our network analysis reveals the entire network's lack of cohesiveness, primarily due to the presence of multiple disconnected components. Political organisations have a strong presence in the main component, indicating their centrality and prominence within the network. The transnational network's main component can be divided into two elements, which we identified as the Finnish national and EU Member State blocs. The Finnish national bloc includes political parties, universities, and stakeholders. There is also a notable business sector organisation that is not typically associated with higher education policies. Meanwhile, the transnational bloc comprises EU Member States and the Commission. Key Finnish national higher education policymakers' dual connectivity with EU-level higher education policy organisations suggests a bidirectional flow of knowledge between transnational and national networks.

Second, we asked how the interviewees described this network's formation and characteristics. Regarding formation, our results reveal that a formal decision-making structure is vital for higher education policy network formation. Our analysis shows that a formal network structure also enables the formation of informal networks, and these networks work simultaneously and at many different levels. Formal structures can work as a platform and starting point for creating informal networks where actors can have informal conversations and exchange information. It seems that informal networking can support formal decision making by accelerating the exchange of knowledge. The formal structure and informal networking thus support each other and smooth the policymaking process. Our examination reveals that, in principle, network formation follows the official structures, deliberate network building, and interest coalitions. The trust between different actors also affects the network formation.

When we shifted the focus to network characteristics, it was evident that switching between informal and formal settings blurred the line between work and leisure. Navigating between and within these blurry network structures allows individuals to gain a deeper understanding of what others think, enhancing feelings of mutual understanding and trust. It is reasonable to assume that as the distinction between formal work and personal life dissolves, a sense of community begins to form, and the formal network's members start to recognise and know each other. Although there may be conflicts in formal settings, informal connections provide channels to discuss the contexts and reasons behind the conflicts, which may contribute to effective policymaking.

According to our results physical presence also plays a significant role in building this trust and sense of belonging. Besides being the optimal way to lobby, in-person meetings provide opportunities for informal conversations during breaks. These interactions help build trust, establish connections, and foster a sense of solidarity within networks. Additionally, formal network structures' importance in building informal connections suggests that individuals gradually accumulate social capital. This social capital – knowing the right people and where to leverage them – may enhance individual actors' professional effectiveness and abilities to influence in the higher education policy field. Our analysis leads us to conclude that these networks' most prominent characteristics are the switching between formal structures and informal relationships, the importance of physical presence, and the network's blurry boundaries.

When we compile all these analyses, we conclude that Finnish universities' autonomy and the EU's lack of competence in education policy affect the structure, formation, and characteristics of transnational higher education policymaking networks within the EU and Finland. We assume that universities' relatively high organisational autonomy, guaranteed by the Finnish constitution (Suomen perustuslaki 1999/731, §123) and in the Universities Act (Yliopistolaki 2009/558, §3), explains their key position in the network. The state therefore needs to influence universities in another way – "information steering" (Kallio et al., 2021). However, this may not be unique to Finland, as universities in many European countries are autonomous. Another explanation may lie in Finland's corporatist policymaking tradition (e.g. Holli & Turkka, 2021; Rommetvedt, 2017), where different stakeholders are included in the preparation of higher education policies. This corporatist tradition enables stakeholders to gain access to the network's core and to be strongly present in policy preparation. However, this is not a solely Finnish phenomenon either, as many other countries can be categorised as corporatist (Vukasovic, 2023). The inclusion of different stakeholders and utilising their knowledge is not foreign to EU higher education policy preparation. In both the Finnish and EU settings, we can observe a need to expand the participant pool, which we assume is due to higher education institutions' legislative autonomy and the EU's lack of competence in education policy.

According to our data, this lack of competence also affects the network structure, positioning Member States at the centre. This reflects previous research, which notes that the lack of competence means that influencing and steering need to take the shape of collaboration between different transnational actors (Eeva, 2021; Milana et al., 2020). This emphasis on Member State power is characteristic of the overall EU structure, suggesting that the influence also extends beyond higher education networks to other transnational networks. Yet variations may exist, and the network structure may differ in areas where the EU has a mandate. However, our analysis cannot confirm this. The hypothesis requires further research.

Although our network analysis focuses on organisations, we must recognise the influence of individual actors as a further matter for research. Individuals may hold personal views that differ from the views of the organisation they represent. Moreover, many of these actors have worked in multiple organisations within the network, inviting us to ponder whether their views and actions integrate these different organisations' various perspectives. This nuance should be considered, acknowledging that individual actors' agency and opinions can affect dynamics within the network. In the context of formal higher education policymaking structures, it can be assumed that the network's organisational structure is relatively stable, while the actors within the organisations change. We argue that this may explain the network's formation and characteristics. It is noteworthy, however, that although actors change, their personal networks remain, meaning the new organisation also acquires these networks, while the old organisation strengthens its network through the expert's departure for the new one. We should also consider the network actors' gradual shaping of organisations through their own actions, while simultaneously adopting organisations' practices, values, and work culture. When these actors change places within the network, they introduce these practices from previous organisations, leading to the layering and entwining of embodied knowledge (Freeman & Sturdy, 2014). These various moving and changing layers of embodied knowledge ensure ideas and knowledge travel through the network (Marin & Wellman, 2014), shaping it as they move.

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6 Organisational knowledge network

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Introduction

The previous chapters' findings mean we already know that much of the Finland–EU network's higher education policymaking we study happens somewhere "in-between" (Chapter 4). We deepened this understanding in Chapter 5, where we described how the "official" network supported the birth of "unofficial" networking. This chapter takes yet another angle in seeking to understand the scrutinised network. We study policy actors working in the interstices between the Finnish domestic and European Union (EU) levels.

Finland belongs to a group of Western European countries with a corporatist higher education governance tradition, which means that stakeholders are included in the policy process (Vukasovic, 2023). There is also a tradition of strong state involvement in higher education (Kauko, 2011). Chapter 4 described and analysed the roles of different stakeholder and state actor organisations. To deepen and focus this analysis of the Finnish higher education system in the European context, we start our analysis with a group that is tasked to link the two levels. This is the EU30 sub-committee on education. This sub-committee is a working group chaired by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) that gathers the policy actors from both state and stakeholder organisations to discuss Finland's EU-level education policy positions (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed account). The members of the EU30 sub-committee who are our focus represent a sizeable sample of the system's important stakeholder and state actors. Moreover, these members represent their organisations and are connected with rooftop organisations at the European level. Indeed, we focus on organisations as policy actors, which we interpret are represented by individuals in working groups, and analyse their role in the EU–Finland higher education policymaking field.

Our analysis focuses on organisations, the relationships they have with other actors, and the activities included in their work in this field. More tangibly, in this chapter, we seek to analyse the relationships of the actors in the EU30 sub-committee with each other and with their European counterparts, and the activities the actors' work includes. In doing so, we seek to understand the work of what we conceptualise as a knowledge network

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between organisations. We developed our theoretical perspective in tandem with the empirical analysis, leading us to utilise the literature on brokers and governing knowledge as our theoretical building blocks. This chapter is structured as follows: in the next section, we introduce our theoretical perspective; a brief description of data and methods follows; the last two sections present our analysis and discussion.

Organisations as brokers of epistemic content

The literature on brokers is useful for a study of the policy actors whom we hypothesise work between Finland and the EU. Wenger (1998) provides a general definition of brokers, seeing them as people who situate themselves between practice communities. Burt (2004) defines them in similar terms, seeing brokers as actors patching a network's structural holes, thus connecting different groups in the network and thereby carrying more social capital than non-brokers. The term broker often includes a qualifying prefix such as "policy" or "knowledge," referring to the particular interest of the research in which the term is used.

Political science uses the term "policy broker." It is defined as the actors located between groups who create important links between them. The term is favoured in research inspired by the Advocacy Coalition Framework that studies how brokers mediate within a policy sub-system (Howlett et al., 2017; Ingold & Gschwend, 2014). Education policy research also draws on the same concept. Grek et al. (2009, p. 6) see policy brokers as people located between Europe and their home country who "'translate' the meaning of national data into policy terms in the European arena and who also interpret European developments in the national space." This definition is close to one Segerholm and Hult (2019) use in studying quality experts. They see the importance of experts as promoting "unified education policies throughout Europe" in different methods of policy brokering and dissemination (Segerholm & Hult, 2019, p. 46).

In studying "knowledge brokering," broker terminology has been a popular way of conceptualising how research knowledge is bridged in practice. In addition to knowledge brokering, terms such as mobilisation, translation, exchange, and research utilisation have been used partly interchangeably (Rycroft-Smith, 2022). Broker terminology bears a risk of simplifying the understanding of how policymaking works, however. Knowledge brokers are often defined as actors in network positions where they can connect science and decision making (e.g. Cvitanovic et al., 2017). In their review of the knowledge brokering literature, MacKillop et al. (2020) find that it often has a thin theoretical understanding of how politics and policies function. Moreover, some see the gap-bridging approach to knowledge brokers as too technical, arguing for an interactive approach (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023). MacKillop et al. (2020) also find that many knowledge broker studies attempt to focus on individuals instead of organisations. In any case, researchers have long attempted

to point out that policymaking is a collective and pluralistic effort with many actors, and that it is difficult to influence this process with scientific knowledge (Weiss, 1988).

The concepts of knowledge brokers and policy brokers overlap to the point where they become almost interchangeable. Understandably, conceptual clarity is not facilitated by the fact that the definition of “knowledge” varies drastically in education policy research (for different understandings see e.g. Mangez & Hilgers, 2012; Ostrowicka, 2012; Rutkowski & Engel, 2010) – if a definition is offered at all. Different definitions have repercussions for how the role of knowledge is or even can be understood in the policymaking process. We opt to use the term knowledge broker with the understanding that knowledge brokers are also policy brokers. This accords with our definition of knowledge, which we see as useful epistemic content for policymaking (Chapter 1). We complement this definition through the literature on governing knowledge that contextualises the broker’s operating environment: how governing has changed in Europe.

Our understanding is that knowledge exists in different forms in contemporary society, where governance and governing relations have been transformed from a traditional government form into a post-bureaucratic and network one (e.g. Ozga et al., 2011; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Stoker, 1998; Stone, 2013). Researchers have hypothesised and discussed a shift in the type of knowledge used in policymaking and governing from academic knowledge (in short, Mode 1 knowledge) to knowledge that is more adaptable, practical, and contextualised and designed to solve policy “problems” (Mode 2 knowledge) (e.g. Byrne & Ozga, 2008; Normand, 2016). Mode 2 knowledge “is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation and it will not be produced unless and until the interests of the various actors are included” (Gibbons et al., 1994). Such knowledge is often presented in comparable forms such as numbers, but the literature indicates that comparative forms of knowledge can also contain political values and choices, thus encompassing a political dimension (Erkkilä et al., 2023; Grek, 2020, 2008; Piattoeva, 2015).

Indeed, the shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge entails a growing number of specialist experts producing knowledge (Grek, 2024), including both public and private actors (e.g. Cone & Brøgger, 2020). The governing of knowledge is no longer within the perimeters of the state as an authority but includes various actors’ involvement (Stone, 2013). Negotiations about what kind of knowledge matters in policymaking lead to the creation of new divisions of expertise around science to influence policy. For example, Bandola-Gill et al. (2022) understand knowledge brokering not only through the production of knowledge but also the interactions and linkages that involve organising and managing it. Overall, knowledge governance engages policy actors, experts, consultants, and researchers in relations of mutual accountability at the same time as policymakers have become managers of complex data and knowledge (Piattoeva, 2016). Governing knowledge is thus tied intimately by default to

the actors – in our study, the organisations that produce, possess, manage, and use knowledge for these actors' interests and policy goals.

In sum, our knowledge brokering premise argues for an organisational (instead of individual) view and a broad definition of "knowledge" (instead of one limited to scientific knowledge). More tangibly, the members of the EU30 sub-committee are assigned in the working group to represent their background organisations, and we therefore think it reasonable to expect that the individuals themselves will play a less important role than the organisational interest they represent and attempt to pursue. Empirically, our data are gathered partly from individuals, but these individuals are above all understood as representatives of their background organisations. As MacKillop et al. (2020) point out, this is a valid but minority approach in brokerage studies, and it can be argued that our conclusions have some limitations. We see this approach as especially relevant in the context of the EU30 sub-committee because the MEC first selects the organisations to be represented in the sub-committee, and only then do the organisations nominate the individuals who represent it. As Weiss (1988, p. 287) suggests, we avoid identifying "key decision makers" and instead attempt to analyse knowledge use as a system-level question – in our case, a network-level question. Moreover, the lesson of the critique of previous broker studies and of the governing knowledge literature leads us to think that policymaking actors can use knowledge as an attempt to achieve predefined policy goals, the actors' selection of knowledge can be biased (Craft & Howlett, 2013), and policymakers can deem various types of knowledge and ideas, including academic knowledge as a specific type, to have equal relevance for political judgement (Head, 2008). As we have noted, we see knowledge as politically useful epistemic content.

Research design

Following the previous subsection's theoretical discussion, in this chapter, we study organisations that broker knowledge and operate in the interstices between Finnish national and EU higher education policymaking: we study their relationships with each other and with their European counterparts, and the content of their work. Our research questions are therefore:

1 What are the relationships between these actors and with their European counterparts?
2 What activities does the work of these actors include?

The actors in question are the EU30 sub-committee's member organisations (through their representatives). The following 25 organisations are members of the EU30 sub-committee: the MEC, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA), the Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (AMKE), the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE), the Confederation of

Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (AKAVA), the Finland Chamber of Commerce (hereafter Commerce), the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), Finnish Education Employers (FEE), the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), Local Government and County Employers (KT), the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE), the Ministry of Finance (MFIN), the Prime Minister's Office (MPMO), the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), the Finnish National Agency for Education (NAE), the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ), the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), the National Union of Vocational Students in Finland (SAKKI), the National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK), the Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK), the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL), the Association of Finnish Entrepreneurs (SYRI; authors' translation), the Universities Finland (UNIFI), the Regional State Administrative Agency of Ahvenanmaa (AHAVI; authors' translation), and the Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU (EUE). Most of these actors are described in more detail in Chapter 4.

To answer our research questions, we used three types of data: archive-sourced quantitative network panel data, interview data, and fieldnotes from ethnographic observations. The network and interview data were used to answer the first research question about actors' relationships, and this was further illustrated with the aid of ethnographic fieldnotes. Interview data and fieldnotes were used to answer the second research question about the activities their work included. Chapter 2 details the data and their collection. We isolated three panel waves for network analysis from our MEC database: 2019, 2020, and 2021. We selected the interviews conducted with the representatives of the organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee from the interview data corpus. The ethnographic fieldnotes used in this chapter include all the fieldnotes from the (seven) EU30 sub-committee meetings.

The network data consist of relationships between organisations, where a tie between organisations exists if the organisations have a co-membership in a working group in the Finnish MEC. We used the network data both to track the relationships between organisations and to highlight the organisations' positions in the Finnish higher education policy field by placing the organisations in this field. We interpreted the interview responses and observations as exemplifying the work and relationships of the organisations the individuals represented. The interviewees described their work and co-operators throughout the interviews, but the interviews opened with a thematic question enquiring about the interviewee's work: what their work entailed, what tasks they performed, and how much their work included working with European-level education policy issues. Another thematic question enquired about the interviewee's most important co-operators, and they could name as many as they wished and detail their relationships with the co-operators as much as they wished. The fieldnotes from observations included notes about the work that the interviewees, understood as organisational representatives,

did in their everyday work, but they also included observations about the actors' relationships. We used qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to analyse the interview data and fieldnotes, and basic descriptive social network analysis methods (Borgatti et al., 2013) to analyse the network data.

In the quantitative analysis, we studied the positions of the organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee graphically, using UCINET and NetDraw software (Borgatti et al., 2002). In the qualitative analysis, we used questioning as an analytical tool (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to find the relevant data excerpts in the dataset. The analytical questions were derived from our research questions. In relation to the first research question on the relationships the actors had with each other and with actors at the European level, we used two analytical questions:

1.1 How do these people describe their relationships with other actors (in reality with organisations)?
1.2 How are relationships between actors visible in meetings?

For the second research question on the activities that actors' work included, we directed two analytical questions:

2.1 How do these representatives describe the work that they themselves or their organisations do?
2.2 What do these representatives do at meetings?

The analytical questions reveal that we are less interested in this chapter in the content of policymaking than in its network structure and the actions the network members take. While some analytical questions refer to individuals, we expect them to be representatives of and appointed by their background organisations.

Analysis and results

Our analysis is described in two subsections, one for each research question. First, we study the relationships between actors; second, we analyse the activities their work includes. A summary and discussion are presented in the next section.

Relationships of organisations

We studied the EU30 sub-committee organisations' relationships with each other and with other organisations operating in the Finnish higher education policy field using quantitative network data, and then interview and observational data. The quantitative network data provided an overview of the Finnish higher education policy network, and the qualitative data offered a more nuanced single organisation-level picture. The network data cover the

actors' domestic relationships; the interview and observational data uncover the organisations' relationships with the European level.

