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Challenges of collaborative governance in lifelong guidance in Finland

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper was to analyse the ways in which collaborative governance appears in the context of lifelong guidance in Finland. The research question was ‘What are (in terms of problem-solving, collaborative process and multi-relational accountability) the challenges for collaborative governance of lifelong guidance in Finland?’ The analysis drew from ten in-depth thematic interviews with experts working on issues related to the governance of lifelong guidance at the central government of Finland and related interest groups. Our analysis showed that, despite the progress made, institutional structures, practices and perceptions challenge the implementation of collaborative governance. The results point out three key challenges: The first generally relates to the aim of increasing collaborative governance, the second to the creation of a collaborative network and the formation of shared objectives in lifelong guidance and the third to the concept of multi-relational accountability. A key question in addressing these challenges is how to evaluate and verify the benefits of collaborative governance.

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Introduction

Lifelong guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information giving, counselling, competence assessment, support and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills. Lifelong guidance has been defined by the European Council (2008) as a continuous process that enables citizens of any age and at any point in life to identify their capacities, competences and interests; to make educational, training and occupational decisions; and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings. According to the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2015), the provision of lifelong guidance is a genuine public interest that penetrates policies of education, training, employment and social inclusion. Commonly, lifelong guidance is a shared policy and the administrative responsibility of several ministries or departments at the national level, typically involving general education, higher education, vocational education and training, employment, youth and social affairs. According to the ELGPN (2015), many EU member states have established national forums for lifelong guidance to ensure cooperation on and the coordination of it from both policy and administrative perspectives.

The implementation of these policies requires a novel approach and a mode of working on the governance of lifelong guidance. *Collaborative governance* can be seen as an attempt to rearrange the processes and

structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies; levels of government; and/or public, private and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 2).

The aim of this paper is to comprehend lifelong guidance as genuinely collaborative endeavour, and to analyse the ways in which collaborative governance appears in the context of lifelong guidance in Finland. The analysis draws from ten in-depth thematic interviews with experts working on issues related to the governance of lifelong guidance in the central government of Finland and in related interest groups. The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce our context, which is the governance of lifelong guidance in Finland. Second, we present the theoretical premise of our paper – namely, collaborative governance in public policies and services. After the methodological section, we report our findings in three empirical chapters drawn from the theoretical background. Finally, some concluding remarks are elaborated.

The governance of lifelong guidance in Finland

In Finland, the legislation on lifelong guidance services is prepared by the administrative branches of

the Ministries of Education and Culture, Economic Affairs and Employment, and Social Affairs and Health. Each ministry has its own core duties, responsibilities and obligations. The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for the organization and funding of guidance and counselling services in comprehensive and upper secondary schools and in higher education. In comprehensive and upper secondary schools, career guidance is a compulsory subject in the curriculum. In general, the aim of guidance and counselling offered within the formal education system is to help students identify their own tendencies and competencies and to make informed choices during transitional stages to further studies (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020).

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for establishing political guidelines and strategic goals for the national labour market policy. The guidance and counselling services provided by the Employment and Economic Development Offices (TE Offices) complement school-based services, since these mainly target clients outside education and training institutions (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020). The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is responsible for preventive youth work, and its objective is to provide specialized information, guidance and counselling concerning different issues and situations in young people's lives. The Youth Act (L 1285/2016) defines the overall planning and development of multidisciplinary cooperation between local authorities. Each municipality should have a steering and service network or other similar cooperation group targeting all young people (aged under 29 years) living in it. The network is responsible for promoting the coordination of services for young people, common procedures for directing young people to services and the smooth exchange of information, among other things.

Since the early 2000s, a trend has emerged towards cross-sectoral networks in guidance services and the flexible development of the totality of guidance services (e.g. Nykänen et al., 2012). Following policy strategies formulated at the European Union level on lifelong guidance and networked cooperation (see Noworol, 2011), a national lifelong guidance working group was established in 2010 by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education and Culture. Co-chaired by both ministries, the goal of the working group is 'to enhance national, regional and local information, advice and guidance services with a lifelong approach, support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Initiative and strengthen multi-administrative and multi-professional cooperation among the service providers and policymakers' (Toni & Vuorinen, 2020, p. 131). Since 2020, the working group has been known as the National

Lifelong Guidance Forum [in Finnish, *ELO-foorumi*], and its work is guided by the Government's Lifelong Guidance Strategy (Finnish Government, 2020).

