Chapter 3
Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture in the Light of Its Working Groups

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Abstract The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) has traditionally been considered as the most central actor and the powerhouse in the education policy field in Finland. While the position of the MEC in the Finnish education policy system seems stable, there have been several organisational changes within the MEC over the past three decades. One of these is the disintegration of the committee system and its replacement by the working groups system, a trend that is part of a more general change from governing to governance since the 1990s. In this chapter we analyse data containing the MEC's working groups and their members with social network analysis in order to understand the ways in which the working group system affects the MEC and its operation. Our analysis suggests that the MEC is organised rather strongly by departments: early childhood and general education, vocational education and training, higher education and research, culture and arts, and youth and sports. Analysing the network through the individual working group members we observed that, in addition to public officials, individuals representing interest organisations such as labour and trade unions were important links between the working groups.

The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC)[1] has been seen as a central, if not the most important powerhouse in the education policy field in Finland. It has had an independent and strong position in this field and, aiding this, the field itself has not experienced major party-based political struggles in recent decades. In other words, around and after what Janne Varjo calls the "policy turn in education"[2] of

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the 1990s, the MEC has been viewed as an independent actor consisting of public servants and professional bureaucrats, instead of a mere instrument for implementing government policies. For example, Osmo Kivinen and colleagues[3] go as far as to say that the prominent figures responsible for the long-term higher education policies in Finland are public servants working in the MEC. Similarly, Osmo Lampinen[4] argues that schooling policies are led more by public servants than by elected politicians, and that the ideological politics in education have been in decline. Consensus is also emphasised by Liekki Lehtisalo and Reijo Raivola[5] who claim that since the mid-1970s no profound differences of opinion have surfaced in the Finnish parliament or government regarding the main pathways of education policy development. Nevertheless, despite its independence and power, it is important to recall that the MEC and its policies are still subordinate to the general politics of the government, as noted by Lehtisalo and Raivola, and later also by others. For example, government programmes had a strong impact on the development plans for education and research over 1987–2016.[6] Similarly, the MEC's press releases about PISA results are influenced more by government programmes than by the PISA test results themselves.[7] Moreover, the importance of the government programme has recently increased, after the government discontinued development plans as a steering instrument in 2015.[8]

Given the importance of the MEC in the education policy field in Finland it is surprising how little its structure and internal functioning has been studied. It also seems that previous research might not have fully recognised the conditions under which policies are being formed inside the MEC, which in turn risks a glossy image of what is taking place in everyday policymaking. The most comprehensive analysis has been made in the MEC's own history series, the last part of which was published before the turn of the millennium.[9] It can be assumed that the MEC's operating methods have changed amidst international trends. Political steering has changed globally and especially in Europe since the 1980s. The first wave of reforms were described as New Public Management[10] and since then changes have been sought to be understood using concepts such as the Neo-Weberian state or networked governance or meta-governance.[11] Similar trends have influenced the field of education policy in various countries.[12] On a European scale, differences in the degree of change have ranged from a radical dismantling of the system in England[13] to more moderate reforms in Norway, Finland and Iceland, where the unifying factor has been decentralisation.[14] Nevertheless, research-based understanding of whether these international trends have had any impact on the MEC has been very limited.

The strong role of the MEC in the education policy field in Finland is related to the state-centric tradition, supported by the idea of a Nordic universalist welfare state. Simply put, the great change in the education policy field in Finland in the nineteenth century was secularisation away from church-led education, whereas in the twentieth century the roles of the state and local municipalities increased.[15] After the 1950s, the MEC has grown from a "post office-sized" office[16] to an organisation that employed 255 staff by 2019 and has annual staff costs of around €40 million.[17] Public sector growth became politicised and its contraction was brought up for debate in the 1980s, and reforms in the 1990s changed the mindset from centralised control to strategic and service-based management.[18] The idea of a New Public Management had an impact on the sector of the MEC, but there has been little indication that the power of the MEC would have substantially decreased.