The quantitative network data were used to depict the Finnish higher education policy network. Figures 6.1 and 6.2 show the positions of the organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee in the overall Finnish higher education policy network in 2019 and 2021, respectively (layout: graph theoretic). Organisations are denoted by nodes, and their relationships are depicted by edges (links). The node's size denotes its (Freeman) degree – that is, the number of connections the organisation has with other organisations in the network. The node's colour denotes whether an organisation is represented on the EU30 sub-committee (white nodes) or not (grey nodes). We drew a similar figure for 2020, but because it did not differ from Figures 6.1 and 6.2, we omitted it to save space. The acronyms used in the figures are the same as when we introduced them in the previous subsection.

The figures show that almost all the organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee held key positions in the Finnish higher education policy network in both 2019 and 2021: only the Prime Minister's Office (MPMO) and Commerce were outside the network's centre. The organisations represented by a sizeable grey node in both figures – well-connected organisations in the policy network that were not represented in the EU30 sub-committee and not titled in the figure – include universities, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Research Council of Finland, and a student union for secondary-level vocational students. As their node size shows, they are well connected in the network, especially with the organisations that are members of the EU30 sub-committee. However, the organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee hold key positions in the network, which means that their position between different groups allows them to play a substantial brokerage role in negotiating the interpretation and transfer of EU education policies in the larger Finnish higher education policy network.

When we compare Figures 6.1 and 6.2, we observe that the sizes of the EU30 nodes (in white) change little, meaning that the number of links the organisations in the EU30 sub-committee have with the network's other organisations is stable. Moreover, these nodes remain at the network's centre, even if the drawing algorithm switches their precise locations from the bottom left corner to the upper centre. Notably, the EU30 nodes migrate in the network visualisation as a block, suggesting that the organisations in the EU30 sub-committee have strong links (measured by co-memberships) with each other. The same results were obtained from the 2020 panel wave (figure omitted). Thus, overall, the positions of the organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee in the Finnish higher education policy network were quite stable between 2019 and 2021. Notably, even the government change in 2019 from the centre-right government (of PM Juha Sipilä) to the left-wing government (of PM Sanna Marin) did not influence the network structure in this respect.

We further studied interviews and observational data to gain a deeper insight into the role of these EU30 actors in the network and their relationships

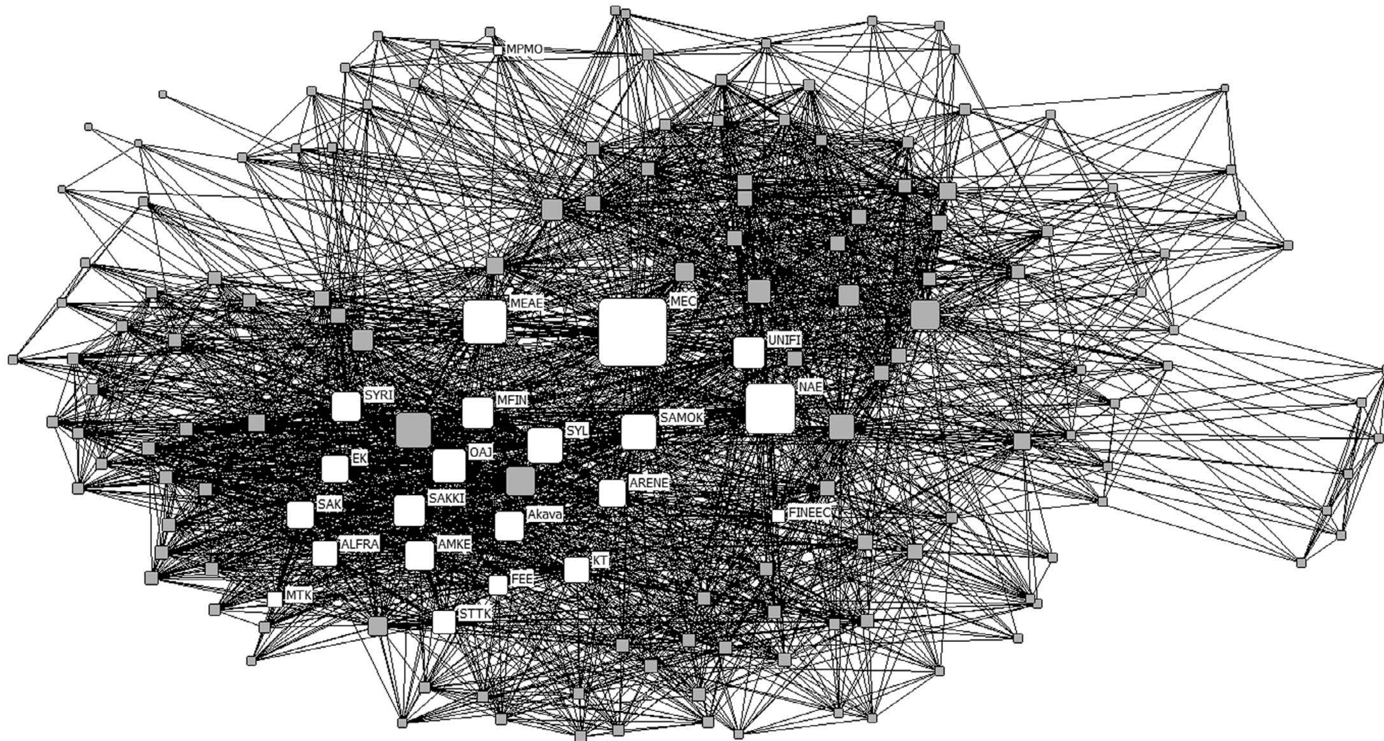

Figure 6.1 The positions of organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee in the Finnish higher education policy network, 2019.

Note: The size of a node represents its (Freeman) degree, and the colour denotes its membership in the EU30 sub-committee (white = yes; grey = no).

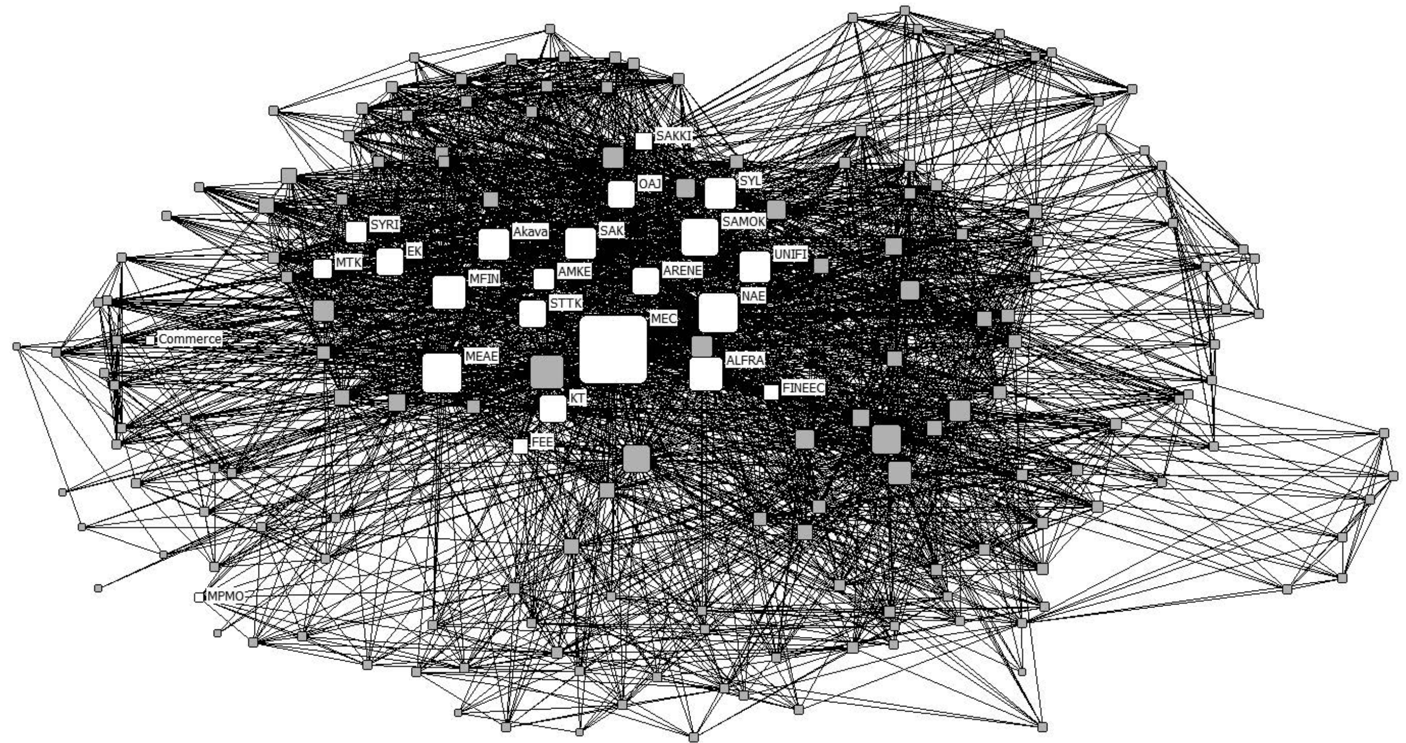

Figure 6.2 The positions of organisations represented in the EU30 sub-committee in the Finnish higher education policy network, 2021.

Note: The size of a node represents its (Freeman) degree, and the colour denotes its membership in the EU30 sub-committee (white = yes; grey = no).

with one another and at the European level. One of the interviews' themes was collaboration with other higher education policymakers, and when these interviewees were asked to identify their most important higher education policy collaborators, they almost exclusively named organisations (not individual persons). The relationships between the MEC and the stakeholder organisations were mentioned in all interviews. Similarly, all the interviewees mentioned their relationships with their counterparts at the European level: higher education representatives mentioned European-level higher education associations; trade union representatives mentioned their European-level umbrella organisations; public officials mentioned their relationships with officials in other Member States and at the European level (officials in the European Commission and in the Council of the European Union). Moreover, stakeholder organisations mentioned other domestic stakeholder organisations, and they usually mentioned each other. Organisations that had members also mentioned their members as key collaborators: for example, trade union representatives mentioned their local representatives; student union representatives mentioned local student unions. Public officials were alone in mentioning other domestic ministries as their collaborators, and only representatives of organisations representing higher education institutions or students mentioned political decision-makers as important collaborators. Thus, according to the interviews, the organisations studied here seemed to have quite firm relationships with one another, and the circle of organisations handling European higher education policy in Finland was relatively small in that the overall number of different organisations the interviewees mentioned was limited. Interestingly, political decision-makers were not mentioned, which may indicate the technical nature of their work or the unspoken expectation that it was done in preparation for politicians. Overall, these organisations seem well connected, both with each other and at the European level.

As part of the observations, we analysed how these relationships played out in meetings. In live meetings, the participants were generally friendly and chatty, and they used the time before and after formal meetings to catch up, with topics ranging from the policy issues of the day to personal lives and jokes. The meetings' fringes thus served as platforms for refreshing the participants' relationships. Online meetings did not have such timeslots for relationship care work, but the participants sometimes used the public meeting chat for similar purposes – for example, to congratulate a participant on their promotion or simply to greet one another.

Substance-wise, we observed a certain like-mindedness in the subject matters that became visible in participants thanking one another, both for the good points and the speeches they had made, and their frequent general and explicit support for each other's statements. A closer examination of the support for statements revealed that it was almost always imprecise, and participants usually expressed gratitude vaguely for each other's views, suggesting perhaps that saying thank you was a form of relationship care rather than a sign of political support. The strongest alliances between participants seemed

to be issue-specific, and in these instances, the participant explicitly mentioned the other participant with whom they agreed (and often specifically the points with which they agreed). We also observed situations when the meeting participants capitalised on their relations with the European level by citing discussions that had taken place at European-level meetings: in these cases, the participants apparently exchanged information between meetings not only to coordinate and support their policy positions but also to inform other participants about policy positions developed at the European level. The fieldnote below captures one of these instances, where the information exchange took place in real time.

> [A stakeholder representative speaking:] Thank you for the good exposition of the issue. A funny coincidence is that [our European-level umbrella organisation] currently has a meeting that discusses the same issue we're discussing here. We've exchanged messages with my colleague who is at that meeting. I'll share the policy position that has been developed there with you. I'm sorry that it is in English, but it is copy-pasted from a message I only got a few moments ago. [Sends a message to the meeting chat that contains several policy demands from the European-level umbrella organisation.]
>
> (Jarmo Kallunki, fieldnote January 2023)

In sum, the answer to our research question "what relationships do these actors have with one another and with their European-level counterparts?" is that they hold key positions in the Finnish higher education policy field, are well connected among themselves, pay attention to caring for their relations, and are well connected at the European level. In the next sub-section, we analyse the activities that are included in these actors' work.

Sub-committee actor's work

As part of the interview protocol, we asked each interviewee a question about their work, and as part of the observations, we examined what these people did in sub-committee meetings. The work of all these organisations is characterised by collection, production, (re)packaging or transformation, and dissemination of knowledge. They report obtaining information from their background communities or member organisations through meetings and surveys, exchanging information with their European counterparts and European-level umbrella organisations, and (some of them) purchasing commissioned research from professional researchers or research organisations. Some organisations have in-house researchers (e.g. economists) or even research departments. Notably, all the interviewees except for the student union representatives hold at least one master's degree (several have a PhD), which testifies to the organisations' capacity for research literacy. However, the knowledge with which the organisations work is not academically or scientifically produced by default

but is politically useful epistemic content. As the examples below illustrate, this knowledge often includes interests, and it is used to provide information about the actor's policy positions and to substantiate and justify their policy demands in both non-public lobbying and public debates. Their daily work is generally quite knowledge-intensive. The following fieldnote from a meeting of the EU30 sub-committee crystallises this knowledge dimension of their work:

> [Stakeholder representative:] Thank you [chair]. There have been several good speeches already. I have two additional points. … The second concerns public spending in Member States. Finland considers education spending to be an investment, but in many other Member States the public finances are more limited, and education spending can pose a problem. Remember, education is primarily publicly funded. The EU speaks about investing in education, but real actions are another story. How can the funding sources for education be diversified fairly?
>
> (Jarmo Kallunki, fieldnote February 2023)

In this fieldnote, the stakeholder representative, who is well networked at the European level, is commenting on a discussion about what messages Finland should send for EU policy preparation. This stakeholder representative offers their knowledge about education funding in different Member States and about EU actions to promote the diversification of funding sources for education, which is also a policy goal for this stakeholder organisation. A similar structure of knowledge gathering or production, and use of knowledge as a backup for a policy proposal, is exemplified by the next fieldnote from another meeting and a different stakeholder representative. In this case, improving the quality of education is this stakeholder's policy goal, and the policy proposal of teacher training is supported both by their own knowledge production and by benchmarking the other Member States' situations.

> [Stakeholder representative:] Developing digital skills for teachers is important. In our student surveys on distant learning more than half the respondents said that the quality of teaching suffered when teaching was transferred online from the classroom. Developing further training for the teaching staff is important, and this should also be brought into EU discussions because Finland is not the only Member State where these problems have surfaced.
>
> (Katri Eeva, fieldnote April 2022)

Another feature common to almost all the interviewees was that their jobs included higher education policymaking at both the national and European levels. Only two individuals reported a separation of national and European issues in their organisations, but for the rest, their everyday work was a mixture of working with national and EU issues. (For a similar observation see

Kauko, 2011.) When asked to assess how large a proportion of their working hours the interviewees devoted to European issues, the proportion varied from 10 per cent to more than half their time, but some interviewees explicitly eradicated the difference between domestic and European issues, as the quotation below exemplifies.

> Jaakko Kauko: What is your estimate of how large a proportion of your daily work goes to European or international issues? Can you make such a distinction?
>
> Official: I rarely think of them as separate issues. [...] I find it quite difficult to distinguish them from other things.

The answer to our second research question, "which activities does the work of these actors include?" seems to be that their daily work is a mixture of domestic and European policymaking, and the work is knowledge-intensive in that it includes its gathering, interpretation, transformation, and dissemination. Moreover, a key part of the work is taking care of their relations with other organisations.

Conclusion: Shaping higher education policy through knowledge

In this chapter, we studied the members of the EU30 sub-committee. Employing two research questions, we set out to analyse these actors' relationships with one another and with their European counterparts, and the activities their work included. Using network panel data, interviews, and ethnographic observations, we found that the actors held key positions in the Finnish higher education policy field and were well connected among themselves and at the European level. They thus had the same feature as the broker literature held to be key: they plugged the gaps between groups. Moreover, their daily work mixed domestic and European policymaking and was knowledge-intensive in that it included the gathering, interpretation, transformation, and dissemination of knowledge. We can therefore conclude, in accordance with our theoretical concepts, that these actors operate as brokers of knowledge between the Finnish domestic and EU transnational higher education policy levels. Through the individuals representing them, the organisations can be collectively described as a knowledge network that creates, transforms, uses, and disseminates knowledge to shape higher education policies.