The diversity of guidance services has proved necessary. However, an audit by the National Audit Office (NAOF, 2015) on lifelong guidance found that development projects and funding are not coordinated in a comprehensive, systematic and evidence-based manner. Guidance, its management and development are still dispersed among different sectors and ministries. This fragmented structure slows down and even hinders the systematic development of governance and the monitoring of its effectiveness (Finnish Government, 2020). Similar fragmented administrative structures related to governance of lifelong guidance – and, presumably, equivalent coordinative problems – can be found also from other Nordic countries.

Towards collaborative governance in public policies and services

According to B. Guy Peters (1998),

From the time at which governing structures began to be differentiated into departments and ministries there have been complaints that one organisation does not know what another is doing, and that their programmes were contradictory, redundant, or both. (p. 295)

Thus, the need for collaboration in public sector governance for dismantling administrative silos is not new, but as an administrative ideology, it has only started to strengthen in recent decades.

In recent studies, several scholars have described the development of public sector governance in Western democracies as a 'paradigmatic shift' (see Kuhn, 1962) between the following three ideologies in governance: *traditional Weberian bureaucracy*, *new public management* and *new public governance* (Bryson et al., 2014; Hakari, 2013; Osborne, 2010). Each ideology can be defined by its own characteristics. Since the late 1800s, Weberian bureaucracy has been known for explicitly defined administrative tasks and duties, which are carried out in a hierarchical and legal bureaucratic administration. Typical for new public management, which originated in the 1980s, is the introduction of managerialist strategies, decentralization, strengthened private sector agency and performance management through evaluation. Finally, since the 2000s, new public governance has emphasized horizontal collaboration between traditional administrative branches, networked agency and the joint coordination of aims and their follow-up.

New public governance is built on top of the layers of previous paradigms in governance and the rationalities

Table 1. Overview of collaborative governance challenges.

Category	Challenges
Substantive problem-solving	<i>Identifying, diagnosing and defining the problem</i> <i>Developing a sound theory of change</i> <i>Measuring performance against the theory of change</i>
Collaborative process	<i>Reaching a shared understanding on the goals and approach</i> <i>Building trust among collaborators</i> <i>Generating commitment to the process</i>
Multi-relational accountability	<i>Managing tension with parent organisation accountability</i> <i>Accounting to collaboration partners</i> <i>Accounting to (new) external channels of accountability</i>

(Waardenburg et al., 2020).

they embody. However, the practical implementation of this theoretical model is often accompanied by various challenges and issues. Evidently, implementing new strategies of policy-making is difficult, above all when these conflict with the rules and beliefs of existing institutions (Termeer, 2009).

Challenges of collaborative governance

To scrutinize the recent developments in the governance of lifelong guidance in Finland, we apply the theoretical framework presented by Waardenburg et al. (2020) as a starting point for our analysis. Based on the existing literature on collaborative governance, the authors argued that collaborative governance efforts typically face the following three types of challenges: *substantive problem-solving challenges*, *collaborative process challenges* and *multi-relational accountability challenges* (Table 1).

Substantive problem-solving challenges

Collaborative governance in problem-oriented efforts begins with identifying and defining a specific undesirable situation and its root causes (Waardenburg et al., 2020). At this early stage, actors face several challenges. Collaborative governance typically addresses complex or ‘wicked’ societal problems (Conklin, 2005; Head, 2008; Rittel & Webber, 1973), making it difficult to reach a consensus on the problem’s definition and causes, often leading to bargaining between different actors and interests. Phillips (2004) emphasizes that collaboration hinges on jointly framing the problem or at least agreeing on its nature. The political aspect of this initial stage is significant. Often, the way the problem is framed and represented is more intriguing than the political decision (Bacchi, 2009).

Once the problem is defined, actors must develop a sound theory of change (Waardenburg et al., 2020), outlining how ideological aims will be implemented in practice. Existing institutional structures, established practices, and embedded rationalities often challenge this phase, potentially leading to inaction. Torfing (2012) notes that governance networks form when social and political actors recognize their

mutual dependence and the need to pool resources to govern. Organizations must adapt to changes in their institutional environment to maintain legitimacy, including normative, legal, and regulatory elements (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). From an economic perspective, collaboration involves calculative thinking about the benefits and disadvantages for each collaborator (Shepsle, 2005).

Collaborators must also determine how to measure performance against the theory of change (Waardenburg et al., 2020). Horizontal and collaborative governance is touted to enhance public sector efficiency and democratic decision-making through networked and deliberative processes (Bryson et al., 2014). Evaluating whether resources are being effectively combined to achieve desired interventions and outputs, and whether these outputs meet the envisioned societal aims, requires a suitable framework for evaluation and performance measures in the collaborative environment (Moynihan et al., 2011; Waardenburg et al., 2020).