To summarise, few accounts of education policy research in Finland can ignore the MEC as an actor or as a subject, but until now the focus has not been in the MEC itself. Since the mid-1970s, the work of the MEC has been organised more and more through working groups, and the preceding committee-type organisation has been run down.[19] The committees were researched in the past, but since their dissolution research focusing on political preparation and planning has diminished.[20] Anne Maria Holli notes that the current common usage of rapporteurs can be seen as a way to outsource political preparation in accordance with the New Public Management, and problems might occur when political preparation and preparation by public servants are separated.[21] These ideas are probably to some extent generalisable to the MEC's working groups. Overall, there is both a need to research the working groups, but also a need to perceive the working groups as an established part of MEC's operating structure, rather than a completely new phenomenon.

In this chapter we seek to understand the MEC and its operation through social network analysis of the MEC's working groups and their members.[22] We aim to understand the ways in which the working group system affects the MEC and its operation. We began by briefly reviewing the activities and the role of the MEC in the education policy field in Finland, and in the next section we describe the MEC as an organisation. We then move on to present our results, and in the concluding section we offer potential interpretations for our results.

The Ministry of Education and Culture as an Organisation

The Ministry of Education and Culture operates as a part of the government, at the highest level of the three-tier administration in Finland. The responsibilities of the top administration include the enactment and implementation of laws, and general policy planning. Of these, the ministry's work includes the preparation and implementation of laws and general plans. The middle tier is administered by six Regional State Administrative Agencies and the Åland Government Agency, whose tasks include, for example, supervision of basic services, guidance of private providers of early childhood education services and various licensing and legal supervision tasks. Local government in Finland consists of around 300 municipalities (311 in 2019), which are responsible for organising basic education and early childhood education. In 2019, the MEC received 11.6 per cent of public expenditure, making the MEC the third largest user of public expenditure after the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Finance.[23]

The administrative branch of the MEC covers all sectors of education and training, from early childhood education and care to non-formal adult education. The rules of procedure of the MEC[24] define the departmental organisation of the ministry and the subject matters belonging to them. The departments are (1) the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care, Basic Education and Non-Formal Education,

(2) the Department of Vocational Education, (3) the Department of Higher Education and Science Policy and Upper Secondary Education, (4) the Department of Culture and Arts Policy, and (5) the Department of Sports and Youth Policy. Departments' subject matters are specific responsibilities within the remit of each department, such as "university education" or "archives administration", both of which belong to the Department of Higher Education and Science Policy and Upper Secondary Education.[25]

The options for the MEC to steer education vary by the type of education and by the means of steering available. Financial and performance-based management are MEC's key tools in steering higher education institutions, even though universities have constitutional autonomy and polytechnics are independent legal entities.[26] In secondary education the MEC uses its financial power by providing unit price funding to education providers.[27] MEC's toolkit in secondary education also includes steering of the content of the qualifications both by controlling the distribution of classroom hours of the upper secondary curriculum, and steering the content and scope of vocational qualifications. In early childhood education and care, the MEC takes care of general planning and steering. The Finnish National Agency for Education under the MEC uses significant power in coordinating and setting frameworks for the curricula for early childhood education and care, primary education, and secondary education.

The relationship between the political steering and the public servant-led steering of and within the MEC is part of a more general change of administration. The idea of New Public Management[28] is that in public administration the top management focuses on strategic decision-making. Following this, the national political steering of the ministries has been geared towards strategic political leadership. Minna Tiili[29] has studied the early days of this development in Finland. During Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's two governments (1995–2003), in addition to the government programme that was considered too superficial, a government strategy document was compiled to enforce the 'implementation' of key government policies.[30] Strategic thinking and framework budgeting were riddled with ministry-specific sectoral interests, which complicated the implementation of a wholesale programme.[31] Tiili assessed that Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's government (2003–2007) had the same problems in strategic steering.[32] Of the later governments, the clearest strategic emphasis was sought by Juha Sipilä's government (2015–2019), whose programme was subtitled "strategic government programme".[33] Conflicts in strategic steering are caused by the limiting effect of the framework budgeting and the rigidity of the government programme.[34] In the field of education policy, the changes in policymaking and administration have led to increasingly complex networks covering different groups of actors, and in some cases in Finland we can also talk about networked governance. The New Public Management differs from networked governance in that the latter's operating principle relies on complex community governance.[35] Networks are self-organising, although at times they need an external stimulus.[36] There has been little research on network-based governance in the education policy field in Finland. Pirre Seppänen[37] concluded that the national network working within Finnish university policy is dense and intensively interactive but not very concentrated, although the

MEC, the Minister of Education and the Chief of Staff of the MEC stand out as the most important actors.