Because the MEC invites the organisations to the EU30 sub-committee, and only then do the organisations appoint the individuals they wish to represent them as members, it seems fair to say that the individuals we studied were knowledge brokers, but only when they were understood through their organisational role in the interstices between the Finnish national and EU higher education policy arenas. Their background organisations gave them the power of an established organisational network that functioned as a channel to

the European level and back. Analysing the individuals without their organisational affiliation and support as knowledge brokers would be improperly to emphasise and exaggerate their personal power. As individuals, they could thus be seen as replaceable by another person from the same organisation. However, if they were replaced, they took (some of) their contacts with them, leading to an overlapping of individual and organisational characteristics. We were able to learn from the network structure that this network appeared stable. This leads us to emphasise the importance of considering the organisational background in stakeholder representation. We therefore think it important to develop the broker concept from the individual definitions that have inspired some previous important research (e.g. Grek et al., 2009; Segerholm & Hult, 2019) to a more organisational perspective. This is the result of our observation that the network structure is riddled with power, and organisational links bring stability to the network, making it difficult to argue that individuals have the capacity to convey meanings without their organisational position. The background organisations' multiple connections with European actors enable a multichannel communication between Finnish and European actors, making organisations' networks more important for brokering than those of individuals.

As expected, in this broad network, the role of academic knowledge does not appear central. The policymaking we have observed works in a Mode 2 type of practical environment, where Mode 1 knowledge is often irrelevant or inapplicable. In reflecting on brokerage theories, these actors are not brokers of academic knowledge, but their daily work is in brokering policy-relevant knowledge. In these actors' line of work, academic Mode 1 knowledge is not usually useful in everyday work, and we saw only a few examples of its direct use. We know from the background of the individuals who were observed, however, that all had university master's degrees, and several had PhDs. Their education probably influenced how they thought about which knowledge was relevant and gave them the capacity to digest the academic literature. As noted in previous research and the results discussed in Chapter 8, academic knowledge is only part of the mix, and the rules for choosing its relevance are norm-based. If academic knowledge is not seen in everyday action, does it then have an effect through education? Our analysis does not extend beyond this question, but it leads us to reflect on where such an expectation of academic works' use in policymaking arises.

From a governance perspective, it can be argued that the EU30's function is to build credibility and like-mindedness, as well as to share ownership of policy positions (Addey, 2024). The question of actors' power in the sub-committee remains untapped in our study, as we focused on their mutual relationships in knowledge brokering rather than following a policy process. Drawing on the *Policy advisory systems* scholarship (e.g. Veselý, 2013), it is possible that the government may externalise policy advice to networks outside the government, decreasing the volume of internal policy advice. Although the EU30 sub-committee operates within the MEC, the knowledge exchange within it

has a degree of autonomy: while the MEC controls the knowledge public officials share, stakeholder representatives are free to volunteer knowledge as they see fit for their purposes. Indeed, our data show that actors seem to be key to coordinating the policy relevance of knowledge for governance purposes: actors draw on the knowledge that aligns with their ideological and political interests and can thus control knowledge brokering.

Our study's limitations may arise from our assumption that individuals represent their background organisations. While this is a generally reasonable assumption because they work for their organisations, and acting against their employers' interests would have consequences, individuals may still experience role conflict and poor organisational alignment (e.g. Tummers et al., 2012): they may disagree with their organisation's views and policies, and therefore be reluctant to advance them. Moreover, organisations can be more or less tolerant of their employees manifesting such behaviour, making it difficult to spot when they are deviating from their organisation's views. While we agree with these notions, we tend to think they are of lesser concern for our study: we do not analyse specific policies or policy positions, but the relationships these actors have, and the work they do.

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7 Policymakers' norms on knowledge

Credibility, reliability, and holism

Joni Forsell and Jaakko Kauko

Knowledge and norms in education policy

In this chapter, we examine how norms frame knowledge in the Finland–European Union (EU) higher education policymaking network and its institutions. We draw on new institutionalism, which focuses on how social environments shape people's identities, behaviour, and practices (Meyer, 2017). More specifically, we ask how institutional norms frame policymakers' (politicians, officials, and stakeholders) understanding and use of knowledge in higher education policy, and the reliance on certain actors and their knowledge. We draw attention to how policymakers' roles may differ because they inhabit various institutions in the network. Normative institutionalism is particularly helpful here to focus on norms that specify legitimate knowledge in higher education policy: where knowledge should come from and how it should be used, thus establishing knowledge hierarchies (March & Olsen, 1984; Peters, 1999; Scott, 2014).

We define norms as "specifications of how things ought to be done" (Scott, 2014, p. 64) that organise knowledge in the background of policymaking (Herranen, 2022). To clarify, even as norms can be understood as official guidelines, rules, and policies, in this chapter, we approach norms as implicit frames of orientation (Reilly, 2018). We also consider that norms do not apply equally to everyone and that institutional positions prescribe how to act (Scott, 2014). Although institutions are resistant to change (Scott, 2014), policymakers can actively engage with, interpret, and even disrupt institutional norms (Hajer, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Norms thus have productive power: actors are expected to produce and use knowledge in a certain way, and expectations can be resisted, leading to new ways of engaging with knowledge (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Policymakers' approach to knowledge is thus not borne of individual calculation but instead unfolds in social environments that convey understandings of what is appropriate and expected in each situation (March & Olsen, 1984). To summarise, norms can reinforce existing power relations. Institutions that enjoy broad legitimacy and power remain so, while other actors continue to be excluded from policymaking and as sources of legitimate knowledge.

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Within the EU and Finland's higher education policymaking, networks are the main social phenomenon that concerns this book. We see networks and institutions as shaping each other, but in this chapter, we focus on institutions and the norms they convey (Scott, 2014). Institutions and networks share many similarities in their stability and uniformity between norms and behaviour (Peters, 1999; Powell & Oberg, 2017), however, institutions carry cultural understandings and networks enable the flow of ideas and knowledge (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2008; Powell & Oberg, 2017). In our perspective, in following the ideas of normative institutionalism, deeply institutionalised norms enable actors to form knowledge in overlapping networks, roles, and positions (March & Olsen, 1989; Peters, 1999).

Our analysis draws on interviews with policymakers. We understand policymakers as experts who work on specialised issues for extended periods, belong to professional communities that share values, beliefs, and practices (Grødem & Hippe, 2019), and possess specialist knowledge (Normand, 2016). Analytically, we approach policymakers' conceptualisations of knowledge as clues to the norms with which they engage in the interstice between knowledge and policy.

Knowledge itself can be an unruly concept. Any thought or meaning can be seen as knowledge (Fazekas & Burns, 2012). Knowledge in policymaking has been studied through concepts like evidence (Cairney & Oliver, 2017; Head, 2008), expert knowledge (Grek, 2024), governing knowledge (Ozga, 2012), and embodied, inscribed, and enacted knowledge (Freeman & Sturdy, 2014). Whereas governing knowledge refers to the purposes for which knowledge is used (Ozga, 2012; Ozga et al., 2009), the idea of embodied and inscribed knowledge refers to the form knowledge takes, either as situated within persons and employed in everyday action or as written text and other material artefacts (Freeman & Sturdy, 2014). These conceptions illustrate the importance of context and the variety of knowledge observable in policymaking settings, and whether researchers are interested in the purposes for which knowledge is used and in what forms it comes, or both. We retain an openness to varieties of knowledge, considering both the form in which knowledge comes, whether personal experiences or artefacts, and the purposes for which knowledge is used – that is, anything policymakers discuss as knowledge.

Various recent research projects have studied the question of how policymakers engage with knowledge in Western democratic societies. By studying international organisations and their engagement with global metrics and quantification in the case of Sustainable Development Goals, the METRO project, "International Organisations and the Rise of a Global Metrological Field" (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Grek, 2024), reveals that expert knowledge is valued by its applicability to diverse contexts, and that global public policy relies on the "interplay of material, techno-political and organisational structures within which statistical and governing knowledge is produced" (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022, p. 149). Experts are, in turn, afforded an active role as knowledge governors and institutional

filters to broker connections, build consensus, and work towards shared meanings, rules, and artefacts to promote unified knowledge (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022). Global public policy can therefore be understood as a set of epistemic infrastructures, with choices and outcomes of education policy becoming increasingly uniform across diverse contexts by approaching education as a question of the economy, for example (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Grek, 2024).

Karseth et al. (2022) also address the relationship between expertise and policymaking. In the "Policy Knowledge and Lesson Drawing in Nordic School Reform in an Era of International Comparison," or POLNET, project, they illustrate how Nordic policymakers turn to various types of evidence and expertise to inform, support, and legitimise school reforms. Yet, as the POLNET project shows, differences in national contexts should be observed – for example, the extent to which policymakers rely on comparative knowledge (Karseth et al., 2022). The role of international organisations also requires consideration. More specifically, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been observed to act as a producer of expert knowledge, strengthening linkages between knowledge, education, and the economy (Godin, 2006). Kallo (2020) argues, in turn, that the OECD has its own interiorised knowledge production processes, enabling it discursively to create and define knowledge boundaries in the global education scene. The EU also engages in the promotion of knowledge-based economies, where technical expert knowledge is valorised, and new communities are created around expertise (Normand, 2016; Zito, 2001).

The key literature illustrates how norms in diverse institutions specify what legitimate knowledge is, and how it should be used: quantitative and comparative data are deemed relevant; combining the variety of knowledge is valued; governance is to be enacted with the help of experts and expert knowledge; and knowledge drawing on positivist epistemologies and experimental economics is prioritised (Bandola-Gill et al. 2022; Grek, 2024; Normand, 2016). The scientification and datafication of education policy thus work to promote a reality where policies' legitimacy and objectivity and the creation of educational futures depend on experts and expert knowledge, seen in reliance on numbers and data, for example (Ball, 2015; Christensen, 2018; Grek, 2024). Knowledge hierarchies mean we can end up with "policy without humanity" – that is, uninformed by the subjective experiences and experiences of those the decisions involve (Carusi et al., 2018, p. 343). Indeed, as Christensen et al. (2023) note, reliance on experts and expertise in policymaking has led to a need to reconcile epistocracy within democracy by ensuring disciplinary diversity, including actors with various types of knowledge and allowing experts to represent various views and values. However, given that institutions can be resistant to change, and that select actors benefit from the status accorded to expert knowledge (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Grek, 2024), we can ask if momentum exists to include more actors and forms of knowledge in the name of democratic participation (Scott, 2014).

Approaching norms as invisible organising principles of collective behaviour opens an enquiry into the seemingly spontaneous yet uniform ways in which knowledge is formed (Herranen, 2022). Using policymakers' conceptualisations of knowledge as clues, we consider how norms frame knowledge in institutions and subsequently in the EU–Finnish higher education policymaking network. We also ask how these normative frames reinforce existing power relations by solidifying perceptions of who the important actors are, and what legitimate knowledge is. Our study complements the body of research concerned with knowledge and policy relations in the EU context. We ask the following research questions:

1 How do policymakers conceptualise knowledge?
2 What kind of knowledge-related norms can be identified?

Based on the results, we identify various conceptions of knowledge, outlining three normative orientations. We argue that knowledge's credibility and legitimacy are relational, depending on institutional recognition. We conclude by reflecting on how a normative institutionalist perspective helps in considering how actors think about and engage with knowledge while exhibiting role-specific articulations.

Data and analysis of knowledge norms

To understand how norms frame knowledge in the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network and its institutions, we used qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to analyse 45 policymaker interviews and highlight similarities and differences between politicians, officials, and stakeholders. Politicians include members of the European Parliament; officials include the secretariat and civil servants; stakeholders represent specific organisations and interest groups (see Chapter 2). By interviewing policymakers, we follow Diermeier and Krehbiels (2003): studying institutions requires an empirical component to better account for collective action as it occurs in them. The interview questions were coded using ATLAS.ti to provide a general structure to the data (Saldana, 2013). In the first analysis round, interview transcripts were subjected to a keyword query using Boolean operators and a truncation symbol to retrieve textual material where knowledge was discussed in various terms in both Finnish and English: "knowl* OR data* OR fact* OR evid* OR info* OR tieto* OR fakt*." We included only interviewee material from this textual material. We then read this dataset to construct preliminary themes detailing how norms and knowledge were connected. In the second analysis round,[1] textual material was retrieved according to structural coding that identified sections where policymakers were explicitly asked questions about knowledge (e.g. how they evaluated it, what sources they used most, and how one could learn to evaluate it). This was done to

challenge and expand our preliminary findings. We discussed our interpretations to identify similarities and differences in the analysis, revealing themes both researchers felt were relevant.

During the analysis, we noted that when policymakers were asked about knowledge and its use, they used words like knowledge, information, research, data, and evidence. The word *tieto* in Finnish translates as knowledge, but it can also mean information. While we use the word "knowledge" in our analysis, we have therefore striven to maintain all the different words policymakers have for knowledge, as well as knowledge use, in our analysis and quotations. By bringing the diversity of policymakers' understandings and practices to the fore, we can grasp often informal and tacit norms and understandings (Herranen, 2022) and even distinguish between frequently blended norms (Reilly, 2018). We must also consider that people do not necessarily act in accordance with what they report (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). We maintain, however, that policymakers' accounts are connected with their work, beliefs, values, and actions in various settings. To address these methodological challenges, we explore data openly in a way that retains its richness, enabling other researchers to evaluate our findings pertaining to knowledge-related norms and come up with their own categorisations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). By striving for reflexivity in our interpretations, we also aim to account for the fact that studying how policy and knowledge interact in Western democracies can be prone to reinforcing existing understandings of who the powerful actors are, and what is considered knowledge (Voß & Freeman, 2016).

Knowledge in institutional norms

Our first analysis of how institutional norms frame knowledge in the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network and its institutions concerned policymakers' conceptualisations of knowledge. In many cases, policymakers valued experience and expertise. Experience was about understanding how things really worked in practice. Expertise was seen to accumulate from long-term participation in policymaking. This conception of knowledge as experience and expertise even had implications for who was included in policymaking. In discussing how people were chosen for internal groups, a European-level stakeholder emphasised that people were chosen due to their knowledgeability and experience to introduce views that went beyond sterile theorisation in Brussels.

> We choose people … we know are knowledgeable. … [I]f I'm thinking in your terms of a knowledge flow, there's of course a high level of technical knowledge. [Our organisation] is the technical people in the digital discussion, and those setting up learning management systems and things like that. They have a lot of knowledge. And [a person selected] was both, had responsibilities, we knew the, the institutional

> setting, and … had a dialogue with the more technical people. And that's how, you know, we get a direction in how to develop evidence and knowledge.
>
> (Stakeholder)

When asked about how often personnel changed in the EU's working groups, an official in Finland mentioned that those who had been around longer tended to carry knowledge between different groups. They commented on people's permanence in various administrative cultures.

> But there's always someone new and then someone who's been around longer and carries knowledge with them from the previous group. And it varies enormously from country to country how much people change. There are those who've been in the same group for years, and then there are countries where the person changes very often. The same can be seen in all the OECD cooperation – so it varies a lot in how this cooperation is done in terms of whether or not the personal designations are permanent, or how permanent, how long-term they are, and whether they change, and how often. The countries' administrative cultures are also quite different in this respect.
>
> (Official)

Previous examples illustrate how embodied knowledge (Freeman & Sturdy, 2014) is appreciated, and how knowledge is circulated in policymaking networks as people move between organisations and groups.

Policymakers also conceptualised knowledge as information sources and the tangible artefacts with which they dealt in their line of work – for example, reports from international and domestic organisations. EU and OECD material especially was seen as useful. One official who had worked in both the EU and OECD referred to how international knowledge from the EU, and especially the OECD, was essential for developing national education and for comparison.

> International sources of information … they're terribly useful, they're absolutely essential for our own system's development. That's what we get from both the EU and perhaps above all from the OECD. … They're terribly important for our system's development, and they really are one of the things that can show where we're going. A good example is the discussion at the education level – in my opinion that should be talked about even more because our relative ranking has been sinking for a long time.
>
> (Official)

When asked about what sources policymakers used in their work, another official mentioned EU reports, government programmes, position papers, and

colleagues' tacit knowledge. This interview was in Finnish, so "information" and "knowledge" are interchangeable in the next quotation.

> Well, yes, the sources of information are of course the material that comes from the EU. That's the starting point. Then, as other tools, the government programme and any other such position papers if they're available. … But then tacit knowledge, from colleagues, from superiors, I'd say.
>
> (Official)

The above quotation reveals that officials perceive international and comparative data as usable knowledge for policymaking, turning to the EU and OECD as sources of information. Different types of knowledge, from government programmes to colleagues' tacit information, are also mixed and matched in everyday work. In contrast, one stakeholder operating in the EU felt long briefs or research articles produced by higher education institutions were not useful in advocacy work.

> There's a slight mismatch between knowledge's academic production and what we need, to be honest. Well, because we don't have the time. So I'm going to talk next week about synergies between education and research, and I got some titles on research-based teaching. They're very good. I wish they'd been one page because they could've been. But they were twenty pages. And, you know, you sit there in your very busy daily life, and you get this twenty-page report, and that's a big difference between here and academia, you know. Here you say, yeah, I'm sure it's very good, but it's thirty pages. In academia, it needs to be thirty pages, or it isn't serious, you know. You don't get any, any recognition for an infographic.
>
> (Stakeholder)

This stakeholder felt some knowledge providers such as academics could not provide useful evidence. They continued to discuss knowledge as something consolidated and simplified from various sources, naming monitoring data and comparisons produced by a stakeholder rooftop organisation operating in the EU context.