Collaborative process

While the first category of challenges focuses on defining the problem (what), the second category focuses on implementing collaborative governance (how). A key step is achieving a shared understanding of goals and approaches (Waardenburg et al., 2020; see also Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Diverse goals can affect collaboration negatively, but these differences should be seen as opportunities for synergy. The main challenge is for participants to find common ground and leverage the benefits of collaboration.

Building trust among collaborators is crucial (Waardenburg et al., 2020). Trust, whether a prerequisite for or a result of collaboration, is essential and typically grows from experiences of equal treatment, reciprocity, open dialogue, and shared information (Cook et al., 2009). However, trust is fragile – hard to build but easy to lose.

Generating commitment to the collaborative process is closely linked to trust (Waardenburg et al., 2020). Achieving shared intermediate targets builds trust (Emerson et al., 2012). To reduce friction from

overlapping commitments, actors need to foster an environment focused on mutual professional and personal gain (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Multi-relational accountability

The third category of challenges involves the accountability relationships among collaborative actors. Collaboration creates new channels of accountability, often causing tension with existing ones (Waardenburg et al., 2020). A fundamental question in collaborative settings is: to whom is the collaboration accountable, and for what? (Bryson et al., 2014).

Every actor in a collaborative structure is already bound by their existing accountability systems, such as internal and external evaluations. These systems may not recognize or may even discourage contributions within the new collaborative context. Being held accountable to new partners or unfamiliar standards may cause reluctance to commit to the collaboration. From a societal perspective, collaborations must also defend and articulate their actions and outcomes to a wider audience to maintain legitimacy (Waardenburg et al., 2020).

Finding functional structures and practices of mutual accountability is challenging, especially when outcomes involve sanctions or appraisals. Collaborators must understand these consequences in a multidimensional environment. In the Finnish public sector governance, the concept of joint accountability is relatively new (NAOF, 2020). However, the cross-sectoral network on lifelong guidance provides an interesting context for exploring these challenges.

Research aim, data and method

The aim of the paper is to analyse the ways in which collaborative governance appears in the context of lifelong guidance in Finland. Our research question is *What are (in terms of problem-solving, collaborative process and multi-relational accountability) the challenges for the collaborative governance of lifelong guidance in Finland?*

The research data consist of interviews with ten experts working on issues related to the governance of lifelong guidance at the national level. The interviewees were selected on the basis of the organizations they represented. Representatives of the ministries were from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE), the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC, two different units) and the Ministry of Finance (MF). We also interviewed the representatives of the Regional State Administrative Agency (RSAA), the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA), the Confederation of Finnish Industries (CFI), the Trade Union of Education in Finland (TUE), a University of Applied Sciences

(UAS) and the Lifelong Guidance Forum (LGF). To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, it was agreed that only the organizations represented by the interviewees (e.g. expert, MEAE) would be mentioned in connection with the interviews.

All the interviews followed a pre-planned interview frame, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. After a presentation of their personal history, experts were asked to describe recent developments in lifelong guidance and the network of actors and then given more specific questions on the ways in which the governance of lifelong guidance works through ideology, legislation, funding and quality assessment (Lundgren, 1990).

The processing of the data began by reading through the entire set of interviews. The aim of the initial reading was to create an overall picture of the interview data. Along with the theoretical framework presented by Waardenburg et al. (2020) in general, and the three types of challenges of collaborative governance in particular, we pinpointed themes and descriptors from the data in which, for instance, the interviewees described the nature of the collaboration in lifelong guidance and the various actors, common values and contexts involved. Later, the content of each challenge of collaborative governance was thematically analysed in order to carry out our research tasks.

In the first stage, the analysis of challenges was conducted by the two researchers separately. In the second stage, all the data were re-analysed jointly in order to check the validity of the categorizations and interpretations involved. In a deductive manner, the theory led the development of the coding scheme by focusing on certain concepts and helping us to derive coding rules and values by the way the concepts had been defined in the theory (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

Challenges of collaborative governance in lifelong guidance

In the following three sections, we present our empirical findings according to the framework presented by Waardenburg et al. (2020).

Substantive problem-solving challenges in lifelong guidance

In the first stage of any collaborative agency, the participants should agree on the substantive problem at hand (Waardenburg et al., 2020). In general, it can be said that the initial problem of fragmented guidance services has already been identified and acknowledged by the core actors. In the 2000s, many policy documents have called for increased cross-sectoral and collaborative governance in lifelong guidance (authors).

Sometimes collaboration can turn out to be a game of bargaining between actors with competing interests (Basadur et al., 2020). In our case this does not seem to be a major challenge, at least in the big picture. At the same time, however, the following quote illustrates how each stakeholder, whether a ministry or not, has its own ‘natural’ priorities, objectives and points of view.