Seppo Tiihonen[38] describes how the internal organisation of ministries has changed. Since the late 1980s, the New Public Management-related performance-based practices and changes in human resources management have affected ministries. The abandonment of the classical bureaucratic approach has materialised in the abolition of central agencies and committee structures, which has led to diminished professional resources for the ministries. Tiihonen believes that this has increased the problems related to the management of ministries by adding technocratic demands to the already existing political pressures. One of the reforms to support the political leadership of the ministries was the creation of the offices of political secretaries of state in 2005. In the field of education, education committees have had an important role in responding to the needs of different eras, and they played a key role especially in resolving the problems arising from educating the baby-boomer generation.[39] In the peak years of the mid-1970s, the number of reports of education committees accounted for 22% of all committee reports, but by the late 1980s reports of education committees fell to only 5% as a result of cuts to committee structures. Meanwhile preparation in working groups gained more ground[40] and the trend of increased use of rapporteurs and working groups in education policymaking has continued.[41] Observing the work of government in the UK, R.A.W. Rhodes[42] has noted that several historical administrative layers exist after administrative reforms, meaning that past practices remained active within the organisation for some groups or for certain issues. This kind of research is not available in Finland, but it can be hypothesised that the change in administration is similarly layered within the MEC.

The Social Organisation of the MEC as a Network of Working Groups

Our data is based on a publicly available government project register (*Hankerekisteri*) supplemented with desk research,[43] and it consists of information about 643 working groups (including their members) that were active under the MEC between January 2010 and November 2018 (see Table 3.1). We used social network analysis[44] to study the ways in which the working group system affects the MEC and its operation. In this chapter, we focus on a two-mode network that affiliates individual working-group members with different working groups and treats, in turn, both the individuals and the working groups as actors in the network. We analysed the data using UCINET and visualised the networks using NetDraw.[45]

Around one-third (35.6%) of the working groups belong in the general or inter-departmental category. Next largest categories, roughly of equal size, are culture and arts policy (22.1%), and higher education and science policy and upper secondary education (19.8%). Other department categories have significantly fewer working groups in this data. The size of the working group varies across departments, but the

Table 3.1 Working group data categorised according to the MEC's departments: the number of working groups and information about the members (2010–2018)

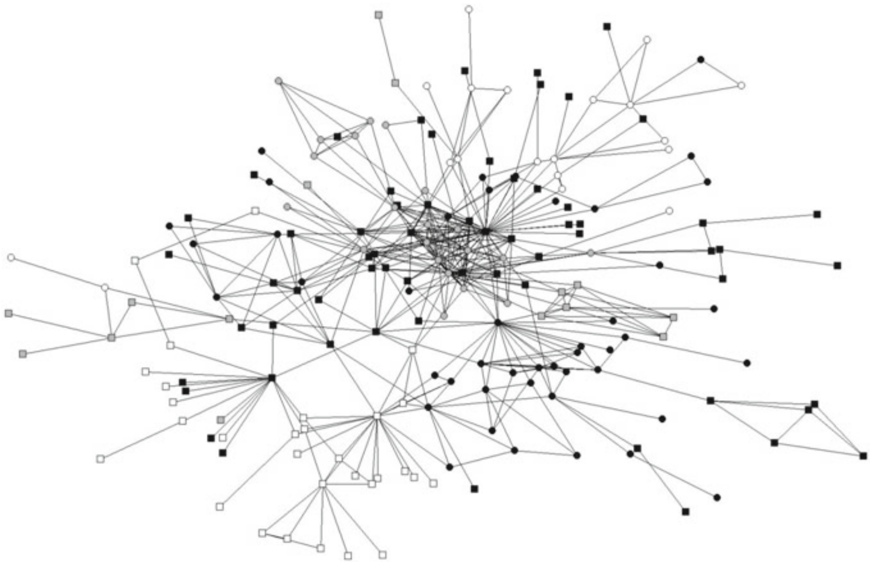
Name of the department	Number of working groups N (% of total)	Average number of members in a working group	Number of working groups with less than three members
Early childhood education and care, basic education and non-formal adult education	50 (7.8%)	10.0	19
Vocational education	36 (5.6%)	13.5	12
Higher education and science policy, and upper secondary education	127 (19.8%)	10.2	47
Culture and arts policy	142 (22.1%)	8.7	62
Sports and youth policy	59 (9.2%)	9.4	29
General or interdepartmental	229 (35.6%)	11.1	72
Total	643 (100.0%)	10.3	241