> …[P]ut out a short statement. That's your visiting card. And since you're interested in knowledge, these visiting cards mostly work if you have evidence in them. If they just state an opinion, you have to push them very, very hard. … [Describes an example.] And we made an infographic out of it, and that was one of the best visiting cards we ever had. You do that, and then you create a dialogue with people.
>
> (Stakeholder)

Another stakeholder observed that it was not enough merely to state opinions: supporting evidence was required for them to be taken seriously.

When asked if they cited reports or surveys in their work, an official echoed the sentiment that just mentioning things or stating opinions was not enough.

> Well, it doesn't happen that often but … sometimes you feel like you need some more substance, and you can't get by with just mentioning things. Then you need verified information as a backup, like research from the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.
>
> (Official)

The previous excerpts point to an expectation that policymakers' arguments and work are under scrutiny, and that they will not be taken seriously if found lacking in verifiable knowledge. Everyone plays their part here. Officials attempt to support claims with credible knowledge; stakeholders aim to create credible and simplified evidence by drawing on what they can access. In this context, knowledge was discussed as a field of argumentation and reasoning but also through valuing different knowledge sources and formats.

Knowledge's social and interactive nature was present in many policymaker accounts. When discussing sources of information, one official in Finland mentioned their regular exchange with Finland's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels in order to get the most recent news and an informal take on what was happening.

> There's an awfully wide range of information sources if I think about where I get my information from. From colleagues, from old documents or that kind of thing, we have quite good archives of what's been discussed in the EU Committee of Ministers, and how. … We have contacts with the Permanent Representation weekly or even a couple of times a week, and of course more often on a case-by-case basis. … [W]e get a great deal of their most up-to-date [stuff] – what's going on informally in Brussels. It's also a really important source of information.
>
> (Official)

A European official similarly commented on the importance of good contacts, lamenting the lack of knowledge from informal contacts.

> It's true that you can have most meetings online, but what we're missing in terms of knowledge is the knowledge you get from having informal contacts with people: once it's online, everything is formal, and you're only really talking to people you need to talk to. That's something I think every workplace is going to have to think about, but for the Commission, where there could be a perception that we're in a Brussels bubble anyway, that's going to become a bigger and bigger issue.
>
> (Official)

Policymakers also discussed how knowledge was related to views and interests. For example, one politician mentioned their reliance on advocacy knowledge and reflected on the inseparability of knowledge and interests, feeling no objective knowledge could exist. However, this entanglement of interests and knowledge did not necessarily constitute a problem, as it could be mitigated by including many parties' views and forming one's own opinions.

> Yes, I rely quite a lot on advocacy knowledge myself instead of what could be called objective knowledge. But I've tried to listen to as many different parties as possible and then form my own opinion. Because in some way … everyone who steps over the doorstep has an agenda … the idea that this kind of objective source of knowledge exists, which doesn't seem to be the case.
>
> (Politician)

In relation to this, an official remarked that one should be careful to take information at face value because while it might pass itself off as good currency, its veracity might be another question.

> I learned pretty quickly that because gossip and knowledge were currency, people talked whatever. They somehow got it into their heads that it was a matter of course. And they trade it to get it, to raise their social status in the city. But call someone else, and you'll get a completely different picture of the same thing. Yes, information has a meaning, but its truth value is another matter entirely.
>
> (Official)

To summarise, we can see that policymakers' conceptions of knowledge are connected with the social environment and its norms. Those with experience and expertise enjoyed social appreciation. Information or knowledge sources and tangible artefacts varied from international and comparative data to views and interests, but an overarching understanding was that one needed to build a full picture of these bits and pieces and consolidate it from various sources. Evidence was expected when it came to constructing arguments. One needed relevant and often simplified sources of knowledge for convincing arguments. OECD and EU knowledge were perceived here as international and relevant for policymaking, in contrast with academic knowledge, which in some accounts was perceived as too unwieldy, or advocacy knowledge, which was perceived as unobjective. Knowledge was also social in everyday policymaking: our interviewees emphasised the need for an extensive and reliable contact network. Next, we examine more deeply how these conceptions are connected with norms in everyday policymaking.

Engaging with knowledge and norms

In this chapter, we understand norms as specifications for how things ought to be done (Scott, 2014), yet also draw attention to how policymakers engage with and interpret norms (Hajer, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). To some extent, these norms were inseparable in our interviews from what policymakers understood as knowledge. For example, if policymakers considered international and comparative data important, this established a norm for using such data and information. However, one stakeholder commented that OECD statements were too ambiguous to be useful in practice.

> …[W]e had to really understand what the report was about, and the OECD is a very tricky organisation. Because in the end how they describe their recommendation, it's really diplomatic. I was writing it with my intern, and we revised the article seven or eight times to make it understandable for whoever was reading it on our website, to see how we saw this report from our perspective. So I really hope there were lots of readers because we learnt a lot from it. We also get lots of knowledge from OECD and European Commission studies, and we try to plug the gaps with our projects if there's no appropriate information about social dialogue in higher education, for example.
>
> (Stakeholder)

The above excerpt shows that even when information is provided by a generally reliable actor in the network, it still needs to be moulded to fit background organisations' interests and policymaking purposes. For example, the OECD's information is freely available and sufficiently diplomatic and generalised to serve many actors, which may facilitate its use.

Although we did not focus on formal rules and procedures, they had consequences for how policymakers engaged with and interpreted implicit knowledge-related norms. When discussing Finnish parliamentary practices, one official mentioned that every committee was expected to be content with the knowledge the majority deemed sufficient and that it was not their job to question the accepted final versions of a text.

> There are two kinds of exchange of information here. There's this formal exchange of information, which I operate, and then there's the internal parliamentary practices that may be within the parliamentary group or within the government groups or within the education policy groups – that's not really apparent to me. If there are some changes to the text I've drafted, they appear there for me as the final text, and it isn't my job to ask where the information's come from. If a majority of the committee thinks something's written in some way, that's enough for me. Similarly, it's perhaps enough for each

> committee to confine itself to the information that the majority considers sufficient.
>
> (Official)

Similarly, a Finnish politician emphasised the importance of trust in sources and experts in the context of committee work, and that experts were under scrutiny in committee hearings.

> That's what we do a lot in committees – we invite experts to find out why they have this opinion, and what it's based on. It's impossible for a member of parliament to check all the sources, and trust is a very important factor, and personally I think that if you want to influence decision makers, trust is the most precious capital, and you can only lose it once. If you bring information that turns out to be incorrect or misleading once, the information you bring will always constantly be questioned.
>
> (Politician)

In relation to this, another Finnish politician mentioned that committee work was where politicians' understanding of knowledge and knowledge-based arguments was tested. As in the committee work, knowledge and experts were made to fit the norms described above: they were not to take up too much time in hearings or to provide lengthy reports. There was a tension with the expectation of thorough reading and preparation in the name of evidence-based decision making, without slowing decision making too much. Again, this helps us consider why some actors were relied on as sources of information, and why policymakers prioritised international and comparative data in the form of infographics and short reports.

Forming knowledge also depended on a policymakers' institutional position and role. One official thought knowledge from the Finnish government should be trusted and taken as read in EU working groups.

> The information from Finland, which is actually reliable, I won't go on to master it, I can bring up here, what about this kind of perspective, which may have been in the background, or which has emerged from the speech of a Member State, would this be something that we should reflect on, or whether this is in some way relevant, whatever, Portugal said so. I trust that the word of Helsinki is law.
>
> (Official)

In discussing how reports were written, another official emphasised that the members were ultimately accountable for what was in the paper, and that their job was to consider the best possible knowledge and support it: officials were aware of their institutional position in supporting politicians.

Both EU and Finnish policymakers seemed to share a norm pertaining to evidence-based policymaking. One Finnish official touched on this when

referring to the expectation of background research and reflecting on how difficult it was to try and question it. The norm was also present in how Member States hunted for research to support policy.

> We often ask the Commission what this recommendation is based on – if there's some kind of research behind this, then the Commission presents the research, and we ask, well, how many participated? Was anyone not already part of all this? You know, we also dig up information, and we make evaluations based on, well okay, this research was maybe a bit like this, and other research was a bit like that. And the Commission increasingly conducts research precisely because Member States have asked for evidence-based decision making. That's strongly reared its head – you can't just propose big changes just like that. When you don't know where the problem is, why this is being proposed. And it's difficult to take a stance when you don't know what problem is being addressed.
>
> (Official)

In addition to the need for evidence-based decisions, the official discusses the need to understand rationales for proposed policy changes to evaluate their value. Poor background research for a policy proposal may be taken less seriously and face more opposition. However, policymakers also expressed some reservations about evidence-based decision making. As one politician explained, an element of uncertainty was always involved with research, and research could not replace decision-makers' responsibility to make value-based decisions. Another Finnish politician remarked that diverging interests meant knowledge was being contested:

> Well, of course, I see that the researched data should be the basis. But then in practical life there are a lot of interest groups who want to dispute that scientific knowledge. One timely topic now is forests' carbon sink and emissions. And for a long time in general, if climate change is real, and whether it's caused by humans. Scientific research has provided certain results, but not everyone wants to accept them as real. And then there are lobbyists like influential industry lobbyists who question those results.
>
> (Politician)

As policymakers saw the entangling of knowledge and interests, a norm of careful knowledge examination formed. Interestingly, while knowledge was understood as entangled with interests and uncertainties, there seemed to be a normative expectation that objective knowledge would be established. In connection with this, politicians operating in the European and Finnish higher education policymaking arenas expressed some reservations about the

European Parliament's capability of adhering to this objective knowledge norm.

> People in the European Parliament's administration don't have the same principles of good administration as a committee councillor in Finland might have, for example. Of course, our committee councillors also generally have a political background. But they do try to follow the government's majority. But that isn't necessarily the case there – they wouldn't pull things strongly in their own direction.
>
> (Politician)

Policymakers usually trust their own group, as they are seen to follow the same norms and occupy the same institutional settings, while others are subject to more scrutiny (e.g. Reilly, 2018). Our interviews reveal that actors actively interpret and evaluate other institutional settings based on normative considerations while establishing their own institutions as more legitimate and credible counterpoints (e.g. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

All policymaker accounts reflected the value of varied knowledge sources. A politician discussed how making contacts with all kinds of people in the education sector was important.

> It's important to have a broad range of people where you listen not just to researchers, not just to persons with a personal interest in this, but to all kinds of professionals dealing with this, but also with decision makers at the national level. That's quite difficult because education is very often not a national but a regional issue.
>
> (Politician)

Officials also felt it important to meet and discuss with various actors and stakeholders and to consider a multitude of views. It was not enough for them to have just one perspective; they wanted to listen to a "broad range of people, and depending on their political affiliation and conviction, they then propose amendments" (Official). Like politicians and officials, stakeholders emphasised the importance of both internal discussions in the organisations and external ones with various actors to build a comprehensive understanding of important topics – for example, by having lunch together and discussing matters less formally.

These accounts nuance the idea of policymakers' preoccupation with international and statistical information as a basis for policymaking by detailing how much their work involves interaction with others and considering their experiences and views. Connecting policy and knowledge thus includes a human element (e.g. Carusi et al., 2018). Yet another immediate question concerns who is then invited to participate in policymaking or is considered worth hearing. As one politician noted, there were struggles about whose

knowledge should be the basis for decision making, and not all were in an equal position to influence which knowledge was selected.

> Political groups try to influence the Commission in advance. In our group commissioners come in regularly and tell us what's being prepared, and we try to influence this so our group's perspectives are well represented. And others do the same thing. Everyone's trying to influence everyone all the time. And then there are the struggles over whose knowledge should be the basis for decision making. That's the decision makers' choice. It matters a lot who acts as the negotiator for a political group because they have the opportunity to select which knowledge to use.
>
> (Politician)

Politicians generally agreed that policymaking should be based on knowledge, whether experience, expertise, research, evidence, international and comparative data, or information from personal contacts. Yet institutional roles contained their own norms: it was understood that politicians advanced the political agenda and promoted their own political group; officials were delegated to supporting the political layer with the expectation of remaining neutral; and stakeholders were seen as driving their interest groups' agendas while representing their members. Role-related norms might also differ concerning the stage of the policy process: for example, officials were occasionally allowed to revise policy papers, though later in the policy process, they were expected not to modify them. Some policymakers expressed reservations about European Parliament officials, who were deemed not to adhere to the same norms of transparency and trustworthiness as their Finnish counterparts.

Norms framing knowledge

In this chapter, we have examined how norms frame knowledge in the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network and its institutions. We have asked how policymakers conceptualise knowledge, and what kind of knowledge-related norms can be identified. Policymakers' preference for knowledge followed the pattern in previous research (e.g. Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Grek, 2024): there was a preference for international organisations like the EU and the OECD that provided international comparative statistics and reports. In many policymaker accounts, simplified knowledge worked best for policymaking needs (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022). We also found that policy actors' embodied experience and expertise (e.g. Freeman & Sturdy, 2014) were much relied on in working group settings, for example. Importantly, we found that normative knowledge practices occurred in social networks. Policymakers emphasised the importance of contacts for obtaining a more hands-on account of what was really happening, and that tacit knowledge, informal discussions, and rumours and gossip were important for staying on

track. We see this tacit and network-related knowledge as important for judging the value and credibility of the knowledge obtained.

In relation to the first research question concerning policymakers' conceptualisation of knowledge, we discussed evidence, data, research, and information with policymakers under the broad umbrella of knowledge. Policymakers' main distinction seemed to be based on where knowledge came from, regardless of whether it was stakeholders or international organisations. Knowledge was also judged according to its use to drive interests, as currency in discussions, or to provide rationales for policymaking, for example. It was also evident that these conceptualisations were diverse and fluid, and that they were made and remade in everyday work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). We can also see the network's importance here: knowledge is related to policymakers' institutional role. Politicians, officials, and stakeholders discuss knowledge and use it differently while sharing normative orientations (e.g. Herranen, 2022).

In relation to our second research question, we examined the kind of knowledge-related norms that could be identified. The following is not an exhaustive list, given that norms can be categorised in different ways that emphasise different facets of social activities (e.g. Meyer, 2017), but we can highlight three norms.

First, we identified the norm of the trustworthiness of collectively accepted knowledge. This means policymakers trust knowledge others deem good, removing the need to constantly establish it as legitimate and credible. Some organisations like the OECD and the EU European Commission were therefore rarely questioned as sources of information, while stakeholders' or political groups' knowledge was evaluated as interest-laden. Another type of collective acceptance was that knowledge from policymakers' own background community (e.g. country or government) was not necessarily questioned (e.g. Reilly, 2018). Collectively accepted knowledge also extended to types of knowledge in that the use of statistics and international and comparative data was rarely questioned, and the methodological choices leading to such data were seldom discussed. Knowledge thus became contested when it was seen to be connected with explicit interests and agendas, and objective when it adhered to normative collective expectations of trustworthiness and credibility.

The second norm we identified was the reliability of sources, meaning knowledge should come from a recognisable and well-established source. This norm was evident in how policymakers relied on their own personal contacts to obtain information, their involvement in maintaining such relationships, and their work to establish their trustworthiness. Reliability was also about being aware of and evaluating actors' interests, which enabled policymakers to contextualise knowledge and ascertain what others wanted. Policymakers relying on knowledge of unknown origin could risk credibility and undermine the agenda to which this knowledge was connected.

The two norms above were further connected to a third: holism. This was seen in how policymakers argued for the importance of dialogue and discussions, and involving various interest groups, stakeholders, and experts.

Knowledge should be built on perspective taking, considering various interests and views, and utilising a variety of sources. This is related to policymakers' attempts to secure acceptance for their ideas and agendas, and their adherence to democratic institutions' conventions for involving different views.

These three norms of collectively accepted knowledge, the reliability of sources, and a holistic approach pointed to the relationality of knowledge as interdependencies between people (Herranen, 2022). Knowledge and its credibility, relevance, and value were connected with other people, their interests, personal contacts, the groups to which a person belonged, and different organisations. There was therefore an effort to establish expert knowledge by relying on credible organisations, emphasising the research basis of agendas, or displaying reservations about the knowledge others provided. How policymakers questioned some sources, emphasised research, and drew on international and comparative data originating from the EU and the OECD illustrates policymakers' active engagement with knowledge and norms. We therefore argue that selected actors and knowledge are privileged based on their institutional recognition. Everyday institutional work was also evident in how politicians, officials, and stakeholders engaged with knowledge. Politicians gave accounts of knowledge being entangled with interests and of everyone's attempt to influence everyone; officials emphasised the importance of using credible sources and factual knowledge. Stakeholders spoke of the importance of producing knowledge and using it to influence others and get issues onto the agenda. All groups seemed to share an understanding of each other's roles, whether it was a stakeholder having their say in a working group, a politician arranging time to hear all relevant sides, or an official passing a draft on to politicians after initial corrections. As norms are more orientation frames than they are ironclad rules, some overlap and fluidity are expected in how policymakers conceptualise and use knowledge (Reilly, 2018).

