

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

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

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Relation to knowledge networks</i>	<i>Methods</i>
(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 searches,” 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

<i>Database description</i>	<i>Data origin</i>	<i>Database size</i>	<i>Data items</i>	<i>Analysis in this book</i>
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 Zoom⁴ 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

<i>Category</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Stationed in</i>		<i>Sum</i>
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>EU</i>	
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

<i>Target of observation</i>	<i>Time period</i>	<i>Observed meetings (days)</i>	<i>Hours of observation</i>	<i>Fieldnotes^c (number of pages)</i>
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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