The differences in the means are not significantly significant, $F\ (5, 637) = 1.23$, $p = 0.29$

pattern is not statistically significant. The vocational education department has, on average, larger groups: there are fewer groups of less than three people (12 or 33.3%) and the average group size is larger (13.5). About one-fifth (20.2%) of the working groups includes no members. A similar share of the working groups (17.3%) includes one or two members. These groups are more likely to be isolated from other groups.

First, we analysed the network of MEC working groups. Two groups are linked if they share members. The resulting network is very extensive. A vast majority of the working groups in the data are part to the main component (496 out of 643 [total number] = 77.1% or 496 out of 513 [with at least one member] = 96.7%). For a deeper analysis we set the threshold for connection between working groups to four, meaning that two working groups are connected if they share at least four members. Figure 3.1 shows the result, but only focussing on the main component, leaving out other, smaller, and disconnected elements (e.g., dyads, triads, etc.).

The working-group network organises mostly according to the MEC's departments, as illustrated in Fig. 3.1. At the centre of the network, we find working groups in the category "General or Interdepartmental" (black square) and Vocational Educational and Training (grey circle). These groups are located in the centre because they have connections to many other groups. Particularly clear is the separation of the departments not linked to education: Culture and Art (white square), and Sport and Youth (grey square). Two other departments can be clearly distinguished from the

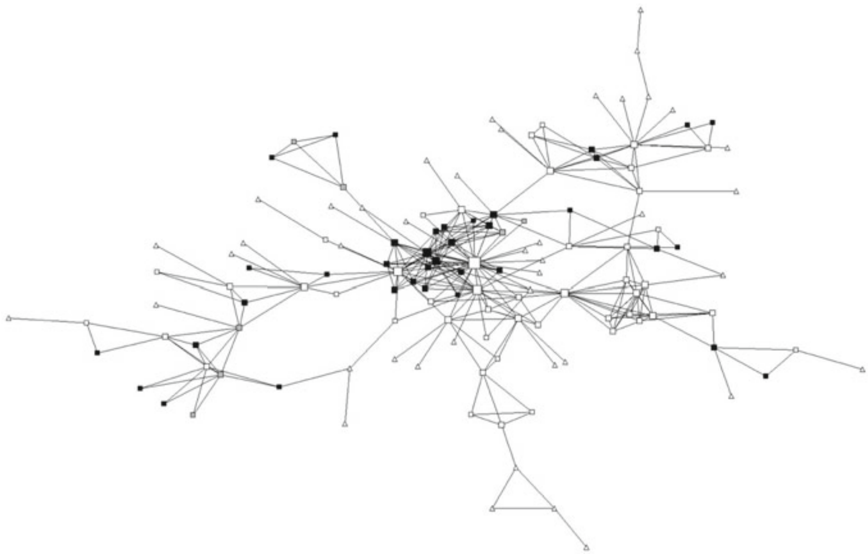


○ Early childhood education and care, basic education and non-formal adult education
● Vocational education
● Higher education and science policy, and upper secondary education
□ Culture and arts policy
■ Sports and youth policy
■ General or interdepartmental

Fig. 3.1 Network of working groups within the MEC (main component, link threshold: four shared members)

network as well. These are the Department for Early Childhood Education, Comprehensive School Education and Adult Education (white circle) and the Department for General Upper Secondary Education and Higher Education and Science Policy (black circle).