In this chapter, we showed how norms framed knowledge in Finland–EU higher education institutions and the subsequent policymaking network. These normative frames can be interpreted as reinforcing existing power relations, as well as the recurrent reliance on established and prominent actors and organisations and their sources. Although beyond this chapter's scope, a fruitful enquiry could be made concerning how these norms work to legitimise and reinforce Western and Global North perspectives in European education policy: which actors and knowledge are perceived as relevant for policymaking institutions, and which are not. Furthermore, there seemed to be a lack of discussion of what happens when norms are not observed. Only a few interviewees spoke of how their credibility could be at stake if they relied on non-credible organisations, or how being caught with false information was detrimental to their image.

Normative institutionalism enabled us to consider how knowledge and its use were organised (Herranen, 2022) by norms that specified what legitimate knowledge was, and how it should be used (March & Olsen, 1984; Scott, 2014). We found that policymakers reflected on and engaged with knowledge

throughout the Finland–EU higher education policymaking network and its institutions with role-specific articulations of shared norms. Efforts to address the prevailing knowledge policy relations therefore need to consider the invisible norms that frame knowledge and its use in policymaking contexts.

Note

1 Joni Forsell conducted the second round of analysis.

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8 Navigating higher education policymaking in the European Parliament

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Introduction

The book's theoretical focus is on the construction of knowledge and power in social relations (see Chapter 1). In this chapter, we focus on one key actor in the construction of European higher education policymaking: the European Parliament's Committee on Education and Culture (CULT). CULT's role in higher education is worth investigating because it is not primarily responsible for legislation under the Treaties of the European Union. Previous research has not therefore focused on CULT as an actor exerting power. In our analysis, we adopt a broad lens on power outside the direct legislative influence, asking how CULT exercises power and what kind – if at all.

We draw on Carstensen and Schmidt's (2015) framework on ideational power. They synthesise theories on power, separating views on (1) "compulsory," or "direct control" over an actor, (2) the "structural" approach, examining the broader frame of resources and position in society, and (3) the "institutional power" of formal and informal institutions (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, pp. 319–320). Carstensen and Schmidt (2015) argue for a new framework to understand the ideational power that is key for *discursive institutionalism (DI)*. In this framework, "power through ideas" is a form of compulsory power through reasoning; "power over ideas" concerns the ability to structure ideas; and "power in ideas" builds on which ideas are seen as viable. The synthesis resembles some earlier ones such as Haugaard and Ryan's (2012) conflictual (associated with domination), consensual (actors' capacity to realise their aims), and constitutive (ontological) power.

Regarding this book's goals, the DI approach contributes a new perspective to our Foucauldian (Foucault, 1977; 1986) understanding of power and knowledge, which we identified as the dimensions of relationality, normative effects, and power effects in Chapter 1. We acknowledge, however, that blending Habermasian-influenced underpinnings of DI with the Foucauldian-inspired approach is contested (Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014) and can pose challenges in conceptualising concepts such as power, discourse, and *ideas*. Taking the view that a "discursive practice is not a blueprint" (Bacchi & Rönnblom, 2014, 175), we can accommodate

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broader interpretations under the DI umbrella – including productive power. While Carstensen and Schmidt acknowledge Foucauldian power only in the "power in ideas" (2015, p. 330) domain, we take the view that productive power is exercised concurrently through and over ideas – as "power through ideas" and "power over ideas" induce forms of knowledge and resistance. Ultimately, actors coordinate and communicate these forms of power through the available discourses, which means they are not entirely voluntary.

DI and its perspective on ideational power can help us further analyse the construction and contestation of CULT's actorness – that is, *inter alia,* its autonomy, authority, recognition, cohesion, and capacity in higher education policymaking. Researchers recognise that education as a policy field is in flux, and that there are negotiations and contestations of its competence within and between EU institutions (e.g. Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023). We are concerned with the interaction and tension constructed in CULT's everyday work. As we understand them, discourses produce political authority within the committee and among committee members but also allow external actors to act politically (Lynggaard, 2019). Discourses reveal to us how politicians assign meanings to their committee work, knowledge making, and political positions, which generate compromises, conflicts, or consensus. Political authority can, in turn, be an ideational conduit of power, as ideas are communicated through discourses. We therefore explore the discourses in committee meeting debates and generally around the committee's attempts to order and negotiate its role – not only intra-institutionally in the European Parliament, but also inter-institutionally with the European Union (EU) institutions and extra-institutionally with policy stakeholders. We explore CULT's boundary disputes about policy terms by analysing the politics of knowledge making, power, and ideas.

Our research aim is to understand *contestations of CULT's role as a European higher education policymaking actor.* If we only pay attention to the legislative powers inscribed in the EU Treaties for education, we may omit other types of power that CULT may exercise in education policymaking. CULT can therefore be considered weak in terms of legislative powers, but in examining its actorness, we find it important to broaden the analysis to alternative perspectives such as ideational power. We pose the research question: How is the role of the CULT committee constructed ideationally?

We next outline our research context, European Parliament's committees, and how CULT sits in this landscape. A section discussing our approach to discourse and its analysis in the context of CULT follows, presenting our analytical framework of DI. We then provide an outline of our data and methods and present our findings. We conclude that while CULT's perceived role is contested in all dimensions of ideational power, committee members resist its impotence by ideationally constructing a consensual education policy atmosphere.

Research context

Committee work plays a major role in the European Parliament's daily life, as it is a working parliament (Lord, 2018; Miller, 2023) in which most of the parliamentary powers of delay and amendment are exercised (Corbett et al., 2024). Committees interact with other actors in the EU system, such as approving Commissioner appointments (Hix & Høyland, 2013). Furthermore, since the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament's co-decision role with the Council of the European Union (hereafter referred to as the "Council") has been expanded into a new ordinary legislative procedure (Whitaker, 2011). Committees' legislative involvement is uneven, however. Taking a historical view, Whitaker shows (2011, p. 32) that although CULT has not been the least active committee in processing co-decision reports, it has "far less legislative involvement" (2011, p. 70). Whitaker (2011) also notes that the perceived importance of CULT's co-decision legislation is not factored into statistical analysis. Single indicators of committee importance can therefore neglect the views of policy actors themselves (see also Aula & Raunio, 2022).

The European Parliament's committees are composed of several influential actors, including national parties (Whitaker, 2011), political groups (Roger & Winzen, 2015), rapporteurs, coordinators (Obholzer et al., 2019), and committee chair leaderships (Chiru, 2019). Committee assignments have therefore been a considerable area of research (Yordanova, 2013). Whitaker (2011) found that in 1982 and 2002, professional and ministerial experience was not well represented in CULT, and that in 1999 and 2004, CULT had an over-representation of new Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). MEPs may therefore not perceive CULT as a prestigious committee or an arena to advance policy change – they may question its actorness.

Despite CULT's low legislative activity and historical differences in its membership, they do not determine behaviour or ideas around it. Some actors have recognised CULT's potential and have sought influence within it (Armangau, 2024). This suggests CULT's power may be exercised through means other than its legislative activity. Institutional actors not only negotiate formal rules and informal practices but also prevailing ideas about CULT's importance in education policymaking and the construction of political interests within it. Furthermore, in committees with less legislative involvement, committee members can exploit parliamentary rules and routines to maximise their committee's influence (Ahrens, 2016).

The scope of policy issues within CULT has changed since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Education as a policy sector was an "area of conflict and controversy": the European Parliament was in dispute with the European Commission (hereafter referred to as the "Commission") and Council, but also with the Committee of Regions and the Economic and Social Committee about competences and national subsidiarity (Field, 1998, p. 57). In principle, the EU dimension in education meant supporting Member States' actions in education and training in student and staff mobility, for example. However, the European

Parliament gained more powers in education with its extended budgetary powers and the legislative process of co-decision with the Council (Pépin, 2006). The European Parliament, namely CULT, was thus able to introduce amendments to vocational education policies (Field, 1998). The European Parliament and CULT have since expanded their powers. Indeed, during the current parliamentary term, the tenth legislature, CULT is responsible for all cultural aspects of the Union, including cultural heritage, cultural and linguistic diversity, and artistic creation; the European higher education area and the promotion of the system of European schools in addition to lifelong learning; and the Committee also plays a role in developing policy in the key audiovisual, information and media, youth, and sport areas (European Parliament, 2024).

In terms of internal cohesiveness, coalition patterns in winning votes seem to have been favourable for CULT when the two big political groups, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), have been in coalition with the Renew Europe group (Hix & Noury, 2024). Hix and Noury (2024) have analysed the 2024 European Parliament Elections, examining the coalitions and voting cohesion of the political groups within the European Parliament. They report that party cohesion is high among almost all political groups in CULT, but lower than the average percentage of all votes per political group: the Greens/EFA parliamentary group has the highest voting cohesion (86.7%), and other groups' cohesion is higher than 56 per cent. The European Conservatives and Reformists Group's cohesion was higher than in CULT only in the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. The exception is the Left group, with 32.8 per cent of political group cohesion, the lowest of all committees. Two political groups have jointly chaired CULT – the centre-right EPP and the S&D – with each having a two-and-a-half-year term in the ninth legislative period. However, from 2009 to 2022, a German representative of the EPP held the chair. This highlights not only the influence of national party delegations in securing chair positions within groups (Elomäki et al., 2023) but also the EPP's broader dominance in committee policy leadership and its implications for the kind of leaders selected (Kantola & Miller, 2022). However, the chair works with coordinators – MEPs each political group appoints. In addition to the variety of political backgrounds and affiliations, all members come from different European countries, bringing diverse perspectives on education and education systems.

CULT is thus an interesting case among the European Parliament's committees because it has gained little attention in education policy research despite its ability to draw power from sources other than legislation – and over the years this capacity seems to have broadened its scope of work. Its work is organised to gain negotiated support from broad parliamentary coalitions.

Discursive institutionalism

We draw on DI (Schmidt, 2010) because it fits the overall EU higher education policymaking frame well. As we have noted in the previous chapters (see e.g. Chapter 6), networks' power is constructed in social interaction and

in the build-up of common language and practices. DI helps us emphasise actorness in this networked setting. DI marries with our concern to explore how sentient parliamentary actors involved in and around the CULT committee construct and enact its "power in ideas," and how they are carried in coordinative discourses that offset perceptions of the committee's institutional marginalisation. We therefore explore interactive processes in and around the CULT committee (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 22). Regarding DI's application to the policy sphere, Schmidt (2015, p. 171) notes that policymaking should be understood "in context," and its relationship with ideas takes "different forms, types, and levels." For example, education policy scholarship has adopted DI to analyse school evaluation practices (Wallenius et al., 2018), curriculum studies (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017), and education reforms (Nordin, 2014). Moreover, Bussi and Milana (2024, p. 150) stress the "central role of ideas and their communication" in their study of the EU's adult learning and skills policy trajectories. As ideas are expressed through discourse, we explore the broad discursive context in which actors "outside" the committee construct CULT, and how the committee and its members discursively interact within the EP, inter-institutionally and extra-institutionally with stakeholders, to increase its "actorness."

We agree with Schmidt (2015, p. 171) that DI is an umbrella concept that overlaps with other new institutionalisms. However, DI focuses not only on substantive ideas but interactive processes and the operation of power relations within them in its different guises. In this chapter, we therefore focus on Carstensen's and Schmidt's (2015, p. 320) concept of ideational power. Ideational power is "the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 320). This allows us to explore how CULT is created, contested, and maintained through three ideational mechanisms. These are, first, *power in ideas* – that is "institutions imposing constraints on what ideas agents may take into consideration" and that "plays into processes of structural and institutional power"; second, *power over ideas* – that is "related less to persuasion and more to agents' imposition of ideas and the power of actors to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas into the policy-making arena"; and third, *power through ideas* – that is, "the capacity of actors to persuade others to accept and adopt their views of what to think and do through the use of ideational elements" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, pp. 320–321). All three mechanisms can function "positively" or "negatively" and can interact with other types of power such as institutional power. Furthermore, Carstensen and Schmidt (2015, p. 321) argue that although these types of power differ, "they combine and intersect in concrete instances" – it is therefore also important to study their interaction (Table 8.1).

DI distinguishes between coordinative discourse and communicative discourse. Generally, the agents in coordinative discourse are actors involved in the policy process, including "policymakers" or government officials, policy

Table 8.1 Ideational power and analysis of CULT

Ideational power dimension	*Definition by Carstensen and Schmidt (2015)*	*What we searched for in the data in relation to CULT*
Power through ideas	The capacity to influence actors' beliefs with cognitive or normative arguments (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, pp. 320–323)	Descriptions of persuasion: how an actor changed position after cognitive or normative argumentation Evidence of storytelling, framing, or rhetoric influencing decision making
Power over ideas	The capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 326)	Explicit mentions of who controls or prioritises ideas Descriptions of conflicts over defining concepts, ideas, or facts
Power in ideas	The authority certain ideas enjoy in structuring thought at the expense of other ideas (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 329)	Implicit assumptions or norms shaping engagement with CULT Hierarchies and discourses on what is viable or reasonable

consultants, experts, lobbyists, and business and union leaders. They generate policy ideas and arguments with various degrees and kinds of influence. They also organise themselves as discursive communities in a variety of groupings to influence the generation, shaping, and adoption of policies, often activated by entrepreneurial or mediating actors and informed by experts (Schmidt, 2015, p. 180). Although coordinative discourse can be a deliberative process, it is not devoid of power, and full consensus may not be inevitable. "Communicative" discourse is a discourse between political actors and the public. Political actors defend, deliberate, and disseminate these policy ideas (see Schmidt, 2002). The distinction between coordinative and communicative discourse is less clear-cut, as politicians' public speeches can communicate with the public while also trying to signal to and influence their peers. We do not distinguish between coordinative and communicative discourses in our analysis because our data include ethnographic material collected in CULT committee meetings, which are public. In this context, this discourse's target is difficult to discern (Table 8.1).

Methods and data

Discourses construct and carry political interests, ideological values, and meanings. Ideologies are embedded in discourse's features and are often seen as "matters of common sense" (Fairclough, 2001). We apply political discourse analysis (PDA) (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012) to understand CULT's role as a European higher education policymaking actor. PDA provides an analytical lens for analysing CULT's actorness by emphasising *decision making*

and *action* in discourse through which power is produced, reproduced, and contested (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 17). PDA understands political discourse as context-dependent and existing in institutions. Our focus on CULT therefore locates higher education policy discourses in the European Parliament's institutional context.

In an edited book on parliamentary committees, Siefken and Rommetvedt (2022, p. 10) recommend delving into the "black box" of committees. In addition to studying "the microcosm of political actors in committees," actors should be embedded in their wider institutional environments and policy processes (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 10). This circumscribes the "field" of the CULT committee to include inter-institutional relations (with the Council and the Commission) and extra-institutional relations (with educational stakeholders) as relevant actors in the policy ecosystem:

> [I]t is necessary not only to "zoom in" and see what goes on inside committees, but also to "zoom out," moving beyond the walls of the parliament building and look at the relevant governance processes in the respective policy networks. It needs to be determined where committees are within the political systems and how relevant they are.
> (Siefken & Rommetvedt, 2022, p. 10)

Various observational methods have been used in studies of the EU institutions. These have included the parliamentary ethnography of actors such as MEPs and political groups (Busby, 2013; Miller, 2022), ethnographies embedded in a cabinet of the Commission (Mérand, 2021), multi-sited EU lobbying (Mikkonen, 2024), and conversational interviews to "soak and poke" the inner world of trilogue processes (Roederer-Rynning & Greenwood, 2020, p. 492). Turning to parliamentary committees specifically, a notable interpretivist ethnography (Geddes, 2019) combines observations with interviews to emphasise "the power of ideas and interpretation" in the daily enactment of accountability (Geddes, 2019, p. 138). This ethnography challenges assumptions about how committees work – often differently from their institutional design. Behaviouralist observational studies of televised committee hearings have also explored committee deliberation and accountability (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2022). Geddes and Schonhardt-Bailey both studied select committees in the UK context – with less relative legislative power (cf. Fenno, 1973). In exploring accountability, they zoomed in on committees' scrutiny and deliberation functions, respectively. Given that our aim is to understand contestations of CULT's role as a European higher education policymaking actor, the committees' legislative function constitutes an important backdrop for our work. We thus draw on insights from policy ethnography. This approach analyses "policy settings, agents, practices, organizations and processes" (Dubois, 2015). It includes arenas where policymaking claims are both articulated and challenged.

In this chapter, we analyse CULT and its embeddedness in the European Parliament as a policy setting, the inter-institutional actors and extra-institutional

stakeholders involved in the higher education policy system, and their practices, organisations, and processes. Policy ethnography is an umbrella term for several metatheoretical and political approaches that explore policymaking as a lived process. Although we share in the scepticism concerning positivist approaches to policymaking, the desire to confront common-sense views of policymaking, and the notion that policymaking is rational and top-down as in Dubois's (2015) critique, our approach is more Foucauldian (see also Shore et al., 2011). A Foucauldian approach explores how power and knowledge are socially constructed in everyday interaction and practices; how power and knowledge are mediated through actors; and how ideational power coexists with resistance.