The second part of our analysis addresses the network of individual members in the working groups. The strength of the relationship between two individual members reflects the number of times they serve together in a same working group. We assume that when two individuals serve together on multiple working groups, the likelihood of exposure to same types of knowledge, experience, and agenda increases.[46] Our data includes 3,483 individual members. Slightly more than two-thirds (68.1%) of them serve on one working group, and additional 16.1% serve on two working groups. A small minority, 57 individuals (1.6%), serve on 10 or more working groups. Here we focus on the strong relationships, meaning that we study individuals who are connected by at least five working groups and the network that emerges among them. Moreover, we take a closer look at the most connected individuals in the network; to this end, we identified the 99 most connected individuals and coded them according to their background organisation (either the MEC, National Agency for Education,



□ MEC ■ National Agency for Education ■ External △ Not coded

Fig. 3.2 Network of the individual working group members within the MEC (main component, link threshold: five shared memberships), background organisation highlighted

or external organisation). Figure 3.2 presents the network, with the size of the nodes representing their overall connectedness (degree centrality).

We find that central members come from the MEC and the National Agency for Education, but also from the external organisations. The core of the network includes a concentration of actors from external organisations such as the Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training AMKE and the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences. When we compared the backgrounds of the individuals to the departments in which the working groups they served in belonged to, we found that individuals who served in working groups from different departments are affiliated with external organisations. This suggests that the MEC officials are limited in the tasks of the ministry protocol for different departments and members that are external to the ministry are the links between these departments.

We conducted yet another analysis on the background organisations of the 99 key individuals who had most connections in the network. The background organisations are listed in Table 3.2. It illustrates the centrality of organisational backgrounds outside from the MEC. Most working group memberships from individuals in this outsider group are from the Ministry of Finance (44), National Agency for Education (43), Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (33), Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (30), Confederation of Finnish Industries (21), Trade Union of Education (19) and IT Centre for Science (19). In addition, the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences

(Arene) seems like a powerful organisation given its number of connections (17), albeit it has fewer memberships (14) than the other organisations listed here. The reason for this might be that there is only one person representing Arene in all of these groups.

These 99 central individuals in Table 3.2, who are central nodes in the network represent mostly public governance (ministries, government agencies), labour markets, universities and other educational institutions and their interest organisations, and cultural organisations. In addition, there is one representative from the Association of Finnish Municipalities and two Members of Parliament. External representation outside MEC is thus formed mostly by public sector, labour market and education providers' organisations and interest organisations.

Drawing on the MEC working group analysis with the help of networks we conclude that the MEC is relatively strongly organised in departmental sectors. The exceptions to this rule are the general and interdepartmental working groups and the Department for Vocational Education and Training. Particularly strong sectors operating on their own are the Department for Art and Cultural Policy and the Department for Youth and Sport policy. Analysis of networks of individuals showed that the links between the different departments are MEC officials only in part. External members from public sector, labour market and education providers are in a more prominent role here.

Conclusion: The Myth of the Traditional Monolithic MEC?

Our analysis reveals that the structure of the network of the MEC's working groups conforms to the MEC's departmental division prescribed in the MEC's Rules of Procedure. Additionally, the network formed on the basis of individual members of the working groups showed that the external members have an important role in the social organisation of the MEC network. We conclude that the social organisation of the MEC is multi-layered,[47] having at least two layers: on one hand, the working group-based analysis shows that MEC has a traditional Weberian bureaucratic and sectoral organisation within it, but on the other hand the individual-based analysis shows that MEC also has a cross-departmental networked form of organisation that includes a host of external stakeholders in it. Lacking temporal dimension in our analysis, we cannot assert that this is a change to some previous mode of MEC's organisation, but we can state that both of these layers were present in our data. Thus, our analysis of the MEC's working groups offers a rather traditional picture of the MEC's operation on one hand, but on the other hand the strong role of the external working group members especially as interdepartmental links invites new questions about the application of networked governance and New Public Management in Finnish education policymaking.