In following our Foucauldian approach, we acknowledge the researcher's role in studying policymaking practices, and that assumptions about power and authority are manifested in education policy elite interviews. As Ozga (2020) notes about researching the powerful in education policy contexts, the changing nature of policy and research itself affects the relationship between policymakers and researchers. In practice, this means interviewing powerful EU policymakers entails gaining knowledge of policymaking settings before interviews and, as Field (2019) suggests, careful management and navigation of access and time to gain credibility. Epistemologically, in a Foucauldian sense, this means both researchers and policymakers operate within knowledge epistemes – delimiting the ideational analysis of CULT. As four social scientists, we adhere to our disciplinary ways of knowing in education and political science and can be influenced by the existing knowledge frameworks within our scholarly communities. Moreover, in this chapter, we are participating actively in knowledge production while creating insights to evaluate the conditions for knowledge formation. As our research contribution attempts to reflect the boundaries of current scholarly debates and intellectual paradigms, we therefore acknowledge that according to our Foucauldian interpretation, power is "rooted in the systems of social networks" (Foucault, 1982, p. 793), and its conduct cannot be simply reduced to a study of a single institution such as CULT.

We draw on a body of interview and observation data we report in more detail in Chapter 2. In this study, we focused on interviews with EU policymakers, officials, and stakeholders working closely with the European Parliament, and observations and summary fieldnotes based on what we witnessed in CULT committee meetings over a year, from the autumn of 2021 to the autumn of 2022. We observed nine CULT committee meetings (of which three lasted two days) online and in person, yielding a total of 30 hours of observations and 155 pages of fieldwork notes (see Chapter 2).

Power through ideas: CULT's capacity as a "bridge" between people and politics

This form of ideational power draws on persuasion and actors' influence on and co-option of other actors to their worldview using ideational elements – such as persuading actors of both the normative and cognitive validity of arguments

(Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 323). Our analysis of interviews and CULT committee meetings suggested that power was enacted through discourses of CULT's relevance and the committee's ability to gain empowerment in education policy, which largely assumed the integrity and coherence of policy problems.

The most direct way in which CULT's members exercised power was to attempt to persuade others of its importance. This was carried out discursively by promoting ideas of CULT's capacity to bridge the different voices and actors in the policy field. Constructing "successful" policy was in effect seen as derived from conversations and interactions with people, educational professionals, citizens, students, and constituents. One politician explained why Commission-made policy needed CULT's and the European Parliament's contribution:

> We bring in what we experience, what we hear from groups, from people who have a project under Erasmus. If you hear about the problems there were, then you analyse the reason for it, and you then also have an exchange with the Commission on these things to improve the programme and raise the awareness of where the problems in practice may be. Because making a programme is one thing in theory. Looking at how it works on the ground is totally different. And I think that's important, and as parliamentarians you are, let's say, the bridge between the people in the constituencies and the Parliament and the big process bubble.
>
> (Politician)

Another attempt at bridging was filtering the (knowledge) input from political groups based on the similarity of priorities (Politician). Policy priorities that were a shared interest of the committee members and political groups were incorporated into the committee's work programme.

Extra-institutionally – that is, in fora beyond the EU institutions – this would often entail persuading Member States of CULT's normative value, despite its lack of competence, as a key actor responding to the needs of citizens, various non-governmental stakeholders, end users such as students, and local and regional actors. The ideational power was embedded in the argument that CULT guided Member States in what they should provide for their citizens (Politician). For example, the construction of the European Education Area (EEA) lay in Member States' competence, but according to several CULT interviewees, its implementation was not advancing sufficiently quickly. CULT's ability to "give a little power to the process" was therefore demonstrated by defining policy priorities and problems surrounding the advancement of EEA and proposing solutions to tackle them (Politician): CULT organised expert hearings and an exchange with national policymakers and representatives, simultaneously gaining knowledge and expertise from these interactions to empower CULT's policy vision (Politician).

Despite the apparent cognitive validity of arguments, in our observation data CULT members were unable to convince Member States or even all their colleagues that CULT had the capacity to bridge the gap between people, Member States, and the political agenda. This was also demonstrated in inter-institutional relations, and even intra-institutionally within CULT.

> Yet even inside CULT MEPs resisted the idea that European values would supersede national values, and that value questions could not be harmonised due to Member States' competence.
>
> (Eeva observation diary, 13 January 2022)

> One MEP argued that the European Union was intended to overcome nationalistic interests, emphasising that the EU was meant to complement and help its Member States, not eradicate national identities – noting that while education was indeed Member States' competence, this did not prevent going forward with their work.
>
> (Kallunki observation diary, 13 January 2022)

These observations from the same meeting illustrate the apparent division between political groups. MEPs on the right could enact ideational power through the normative value (and power in the idea) of subsidiarity and Member State competences within a set of like-minded MEPs, while political groups on the left could persuade another like-minded group of colleagues of the democratic value of CULT that was not limited by the idea of competence. This shows how power through ideas and power in ideas intersect. CULT therefore featured internal contestation that may also have affected its capacity to appear to be a bridging actor in education policy.

There were also other direct attempts to argue for CULT's parliamentary power in relation to other EU institutions. Inter-institutional contestation concerning which body had the power to generate, develop, and impart ideas was observed in both the Council and the Commission. An example was in a CULT meeting, where the Vice Chair criticised the Council Presidency for not allowing CULT to play a prominent role during its term:

> MEP Kammerevert [Vice Chair] scolded the Member State holding the Presidency [of the Council]: the Member State in question constantly referred to conferences during the Presidency. The MEP demanded that they (CULT) should be invited to speak, not just to observe as guests.
>
> (Eeva observation diary, 7 January 2022)

Vice Chair Kammerevert's reference to tangible invitations may indicate that she interpreted them as a method of inclusion or exclusion enacted by the Presidency. These invitations were an opportunity for inter-institutional forms of bridging and asserting CULT's power over ideas (see below). CULT's

ideational power appeared to be based first on persuading others, Member States, and the EU institutions of the consensual idea that CULT was working towards expected policy goals; second, that CULT could also enact ideational power by providing interpretative lenses that shaped the values and preferences of the actors involved, thereby having the capacity to translate complex political and economic interests into tangible policy actions.

An official discussed their role in supporting CULT power efforts:

> But we're not powerless – okay, we have our ways I would say, but that's, sometimes it's, it requires a bit more thinking, and strategic thinking to push something through. And we help with this. … We're happy to provide as much support as we can, and if our thoughts are heard and taken into account, we're even happier.
>
> (Official)

The committee also dealt with certain policy areas that were not at the core of education policymaking, such as audiovisual policy. This demonstrated that actors working in CULT could reinterpret the institutional setting and use it strategically to adopt new policy goals – perhaps to gain more competence or relevance. Yet CULT's attempts to persuade Member States of this capacity failed, and it was therefore unable to use power through ideas. For example, when discussing the Digital Security Act, one MEP remarked that Member States had not implemented it, despite the work the European Parliament and CULT had done (Eeva observation diary, 26–27 January 2022).

To summarise, CULT's ability to enact power through ideas was more successful internally within the committee than with external actors. The cognitive validity (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 323) of its role in democratic policymaking was also contested internally by claims of subsidiarity, while certain CULT members and political groups supported it. Similarly, bridging did not seem to extend as easily to inter-institutional relations: bridging to the Council and Commission (who were seen to hoard power over ideas) was less successful, but it was more successful in constructing a narrative responding to "real world" (policy) problems that were attentive to the voices of education professionals, stakeholders, and citizens. CULT's actorness was therefore constructed through perceived ideational elements that defined the committee as an underrated player in the field. This construction reflected the internal frustration within the committee, but simultaneously presented it as a united front, making policy in response to agendas supported by a wide range of societal actors and primary user stakeholders.

Power over ideas: CULT's autonomy – "Whose waters are you fishing in?"

Power over ideas refers to the imposition of ideas and the power to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas in the policymaking arena (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, 326). We examined explicit mentions in the data of who

controlled or prioritised ideas, and descriptions of conflicts concerning who could legitimately define concepts, ideas, or facts. In our data, we found examples of CULT resisting ideas the Commission proposed and attempting to impose its ideas on the Commission in return.

CULT members also guarded their area of competence. This included challenging other committees for not respecting CULT's competence (Politician). An MEP explained that other committees might attempt to "fish in the wrong waters" by drafting a report on a topic within CULT's competence (Politician). An interviewee explained the struggle to claim competence within the European Parliament:

> For some people a non-legislative committee has nothing to say, but we also have legislative competences when it comes to media law, for example. Or in the programmes for education. You very often also have to fight for your competences, especially when other committees think they are, let's say, overruling everyone.
>
> (Politician)

Reclaiming competence was thus a way for CULT to prioritise its ideas. By enacting power through ideas, MEPs also emphasised that their expertise was valuable to others, proposing themselves as speakers – not observers – at conferences (Kallunki observation diary, 7 February 2022). Yet, as within the previous subsection, CULT's internal conflicts – for example, in relation to domestic policymaking – could undermine efforts to prioritise their ideas. Ministerial hearings often become entangled in domestic politics when MEPs from the minister's country, especially those representing an opposition party, could exploit an opportunity for politicking (e.g. Eeva observation diary, 26–27 January 2022). Language politics – often in the context of French versus English – could also dilute CULT's efforts to impose its ideas as a united front (Politician), meaning the language in which ideas were to be conveyed became more important than the ideas themselves (e.g. Erdocia et al., 2022). In the extreme example, a political group was excluded from everyday committee work. A politician reported how Identity and Democracy was excluded when they did not align with shared ideational understandings of parliamentary work (Politician).

The Commission's proposals are of course a significant way of imposing ideas on the European Parliament. Interviewees across the spectrum emphasised the importance of affecting these proposals beforehand, which was evident in officials' trust in Commission fact-checking (Official), and in how stakeholders prioritised Commission outputs – for example, work programmes and recommendations.

Placing Commission proposals under the microscope was one way for CULT to reclaim power over ideas and emphasise its importance as an actor. For example, the Commission's data were questioned in CULT meetings. In our observation material, when a Commission representative was presenting

the results of the European Year of Youth 2023 for CULT, an MEP criticised the Commission for not taking any legislation into account that a youth panel for the year had suggested. The CULT chair MEP Verheyen supported this view, noting that European youth had not been informed of the events (Kauko observation diary, 25 October 2022). A little later, the chair was also sceptical of the attendance numbers for the theme year's events given by a representative from the Commission because they were not compared with a regular year (Kauko observation diary, 25 October 2022). On another occasion, when MEPs expressed eagerness about Commission outputs, there was hesitancy about their relevance (Eeva observation diary, 13 March 2022).

Taken together, we observe that CULT strove to impose its ideas and resist the inclusion of alternatives: first, by putting Commission proposals under the microscope and emphasising MEPs' expertise; second, by reinforcing CULT's boundaries and territory in terms of competence.

Power in ideas: CULT's recognition as a megaphone without a voice?

The DI view on power in ideas analyses the structuring constraints on which ideas are considered at the expense of others (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015). In CULT's case, this was connected in our data with CULT's recognition. This included attempts to define the committee's role and contestations concerning it, and how the committee was recognised differently, depending on the observer. Our interviews revealed there was some discursive struggle about its importance.

CULT was discursively constructed by external actors as lacking influence – and this was a recurring idea in the data. This was observed in the comments of MEPs who were not members of CULT, for whom it did not seem a priority. In the ninth parliamentary term of 2019–2024, Finnish MEPs actively chose not to engage in CULT, instead attempting to participate in committees with more legislative power. In some descriptions, CULT was seen as a world of its own, with no real influence:

> [CULT] lives a life of its own [laughs], of sorts. … It plays a role where it gives statements for different topics, but it seldom has the main responsibility for something, and others give statements. That CULT committee doesn't really play a big role in our decision making.
>
> (Politician)

The politician's unspoken expectation was that power could be enacted only through legislative authority in parliamentary committees. Based on this, CULT was thought to be a secondary priority. MEPs outside CULT reminded interlocutors that science and research was the third-largest EU budget item and an important tool for the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE), which was the committee responsible for the Horizon

Europe programme. An MEP with ITRE experience said there was little cooperation with CULT, which signified CULT's exclusion from budgetary decisions. However, an MEP did recognise CULT's importance in the Erasmus programme (Politician).

Similarly, our stakeholder interviewees raised CULT's lack of legislative authority. They generally perceived higher education as belonging to Member States' purview, and something that could not be accessed or influenced effectively through CULT. Ideas related to national sovereignty thus worked to diminish CULT's importance. Yet the Erasmus and other mobility programmes, as well as the Commission's quality assurance recommendations, for example, were perceived as important. By extension, parliamentary venues such as CULT were seen as a megaphone, a place to voice ideas, while lacking any real power.

> The problem is that the Parliament, like the EU, only has supportive competences. So the Parliament is crucial for Erasmus, for example, and if you're talking about budgets, if you want to put something in the budget, but the fact that they don't have, let's say, real power because in this case the European Education Area is also a process of the Member States. … Parliament can act as a megaphone, or they can perhaps amend things[.]
>
> (Stakeholder)

The committee's internal views of "outside" narratives responded to a dominant construction of CULT as a relatively powerless committee. These narratives appeared to be leveraged inside CULT – sometimes drawing on affective discourses – to cultivate a consensual working environment in the committee, emphasising its work's importance:

> But because this isn't such a heavy legislative committee, we have maybe a bit more leeway, so people are just like ah, yes, they can do whatever they want – it's very nice because it's very like "yay, education, yay, young people!" It's very positive. And you know… And then we have the rising cost of living, the Ukraine crisis, the energy crisis, so no one cares about [laughs] what we do in CULT.
>
> (Politician)

> Across the board we really have a consensus that we want better education for people, more inclusive, higher-level, not excluding anyone, so it's something everyone agrees on. About culture, we all want to support European culture, of course. Each Member State has its own priorities, but we all want, you know, more money for culture, more support for artists and creators, and so on. It's the same with sport and young people, it's all, like, very consensual. The difference is how we get there, so this is where we can differ because we all agree, maybe not agree on…

> we don't agree on everything, but in general we agree most of the time about the end goal.
>
> (Politician)

Interestingly, another way of enacting power in ideas was to attempt to reduce CULT's importance. Participants noted that higher education and science questions were not seen as highly politicised. This was also reflected in lobbying's low intensity (Politician). Nevertheless, the higher education lobby was an important source of knowledge in understanding a complex field (Politician). The same discourse was reflected in stakeholder accounts. CULT was not seen as prioritising higher education, and parliamentarians were seen as lacking the time to deal with "fluffy" questions related to higher education (Stakeholder).

The committee's internal views thus reflected the discourses of outsiders such as stakeholders who constructed CULT as a weak entity. Yet CULT was active in responding to this rhetoric, attempting to level up its influence in institutional relations with other EU bodies by actively finding ways of increasing actorness in the policy areas in CULT's field. In higher education, this was shown by enticing interlocutors through the "cognitive validity" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015, p. 323) – and building power from the idea – of the importance of money in emphasising the focus on the EU budget dedicated to higher education. We observed that policy instruments, funding schemes, and EU programmes were arguably the main building blocks for generating authority in CULT in the exchange of views on the *External dimension of the new EU strategy for higher education – protection of students, researchers, and academics under threat* in 2022 (Eeva, 24 October 2022). A CULT official described the balancing of attempts to level up the committee's legislative role while depoliticising this very idea:

> We're a legislative committee of, course – we have legislation to deal with, we have the funding programmes, Erasmus, Creative Europe, European Solidarity Corps, we have huge pieces of legislation like the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which is also highly controversial, you know, but we don't deal exclusively with legislation because in particular as you know, education policies are primarily the Member States' domain. And… The Parliament can, can give some incentives, you know, the Parliament can try to push some, via resolutions, to put the things in, in the right direction, but of course in the end it's the Member States having the major say on how education policies are going. We have the European Education Area, you know, and we have a view on this, the Parliament as an institution has a view on this, and we also have some influence, you know, and we can push, but of course there are also other actors in this policy field which simply have more power, which comes from the treaties, yeah.
>
> (Official)

Other interviewees said the Council Presidency also played a role in determining different committees' importance. An official saw the importance of deciding into which category each policy fell: higher education topics could sometimes be a grey area, and it was up to the Council Presidency to decide if they would be dealt with in the Education Committee (and Education, Youth, Culture, and Sports Council) or in the Working Party on Research (and the Competitiveness Council). This could then be reflected in which committee – CULT or ITRE, for example – dealt with the matter in the European Parliament.

So a powerful idea that CULT was not an especially important player existed among MEPs outside CULT, and some stakeholders and officials. This was mainly because CULT had scarcely any direct influence on legislation. However, interviewees recognised the importance of using the European Parliament to voice ideas. CULT's relationship with the Council especially, and with the Commission to some extent, seemed to cause tension, as CULT was attempting to gain more prominence. The idea of CULT as a relatively powerless committee therefore had "real" effects in report allocations and conference invitations, but also notably affected the committee's consensual culture. However, the committee was quite successful in building a consensual voice that embedded political dissonance – often due to issues of competence – yet depoliticised them through narratives of the "greater good."

Conclusion

In this chapter, we set out to understand how CULT's role was ideationally constructed, and how its actorness – its capacity, autonomy, and recognition – was negotiated in the European policymaking space's inner life. In all the dimensions of ideational power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015), we analysed that there was a degree of contestation of power from both inside and outside CULT.

Returning to our analytical framing, we showed that combining DI and Foucauldian insights could also provide tools for understanding ideational power beyond the concept of *power in ideas*. We suggested that these interactions also *produced* the actorness of CULT and knowledge, illustrating power's productive effects (Foucault, 1977, 1986).

By enacting ideational power "through ideas" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015), CULT attempted to persuade others of its capacity to bridge different views and actors such as education professionals and stakeholders, as well as citizens. This bore CULT members' self-understanding as an aggregate voice for different education communities. In attempting to find ways to exercise power, CULT needed to confront, consult, and interact with others in the policy domain – the Commission, for example. There were direct confrontations with the Council and Commission in public hearings, and as previous studies have noted, attempts to maximise power through parliamentary processes (Ahrens, 2016) and by ensuring CULT was invited to events to

voice opinions. Internal contestations within the committee also arose when there was a hint that CULT might touch the principle of subsidiarity.

In relation to the ideational power "over ideas" (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2015), CULT's autonomy in determining ideas' meaning was contested. CULT scrutinised Commission proposals closely, making various attempts to question and influence them. It also safeguarded its policy territory if other committees were found to be inching towards it. For example, CULT actively sought to reinforce its competence by insisting that legislation concerning audiovisual policy and the media was the committee's remit.

Concerning power in ideas, we observed a discursive struggle for CULT's relevance and recognition. Outsiders, especially politicians not on the committee, perceived it as lacking influence given its limited legislative capacity and its dealing with seemingly somewhat non-political questions. CULT again tried to find ways to access related policy areas that could fall within its remit and attempted to gain influence in relation to the Council and Commission. CULT also boosted a depoliticising narrative of its striving for a greater good. In this narrative, it argued that it was a forum for public discussion. Using the terminology of DI, CULT argued that it was a forum for communicative discourse, and it used this as a tool for its coordinative discourse.

Our analysis revealed that CULT's main influence tool was its argument concerning its capacity to build its actorness's shared deliberation in "bridging" people – policymakers, stakeholders, and educational professionals – and policymaking realities. Discourses that worked to increase CULT's actorness attempted to persuade others to think of the policy as a shared interest and for the benefit of all. Such discourses contained ideas of a wide array of "European" values, beliefs that MEPs were experts who should be heard, and arguments for being on the side of "people," for example. As its legislative competences were limited, the committee had to work for political aims with the tools at hand and make the case for access to present and disseminate its ideas in different fora.

Discourses that worked to diminish CULT's actorness in terms of recognition and autonomy included ideas of education and culture as "fluffy"; that the lack of legislative authority meant there was no impact; that the Commission was more important; and that education belonged to Member States. Moreover, CULT often needed to attempt to convince a majority of others to embrace its consensus discourse. This was demanding: our analysis revealed counterreactions could be provoked if CULT was seen to overreach its mandate.

However, with Carstensen and Schmidt (2015), we note that ideational power dimensions have fluid boundaries, overlap, and are mutually interconnected. When persuasion was insufficient to convince others (power through), CULT attempted other means to increase its actorness by imposing its ideas (power over) and criticising Commission proposals. Power also seemed to be related to legislative authority. Although the DI view of power emphasises discourses and narratives, it also emphasises institutional power. Does

the legislative authority associated with a committee and the responsibility for decisions pertaining to substantial monetary resources carry more weight than imaginaries of the common good?

Looking forward, new institutionalism and especially DI often claim to explain stability and change, but tackling the question of change in this chapter may need a more elaborated analytical scope. Even as discourses unfold in everyday interaction, some meanings and arrangements are established institutionally and are thus more resistant to change (e.g. Lynggaard, 2019). Yet change can also sometimes be achieved by "working with the grain" of existing institutional discourses: CULT seems to have found some soft spots in existing institutional discourses and to have worked with them – emphasising its consensual rather than politicised forms of decision making, for example.

We found that a combination of policy ethnography, interview, and ethnographic data was powerful for exploring CULT as a higher education policymaker and knowledge producer. This enquiry would also have provided a window into the coordinative and communicative discourse within DI and ideational power. We did not focus on these aspects in this study, however, because we did not follow a specific policy process or topic, even though CULT presents an interesting case for reviewing how far the coordinative discourse of CULT's importance has successfully translated into a communicative discourse with the public and those outside the European Parliament. Moreover, to further develop our analysis, we believe our research data on language politics would prove a fruitful topic for future enquiry.

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9 Conclusion

Jaakko Kauko and Katri Eeva

Introduction

This book aimed to analyse transnational knowledge networks' power in the context of the European Union (EU) and Finland. In Chapter 1, we discussed our approach to the broad spectrum of meanings each of these concepts encompassed and set out some focusing premises. In this chapter, we take some further steps and draw conclusions about our attempt throughout the book to introduce alternative ways of seeing higher education research in the EU context. This has required us to develop our theoretical, methodological, and empirical understanding of the phenomenon. We have learned from all these aspects in our research. This conclusion explores the main findings concerning each of these topics.

First, this book is about the transnational network that works on higher education questions between Finland and the EU. In the previous chapters' analysis, we have highlighted knowledge networks' complex and interconnected nature. Our understanding of these knowledge networks has formed as our work has progressed. When we analysed the everyday policymaking in Finnish and EU institutions, we found that decision-making debates on higher education questions occurred somewhere "in-between" (Chapter 4). We found that there was no clear venue where higher education policymaking occurred, but it seemed to be a networked interaction. When analysing the network more closely in Chapter 5, we found that the network had two blocs, one consisting of EU Member States, the other of Finnish national organisations.

We developed yet another picture of the network structure by zooming out from the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland and its key hub, the EU30 sub-committee. We were able to show that the network's transnational nature and the Finnish higher education policy field were tightly knit with its European counterpart through organisational links (Chapter 6). The network is broad, and its influence does not appear to be limited by the EU's weak legislative power in education matters. Instead, the network seems to be a way to overcome the statutory limitations to legislative power (Chapters 5 and 6). As we argued in Chapter 4, higher education is divided into two separate

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policy sectors in terms of the EU's legislative powers: education policy, and research and innovation policy. The boundaries between these two policy sectors have become blurred in EU higher education policymaking. Our analysis indicates that understanding everyday practices within institutional frames can reveal how these policy boundaries have become obscured. Given its potential, it is noteworthy that this network hides in plain sight.

Second, this book is also an analysis of power and knowledge. The knowledge the Finland–EU network relays is varied. In Chapters 6 and 7, we confirmed what previous research had already established: policymaking considered research as one source of evidence that was not necessarily more valuable than others. Policymakers' preference was for easily approachable and simplified, preferably quantified, evidence. In contrast with some previous research, we found a basis for arguing for the importance of knowledge brokers' background organisation in their message and position rather than as individuals (Chapter 6).

Our results also indicated some norms that framed knowledge. These norms helped policymakers evaluate knowledge: trustworthiness based on collective acceptance, source reliability based on a personal relationship with it, and a holistic evaluation of different sides of a certain topic (Chapter 7). While these norms were tightly knit into the knowledge source's position in the network, knowledge was also used as a tool to shape networks and actors' roles within them. As we discussed in Chapter 8, this was apparent in the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) wielding ideational power in an attempt to persuade actors in its network to accept its role as a bridge for ideas from different actor groups. To summarise, the production and use of knowledge were intertwined with the transnational network's power structures, and this could dynamically influence the policymaking process itself in how it enabled or disabled actors.

Our main findings concern the development of the use of the concepts we employed, methodological findings on how the research process can help in understanding the studied phenomenon, and two main empirical findings. The first concerns networks' nature as fluid and credibility-based; the second, the inter-crossing of knowledge and power discourses. Finally, we suggest alternative perspectives on some European studies and education policy approaches.

Tantalising concepts

Our research project deals with broad concepts of power, knowledge, and networks. In defining and studying them, we have encountered an evasive horizon. The perception of the problem is that it is difficult to define power, knowledge, or networks without their mutual referencing, and defining all of them together is even more difficult. Sometimes we have felt like Homer's Tantalus, who was condemned to eternal torment for his crimes. When in his hunger he reached out for fruit, it escaped his grasp; when he bowed down

to drink, the water sank away beyond him. During this research, we have noticed how artificial it is to separate these concepts. We argue that complexity and difficulties in definitions should be accepted, and for an understanding of how these concepts are connected in the context of the network that we have studied. To summarise, each of the three main concepts – knowledge, power, and networks – is always borne of the other two.

The nature of epistemic content is seldom the decisive factor in what becomes knowledge for policymaking. By drawing on previous works such as Cairney (2015), Chapter 1 established that policymaking was more about weighing a range of evidence, something that emerged strongly in Chapter 7. A pre-study of this project found that in some extreme cases, the selection criteria could be merely political-ideological (Kauko, 2022).

However, there are some preconditions concerning what can become knowledge for policymaking. In Chapter 7, we found norms based on which knowledge could be evaluated, and they were mostly connected with the source's relevance and recognition in the network. Decisions were then made based on a holistic understanding drawing on the actor's networked connections. In addition to the actors' connections, their power position was important for defining whose epistemic content counted. Knowledge formation was therefore part of the policy process. Knowledge did not pre-exist somewhere where it was imported to the policy process, but it was defined and created in policymaking networks through powerful discourses and ideas, for example. An important way of creating knowledge was different actors' own data production, as discussed in Chapter 6. For example, different stakeholder organisations took considerable effort to produce data that drew on their members' views or supported them.

Knowledge networks were also used to facilitate power. CULT presented the most obvious case of an attempt to expand power in a network. In Chapter 8, we explored how CULT attempted to gain more power, and how some other actors sought to limit it. In a situation lacking any strong legislative force, power lay in discourses – that is, in ideational power, as we suggested in the chapter. CULT's attempts culminated in describing its role as a bridge between important parties. This argument made by CULT representatives corresponds to how we theorise the network as the key to power. CULT attempted to demonstrate that it should have a strong position because it relayed and processed epistemic content to help the broader policymaking network. It is noteworthy that politicians attempted to facilitate this networked understanding of power directly in policymaking.

Networks were also used to legitimate knowledge. Based on our data, in Chapter 4, we discussed how knowledge was legitimated by suggesting one organisation represented many others. In Chapter 6, we observed how individuals' organisational background defined power through the network they created between Finland and the EU. Chapter 5's argument that organisational affiliations provided stability and influence in networks also supported the idea of broader networks as a source of power.

In Chapter 1, we started with the idea that higher education policymaking actors could possess authority and secure influence to shape ideas and beliefs into knowledge. Given the power of networks in this process, it is striking to see the long-term build-up of networks of organisations and people in Europe, which has changed policymaking irreversibly. Contrary to some Finnish policy actors in our interviews, it is impossible for any actor to claim that Finnish higher education is beyond the power effects of European higher education policymaking.

Learning from methodology

As Chapter 3 described, our approach was to accept research's messiness (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). This provided a broad spectrum of perspectives, enabling a reflexive process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) for a continuous evaluation of our work's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An important point of reflection is that researchers are undeniably part of knowledge networks and can enact power through their role and position. Researchers push a powerful definition of knowledge: it is created through the scientific process and, in the best case, is peer-reviewed. In Chapter 1, however, we observed that the concept of knowledge was largely undefined in education policy research. This may imply an underlying shared assumption that everyone knew what knowledge was. However, policymakers do not seem to share this perspective. In addition, as we noted in Chapter 3, a shared epistemological understanding does not exist even among researchers in a small research group. Accepting that researchers have a stake in power, and that their understanding of knowledge is dissonant with policymakers' understanding, opens important reflections for further work.

Accepting the stake in power has consequences for how we can approach questions of access and credibility. As we discussed in Chapter 3, we found our research group's existing networks facilitated access. This also taught us something about the nature of the networks we were studying. Much of the research literature on interviewing the powerful, or "elite" interviews, addresses the problem of power asymmetries (as Chapter 2 discusses). However, an idea that existing personal relations serve to level this asymmetry is a notion few texts on methodology address. We attempted to avoid criticism of trustworthiness by avoiding situations where people interviewed their former colleagues. This was a somewhat technical issue. We had to leave the larger credibility question of potential structural bias open. How should we evaluate the complex question of "us" as the researcher community as part of the knowledge and power network? Is a study of knowledge in policymaking merely a sophisticated attempt to push "my evidence" (Klees & Edwards, 2014, p. 38)? While identifying the risks, as long as the process stays reflexive and open, our answer is no. Instead, staying reflexive and open during the research process can help us learn about the studied phenomenon.

Another lesson from the research project's messiness concerned the difficulty of understanding policy networks through official documents. In studying policy networks, one might assume it would make sense to form them based on policy documents and organisation charts, as well as to take a systematic two-dimensional social network analysis approach. In studying more subjectively formed informal networks where people relate to each other through their personal connections, qualitative data analysis and additional network ethnography might seem a reasonable way to start. However, we also struggled with the concepts used to describe networks. As some of our interviewees did not agree with the terminology of "official" and "unofficial" networks, we decided to use the concepts of "formal" and "informal." It is uncertain if our interviewees would agree with this terminology either, but we expect this to be derived from the phenomenon itself. The line between these concepts in everyday work is blurred, and the theoretical distinction is invisible in colleagues' everyday communication. All in all, during our study, we found that the concepts of formal and informal networks were intertwined. We also had to navigate the strengths and weaknesses of two types of network analysis in trying to understand formal and informal networks. This helped us obtain relevant results, described in Chapters 5 and 6.

If we were to continue our study, studying this intertwinement would require a different approach. Our results show that policy networks are based on credibility, which helps in thinking of ways to analyse these networks. Credibility-related networks could be analysed with ego network analysis (Borgatti et al., 2013). This could start with the network's most central actors and then snowball to their collaborators and the collaborators' collaborators. Identifying the central actors would of course need an insight from a previous study or research. In hindsight, this would have been a way to work around not obtaining data from public sources (Chapter 2) and the definition of what counted as a network, and whether it could be called formal or informal (Chapter 5). However, we discussed their most relevant partners with our interviewees. Chapter 6 analysed this systematically.

Knowledge, networks, and power

Fluid credibility-based transnational network

In our book's various chapters, we have named the "EU–Finland higher education policymaking network" as the key phenomenon for analysis. Taken together, the different findings make an interesting image. Our analysis concludes that the EU–Finland higher education policymaking network is fluid and based on credibility derived from the routine manner of everyday higher education policymaking. As was our premise, it is also transnational.

As we described in Chapters 2 and 3, our methodological struggles to gain access to and speak with those making higher education decisions in the EU

institutions and working groups already revealed one aspect of the networks we scrutinised. They were not transparent, and access required a lot of work. This gave us initial impressions of a network whose operation was based on credibility. Our entering the field was a feature of how the network operated. In Chapter 7, we described the sets of rules policymakers had for selecting knowledge. Knowing where a piece of evidence came from and knowing the source personally were very important for policymakers. Getting to know the network personally helps in working as a source, producer, and recipient of knowledge. If you are unknown in the network, it may be difficult to talk to people and thus gain influence. Credibility means that an actor has an accepted position in the network and that others know whence their knowledge comes and can thus evaluate it.

Networks operate differently from what we might have expected at the outset. Chapter 5 showed that the formal networks in policies and process descriptions spawned informal networks around them. Here, the two networks intersect: without the formal network, the informal network could not form; and without the credibility created in the informal network, the formal network's performance would decline, or it would cease to function. These informal networks are ways to gain credibility by getting to know people. As we discussed in Chapter 7, this feature is also essential for the transfer of knowledge within these networks. This dual network structure is dynamic and fluid. It has a base network in the official network structure, but the close description of its operation requires a glimpse into the informal structure. In Chapter 4, we observed that policymaking seemed to happen somewhere *in between*, which also contributed to the network's fluidity.

Although the network is fluid, it has stabilising features. Chapter 6 showed the importance of organisational background in networks. We concluded that organisations, rather than individuals, were important to sustain the network: they were a source of stability. The network we scrutinised seemed stable over time. We also found tensions in the network's structure: in Chapter 8, we found that CULT was actively trying to create a more powerful position. To summarise, when we suggest the network is fluid, we mean that individuals within it can change, and they can easily relocate themselves to its various organisational settings. Active attempts to change the network are difficult; building new connections seems easier. Fluidity also allows smooth policymaking over knowledge.

Layers of knowledge and power

The networks we study can be seen as having complementary discursive layers. They intersect with stakeholders', officials', and politicians' various networks.