The traditional Weberian picture of the sectoral MEC includes the idea that the MEC is organised rather strongly according to its five departments that are focused on their subject areas of work: (1) the Department of Early Childhood Education and

Table 3.2 Most connected working group members per organisation: number of individuals (N), sum of working group memberships (SM), and sum of connections (SC)

Organisation	N	SM	SC
Ministry of education and culture	49	573	307
Finnish national agency for education	7	43	34
Finnish association for the development of vocational education and training AMKE	3	33	34
Rectors' conference of finnish universities of applied sciences Arene	1	14	17
Central organisation of finnish trade unions SAK	3	30	16
CSC—IT center for science	4	19	16
Ministry of finance	2	44	14
Confederation of finnish industries EK	2	21	13
Parliament of Finland	2	8	13
Ministry of economic affairs and employment	2	13	11
Trade union of education OAJ	2	19	8
National union of vocational students in Finland SAKKI	2	15	8
University of applied sciences students in Finland SAMOK	2	15	6
Finnish providers of apprenticeship training	1	6	6
National library	1	5	6
Academy of Finland	1	12	4
Association of Finnish municipalities	1	6	4
The central union of agricultural producers and forest owners MTK	1	6	4
Finnish literary copyright society Sanasto	1	6	4
University of Tampere	1	4	4
Confederation of unions for professional and managerial staff in Finland Akava	1	8	3
Helsinki culinary school Perho	1	6	3
Haaga-Helia university of applied sciences	1	5	3
Finnish heritage agency	1	10	2
Finnish folk high school association	1	7	2
Finnish national gallery	1	6	2
Finnish musicians' union	1	6	2
Social insurance institution KELA	1	4	2
Research and innovation council	1	3	2
City of Helsinki	1	2	2
National audit office of Finland	1	2	2
Sum	**99**	**951**	**554**

Care, Basic Education and Non-Formal Education, (2) the Department of Vocational Education, (3) the Department of Higher Education and Science Policy and Upper Secondary Education, (4) the Department of Culture and Arts Policy, and (5) the Department of Sports and Youth Policy. The main sectoral division was the extent of separation of the Department of Culture and Arts Policy and the Department of Sports and Youth Policy from other departments' activities. The other three departments were clearly more connected through the networks of both working groups and individuals. This traditional picture is easily fitted to the continuum of the research literature reviewed at the beginning of this chapter that views Finnish education policy as being public servant-led and state-centred. We should note, though, that our focus was on the strong links—four or five connections—which may lead us to overestimate the importance of the public servants: public servants often serve in pairs or triplets simultaneously in several working groups as chairs, secretaries or rapporteurs, and in our analysis they are therefore easily interpreted as central nodes or strong links. This overestimation in turn could lead us to over-emphasise the importance of public servant-led policy formulation.

The traditional picture was challenged by the strong NGO and interest group representation in the working groups. The interpretation of the function and meaning of this representation remains partly open and a subject for further research. For example, one interpretation of the role of the NGOs and interest groups might follow the lines put forward by Seppo Tiihonen,[48] who argued that the abolition of a system based on central agencies for governing and committees for preparing legislation necessitated a technocratic mode of governance, which presumably requires broad range of stakeholders to be involved in policymaking. It is also conceivable that individuals and interest groups external to the MEC can bring their own ideas to the MEC's processes, which is strengthened when these individuals act as links between different departments. Yet another possible interpretation is that our results point to a shift from traditional form of government to a networked governance model, where stakeholders are involved in policy formulation and decision-making from start to finish. In this case, working groups could be an important tool for the MEC to commit external stakeholders to policymaking in such a way that it is easier for MEC to push reforms and harder for the stakeholders to oppose the reforms since they have been part of the preparation process from the start.