A surface discourse is that of evidence-based policy. As we – and many researchers before us (e.g. Cairney, 2015; Head, 2008; Sanderson, 2011) – observed in Chapter 1, this is unattainable. None of our interviewees completely agreed with it, yet this idea continued to inhabit discourses. We found

no evidence of evidence-based policy being a relevant description of how policymaking worked, but based on our research, we understand that it can be utilised as a discursive resource for arguing for some legitimacy. Given the researchers' stake in power we discussed above, researchers can also use it.

A second discursive layer is the one that contains epistemic content. This can be perceived as akin to Kingdon's (2003) policy primeval soup, where different ideas and policies float, evolve, and compete for attention. However, whereas Kingdon's theory claims all these items are selected based on certain feasibility criteria, we argue that hierarchies of knowledge and networks matter for how this epistemic content is processed. Knowledge brokers and policymaker preferences (Chapter 6), norms framing knowledge (Chapter 7), and power dynamics (Chapter 8) are more important here than feasibility, for feasibility is subject to power.

A third discursive layer is the normative one, where political ideologies, beliefs, attitudes, and values take centre stage. We explored the norms that framed knowledge in Chapter 7, observing the ideas and discourses framing policy action in Chapter 8. We also noted the importance of political ideologies as policymaking's driving force in Chapter 1, based on the previous literature. This normative layer is an important frame for processing epistemic content into knowledge through power.

A fourth discursive layer is politics. This deep policymaking layer follows the basic Weberian notion of chance. Politics is the art of creating political space where it did not exist before, finding new ways and new interpretations (Palonen, 1993). At this level, there are no rules besides imagination. Rational arguments for what counts as knowledge are irrelevant. New political spaces are formed (Chapters 4 and 5), knowledge and norms are negotiated (Chapters 6 and 7), and discourses are a source for shaping power and networks (Chapter 8).

We understand the partly speculative nature of these four layers, suggesting them as a hypothesis-like summary of our findings. As with discursive layers, they are prone to reinterpretation, but they may work as a clarifying conceptualisation for any further analysis.

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Index

Italicized and **bold** pages refer to figures and tables respectively, and page numbers followed by "n" refer to notes.

accountability measures 4
account interpretation 30
account sharing 30
account theorisation 30
actor code 32–33
Addey, C. 40
Adhikary, R. W. 85
Advocacy Coalition Framework 7, 103
affirmative reactions 43
agenda setting 10, 84
Allgemeine Staatslehre (Jellinek) 7
Association of Finnish Entrepreneurs (SYRI) 106
Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA) 105
Atlas.ti 32, 33, 87, 122
authenticity 38, 39
Avelar, M. 85

background interviews 26, 28
Ball, S. J. 23–24, 85
Bandola-Gill, J. 2, 104
Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) 72
Bologna process 4, 5
Borgatti, S. P. 23, 89
boundary policy work 2
Brussels fieldwork 42–44
business sector actors 87
Bussi, M. 141

Cairney, P. 10, 159
Carstensen, M. B. 137–138, 141, 153
Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) 106
Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) 106
Christensen, J. 121
clarity of expression 34
Coimbra group 6
Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport 77
Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation 77
Committee for EU Affairs 59, 62, 82
Committee of Foreign Affairs 67
Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) 67
Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) 6, 59, 64, 137; autonomy 147–149; capacity as a "bridge" between people and politics 144–147; European Parliament and 140; as a higher education policymaker and knowledge producer 154; ideational power and analysis of **142**; internal conflicts 148; language politics 148; for ninth legislature (2019–2024) 65; offers official framework for education policymaking 66; power in ideas 141, 149–152; power over ideas 141, 147–149; power through ideas 141, 144–147; recognition as a megaphone 149–152; research context 139–140; role of 138; scope of policy issues within 139–140
Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) 67
Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) 67
Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) 59, 67, 149, 152
Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) 67, 140
Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality 140

communicative discourse 141–142, 153, 154
Comparative Analytics of Dynamics in Education Politics (CADEP) 20, 32n2, 34; analytical framework 21, **21**, 34; political possibilities 21; political situation 21; political space, use of 21
Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) 72, 106
Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (AKAVA) 105–106
confirmability 38, 39
conflictual power 137
consensual power 137
constitutive power 137
controlling preferences 10
convergent design 20
coordinative discourse 141–142, 153, 154
Council of the European Union 5, 57, 111, 139; and the Finnish government 61–64
Council Presidency 146, 152
country code 32
credibility 38–39, 42–43, 48, 115, 133, 134, 144, 158, 160–162; knowledge's 122; researcher's 52
credibility-related networks 161
Creswell, J. W. 20, 34
Cross, M. K. D. 8, 34

data collection 44, 46, 52, 53, 58; background interviews 26–27, **27**; trustworthiness in 30
data documentation 39
data in policy settings 43
decision-making processes 2
decisions 10
dependability 38, 39, 53
descriptive code 32–33; actor code 32; country code 32; organisation code 33; person code 33
desk research 27
DG for Education and Culture (DG EAC) 59
DG for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) 59
Diermeier, D. 122
Digital Security Act 147
Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) 57
discursive institutionalism (DI) 137, 140–142
Dubois, V. 144

Easton, D. 7
economic bias, in education research funding 57–58
Education Committee 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 152
Education and Culture Committee 68, 87
education funding 113
education policy research, information in 9–10
Edwards, D. B. 11
Eeva, K. 41
EHEA 72
elite interviews, challenges with 43
elite network 40
epistemic community literature 8
Erasmus+ programme 4, 5, 57–58, 67, 69, 77
ethnography: network (*see* network ethnography); team (*see* team ethnography)
EU30 sub-committee 31, **61**, 62, 63, 86, 102, 105, 106–108, *110*, 113–115, 157
EU Affairs in Finland 76–77
EU funding policies 5
EU higher education policymaking 1, 4
EU institutions 25, 33, 56, 58, 59, 76, 77, 86, 138, 143, 145–147
EU legislation, co-decision 5–6
EU Member State bloc 91
EU policy actors, responsibilities of 59
European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) 72
European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) 7
European Commission 3, 5, 6, 27, 57, 82, 111, 128, 139
European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) 65; cohesion 140
European Degree Label 77
European Economic Area (EEA) 69
European Education Area (EEA) 77, 145
European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) 72
European framework, higher education and research and innovation in 58–61
European Green Deal (2017–2020) 75

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) 4
European Parliament 6, 13, 13n4, 38, 41, 49, 59, 73, 74, 93, 122, 132; higher education policymaking in (*see* higher education policymaking in European parliament)
European Parliament and the multifaceted nature of higher education policy 64–67; co-creating 69–71; CULT 65; culture and education votes 64–65
European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) 30, 31
European People's Party (EPP) 65, 140
European polity 58–59
European Semester 56
European stakeholders: document production in 2020–2023 by topic **74**; lobbying by national and 71–76; Mikkonen's transnational approach 75; universities and 75
European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) 72
European Universities Alliances policy initiatives 5, 77
Europe of Knowledge 5
evidence-based medicine movement 10
evidence-based policymaking 11, 48, 129–130
Eyal, G. 11

Field, M. 144
fieldwork experiences, emotions after 41
Finland Chamber of Commerce 106
Finland–EU higher education policy network 82–98; analysis of 88–96; content analysis of interview data 87–88; core and peripheral actors *88*, 88–89; data and methods 85–88; interviewees' characterisations of the network 94–96; network formation in the national and transnational contexts 91–94; structure, formation, and characteristics of networks in transnational governance 83–85; well-connected core of two elements 89–91, *90*
Finland–EU organisation network database 25–26
Finland–European Union (EU) network 21
Finnish and European stakeholders: document production between 2020 and 2023 73–74, **74**; organisations 72–73
Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (AMKE) 105
Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK) 106
Finnish Education Employers (FEE) 106
Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) 106
Finnish higher education 6; policymaking 1–4
Finnish Ministerial Committee on EU affairs 64
Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) 24–25, 31, 62–63
Finnish National Agency for Education (NAE) 106
Finnish national bloc 91
Finnish National Defence University 6
Finnish polity 59
fluid credibility-based transnational network 161–162
formal networks 161, 162
forming knowledge 129
Forsell, J. 41
Foucauldian-inspired approach 137
Foucault, M. 9, 10
Fumasoli, T. 71
funding: economic bias in education research 57–58; education 113; EU policies in 5; Horizon Europe programme 57–58

Gabriel, M. 59
Geddes, M. 143
General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policy 33
globalisation 4
Goodin, R. E. 83
Grand Committee 67–68
Grek, S. 2
Guba, E. G. 38

Haahr, J. H. 57
Hajer, M. A. 82
Haslerud, G. 2
Haugaard, M. 137
Heiskala, R. 10
higher education: governance processes 1; institutions 87; policy research 1–2; reforms 1
higher education policymaking in European parliament 56–77; in an

intermediary space 76–77; Council of the European Union and the Finnish government 61–64; discursive institutionalism 140–142; dual function of institutions 57; European Parliament and the multifaceted nature of 64–67; implementation of objectives in 57; incentivises benchmarking in 56; lobbying by national and European stakeholders 71–76; methods and data 142–144; policy actors 58; policy actors in EU and Finland in higher education-related sectors in 2019-2024 **60–61**; preparation work on 62–63; research context 139–140
Hindess, B. 10
holism 133–134
Horizon Europe programme 5, 67; funding 57–58
Howard, P. N. 23, 85–86
Hult, A. 103
Hyvärinen, A. 63

improvisation 51
informal networks 94, 161, 162
information steering 82
insecurities and ruptures 49–52
institutional contexts, networks analysis in 30–32, **31**
institutional norms, knowledge in 123–127
interview(s) 38, 46, 85; atmosphere and social interaction 49, 51; background 26; collective coding of data 32–33; core questions in each 28; descriptions of events during 50–51; network analysis and 26–30; personalising interview questions 27; protocol, example of 29
interview quotations 29
intuition 51

Jellinek, G. 7
Johansson, M. 61
Junemann, C. 23–24, 85

Kallo, J. 121
Kallunki, J. 41
Karseth, B. 121
Kauko, J. 41
Kettunen, P. 8
Kingdon, J. W. 163
Kingdon's theory 163
Kivunja, C. 40
Klees, S. J. 11
knowledge: brokering (*see* knowledge brokering); connecting policy and 131–132; evaluation (*see* knowledge evaluation); forming 129; governance knowledge governance; in institutional norms 123–127; and interests, inseparability of 127; networks (*see* knowledge networks); and norms, engaging with 128–132; norms framing 132–135; policymakers' conceptualisations of 123, 124, 133; in policymaking 11; power effects 11; and power, layers of 162–163; sources 131
knowledge brokering 103–104; concepts of 104; definition of "knowledge" 105
knowledge evaluation 49–52
knowledge governance 104
knowledge making, new configurations of 2–7
knowledge networks 20–22, 159; collective coding 32–33; everyday practices in 22; in institutional contexts 30–32, **31**; interviewing the network's powerful positions 26–30; organisational 34 (*see also* organisational knowledge networks); in practice, Brussels as a case of 42–44
knowledge norms in education policy 119–122
knowledge's relationality 11
Krehbiel, K. 122
Kuyini, A. B. 40

League of European Research Universities (LERU) 6
Lincoln, Y. S. 38
Lingard, B. 85
Lisbon of "governing by numbers" 4
Lisbon Strategy 4, 56
Lisbon Treaty 5, 56, 139
Lukes, S. 10

Maastricht Treaty 139
MacKillop, E. 103, 105
Magalhães, A. 64
Marin, S. 59
McKinley, J. 9
Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) 139
Menashy, F. 8–9
messiness of reality 34

messiness of research 40–41, 44
methodological trustworthiness 34
Mikkonen, S. 75
Milana, M. 141
Ministerial Committee on EU Affairs 91
Ministers of Economic Affairs 67
Ministries of Education and Employment 68
Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE) 31
Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) 102
Ministry of Finance (MFIN) 68, 106
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 108
mixed-method approach 20
mixed-method design 33, 34
Mode 1 knowledge 115
mutual affinity 93

national and European stakeholders 87
national policymakers 2
National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK) 106
National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) 106
National Union of Vocational Students in Finland (SAKKI) 106
NetDraw software 23, 107
network analysis 20, 38, 46; in institutional contexts 30–32, **31**; and interviews 26–30; quantitative 30; understanding structure of politics 22–26
network contacts 92
network data 106–107
network database description **24**
network ethnography 21, 22, 34n3, 46, 85–86, 161; mapping of Finland–EU organisation network 86–87
network governance 83–84
network mapping 86–87; technologies 23
network structuration 93
The New Production of Expert Knowledge (Grek) 2
new von der Leyen Commission (2024–2029) 77
normative effects 11
normative institutionalism 119, 120, 134–135
norms framing knowledge 132–135

observation matrices 20, 30–31, 38, 49, 51–52, 85
Ofem, B. 23
Open Method of Coordination (OMC) 4; instrument 57
organisational knowledge networks 102–116; analysis and results 107–114; data and analysis of 122–123; engaging with knowledge and norms 128–132; norms framing knowledge 132–135; organisations as brokers of epistemic content 103–105; organisations' capacity for research literacy 112; relationships of organisations 107–112, *109*, *110*; research design 105–107; shaping higher education policy through knowledge 114–116; sub-committee actor's work 112–114
organisation code 33
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 69, 121, 125, 132, 134
organisations as brokers of epistemic content 103–105
organisations' capacity for research literacy 112
Orpo, P. 59
Ozga, J. 144

paradigm: poststructuralist 40; research 40
Parliament of Finland 67–69; Finnish legislative preparatory work 74–75
party cohesion 140
Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU (EUE) 106
personalising interview questions 27
personal relationships 95, 158
person code 33
physical presence 13, 88, 94, 95, 97
Piattoeva, N. 40
Plano Clark, V. L. 20, 34
policy actors 4, 58, 77, 102, 103, 139, 160; diverse group of 7; in EU, responsibilities of **60**; in Finland, responsibilities of **60–61**; involvement in EU policymaking. 56, 76; knowledge governance engages 104; policy networks and 84
policy advisory systems scholarship 115
policy broker 103
policymaking: knowledge and epistemic content in 9–10; in networks 7–9; role of networks in 7–9
policy networks 83–84
political decision-making bodies 87
political discourse analysis (PDA) 142–143

political situation 21
politics and knowledge, relationship between 48
POLNET project 121
poststructuralism 9, 40
power: Heiskala's theories of 10; Lukes three faces of 10
power asymmetries 28
power in ideas 137–138, 141, **142**, 149–152, 153
power over ideas 137–138, 141, **142**, 146–149
power through ideas 137–138, 141, **142**, 144–148
Prime Minister's Office (MPMO) 59, **60**, 62, 106, 108
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) 65, 140

QR codes 42
qualitative analysis 23, 32, 107
qualitative content analysis 41–42
qualitative data analysis 32, 161
qualitative research methodology 38
quality assurance 4, 150
quantitative network analysis 30
quantitative network data 13, 107–108
question codes 32

reflexivity 45, 48, 49, 53, 123, 160
Regional State Administrative Agency of Ahvenanmaa (AHAVI) 106
relational and normative power 10–11
relationships of organisations 107–112, *109*, *110*
reliability of sources 133, 134
research: nuances and insecurities of 45; preconception, change in 48
Research Council of Finland 108
research design 41–42
researcher bias 39
research funding 75
research literacy, organisations' capacity for 112
research paradigm 40
research process, improvisation and intuition in 51
Rhodes, R. A. W. 84
Rinne, A. 59
Rommetvedt, H. 143
Rose, H. 9
Ryan, K. 137

Saarinen, T. 42
Salokangas, M. 42
sampling 27
Schmidt, V. A. 137–138, 141, 153
Schonhardt-Bailey, C. 143
Segerholm, C. 103
self-organising 83
self-steering 83
Siefken, S. T. 143
Silvén, P. 41
social constructionism 47
social network analysis (SNA) 21–23, 85, 161; actor relations to 23
social relations and interactions 23
socio-materiality approaches 47
stakeholder networks 93
statistical data 3
Strassheim, H. 8
structural codes 32; question codes 32; technical codes 32
sub-committee actor's work 112–114
surface discourse 162–163
Sustainable Development Goals, the METRO project 120
systematic biases 2
systematic networking 92

team ethnography 30
technical codes 32
test coding 87–88
thematic interviews 20
Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) 106
trade unions 25, 63, 74–75, 89, 111; in higher education decision making 83
transferability 38, 39
transnational governance: structure, formation, and characteristics of networks in 83–85
transparency 50
Trondal, J. 2
trust 91, 93, 94, 129
trustworthiness 133; establishing 43; knowledge 94; perceptions of 44–49; reflexively for 40–41; research's 38, 41

UCINET 23, 107
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 69, 72
United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals 57
Universities Finland (UNIFI) 6, 106

Veiga, A. 64
von der Leyen's first Commission (2019–2024) 59
VoteWatch Europe database 64
Vukasović, M. 64, 72
Walters, W. 57
Weiss, C. 105
Wenger, E. 103
Whitaker, R. 139
Williams, C. 43
Working Party on Research 152