Another option is to consider the strong position of the external stakeholders along the lines presented by Anne Maria Holli[49] when she studied the usage of rapporteurs: analogically to Holli, we may ask whether the working groups represent a tacit shift to (at least partial) outsourced policy planning and preparation, and if so, has it strengthened the link between policy preparation and political-electoral cycle. For further research it is noteworthy that our requirement for strong links focuses our analysis into individuals who are key representatives of their organisations and leads to omission of those individuals and organisations that are less prominently represented in working groups. We may underestimate especially organisations that have a broad representation that is delegated to a relatively large number of individuals. These less or dispersedly represented individuals and organisations, or "weak ties",[50] can still be significant, but our exploratory analysis here cannot reveal this.

This means, in effect, that our results may under-estimate the overall role and impact of external organisations.

In the social organisation of working groups, a core group of individuals participating in working groups—'professional working-groupers'—can be identified, some from within the MEC and some external to it (see Table 3.2). These people have strong formal one-to-one ties to one another, as they have to share four or five working group memberships. Thus, while even strong formal ties do not guarantee personal ties, we can be fairly sure that these professional working-groupers know one another by name or by reputation, which is likely to facilitate communication and knowledge transfer between both the individuals and working groups. This indeed can steer the actors towards joint understanding of and consensus about 'real problems' and 'appropriate solutions'.

Another aspect of professional working-groupers is that over the eight years that our data covers, the MEC's two to three hundred employees have had 643 working groups to take part in and to run. The MEC's officials form a central subgroup of people in the network of these working groups (Table 3.2). Thus, it can be argued that participating in working groups is an important aspect of work for the MEC officials, especially those of the subgroup, and thus working groups are a significant form of operation of the MEC. Considering that, as part of the government, the MEC's main task is to implement the government programme, is the extensive allocation of human resources to working group work one way to engage and commit external actors into the programme's implementation? This observation is supported by the fact that steering by information is also an important tool for the MEC in those areas over which it has no direct influence.

Finally, it is worth considering the constellation produced when we put together the emphasis on the leadership of public servants, the lack of party politics in education policy observed in previous research, and the centrality of external actors in the network observed in this chapter. It might be argued that the long-term leadership by public servants in the education policy field in Finland has resulted in limited initiative from the party-political side, and for their part the public servants of the MEC focus on their respective policy area in one sector within their departments. If the policymakers stay without grand initiatives and the public servants are divided by sectors, the fact that external actors are key links in the network might mean that external stakeholders wield significant power over the broader perspective and coordination of the education policy field in Finland. As a result, external actors could be important systemic visionaries of Finnish education policy. All in all, our results seem to suggest that the MEC and its operations are not as traditional and monolithic as it has usually been conceived in the past.

Notes

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23. The appropriations of the Ministry of Finance include the state contributions of the municipalities, which are also used to finance the education organised by the municipalities. In 2019, this amount was approximately €8.5 billion. See *Finland state budget.* Available at: http://budjetti.vm.fi. Accessed 19 Nov 2019.
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25. The Ministry of Education and Culture has several agencies and two limited companies under its jurisdiction. In the field of education and science policy, these include the National Archives of Finland, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, the Institute for the Languages of Finland, the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Student Financial Aid Appeal Board, the Academy of Finland, the Matriculation Examination Board, and the National Repository Library. In the field of cultural policy, these organizations under the MOE are the National Audiovisual Institute, the Finnish Heritage Agency, Celia (the library for the visually impaired), the Governing Body of Suomenlinna (a maritime fortress and a Unesco heritage site), and the Arts Promotion Centre Finland. The MEC also governs CSC – IT Center for Science Ltd. and Ypäjä Equine College Ltd. (For further details, see Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön hallinnonala (https://minedu.fi/hallinnonala. Accessed 10 Oct 2019) and government decree A 310/2010 Valtioneuvoston asetus opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriöstä.) These organisations are not covered by our analysis.
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