It is perfectly understandable that ministers from different branches of government also have their own priorities. I think it is quite a natural starting point if the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment sees things from the point of view of employment. It is important for the Ministry of Education and Culture as well, but there may also be a kind of ‘education thing-in-itself (an sich)’-thinking, so they go in the same direction, but of course they do not always completely overlap. (Expert, AFLRA)

It is clear that the underlying premise here is based on Weberian bureaucracy and the idea that, in a modern society, explicitly defined administrative tasks and duties are carried out sectorally. In this sense, collaborative governance is by no means easy to put into practice, as it always involves some degree of divergent interests and compromises.

Divergent interests are not only limited horizontally between government sectors, but also manifest themselves in tensions between the national and the local level. For example, for the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, identifying lifelong guidance and its services as a local practice was fundamentally different from the departments of central government.

In all matters, the Union of Local and Regional Authorities emphasises that a single national solution will not work in Finland but that there must be solutions based on the needs of the regions, which can best be understood and decided locally. (Expert, AFLRA)

According to Waardenburg et al. (2020), even if it was possible to clearly define the problem, it is not likely that there will be any standardized approaches to solving it, particularly given the cross-boundary nature of the ‘wicked problem’ (see Rittel & Webber, 1973). In our case, the development of a sound theory of change was built first and foremost on inclusive participation in the network. When interviewees were asked which actors should participate in the collaborative network of lifelong guidance, the answers were rich with lists of institutions.

Well, we are almost married with the Ministry of Education and Culture in all our tasks. That is our closest one. But the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is also very important because of many things . . . like social security benefits. All these things that are related to social and health issues. Then again, the

military, because many young men, women also, are in this age group . . . The Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, Employment and Economic Development Offices, all the schools and educational institutions at different levels—all these. And, of course, also the employers. This network, who all should be involved in it, is considered to be very extensive. (Expert, MEAE)

Although the network was perceived to be built on a kind of hierarchy, this was not perceived as disruptive. In general, setting up and chairing the network was understood to be the responsibility of the Ministries, usually without objection. It was also understood that each cooperation network had its own dynamics, often based on the personal characteristics of its members.

And those things have long histories, I’m sure. Things tend to go smoothly when you come up with people you can talk to and see the value of each other’s work, as this collaboration is profitable. (Expert, TUE)

The challenge of measuring performance against the theory of change manifests itself in the question of what outcomes to pursue and how to measure them. A number of institutional factors – established ministry-specific indicators, the distribution of information across administrative boundaries, different views on the importance of the role of evaluation of activities in general, for instance – make it difficult to advance in a cross-sectorial way. This challenge was actual and well recognized among the interviewees, albeit with different experiences. An expert from the youth sector stressed the importance of indicators and other quantitative measures for funding the guidance services.

Yes, they closely monitor the figures there—for example how much the youth outreach work has reached young people and how many of them have moved on to here or there. And that is one of the reasons why those in the Parliament allocate money for this activity, because it has been measured and shown how much of an impact it has in such a figure. (Expert, RSAA)

Interestingly, on the contrary, an expert working with one-stop guidance centres had a completely different view on the evaluation of lifelong guidance services and its significance. These contrasting experiences illustrate well how the evaluation of the cooperation network still consists of several individual evaluations rather than a common and comprehensive evaluation system.

But I don’t know if anyone actually supervises the operation of these centres, I have a hard time figuring out who that would be, since there’s no legislation on how to do it. (Expert, MEC)

In summary, building consensus around the core problem of fragmented guidance services is not the main challenge in terms of substantive problem-

solving. Rather, many challenges stem from institutionalized experiences and practices that tend to sustain the Weberian bureaucratic administrative structure.

Collaborative process challenges

The challenge of reaching a shared understanding on goals and approach draws from the notion that the context may consist of overlapping values, goals and commitments, as indicated in the previous section. In terms of collaborative processes, the more partners, the more difficult it tends to be to control the process.

I am in a national steering group for lifelong guidance, which is such a conclave, with some 50 people representing different parties. Also, workshop activities and then one-stop guidance centres are involved. In other words, everything that has come to Finland in recent years. (Expert, AFLRA)

According to Phillips (2004), in the collaborative process, the key factor is whether the problem has been framed jointly – or at least, whether there is a mutual agreement on the nature of the problems at hand. The establishment of the National Lifelong Guidance Forum has been a significant milestone in the process. In our data, the Forum was widely acknowledged as an important and progressive step by the interviewees.

Now, if we think of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education and Culture, we all have noticed how during the last years, the distribution of duties and mutual collaboration has become more organised and intensive. Some ten years ago, there was quite a big wrangle over each one's duties. I would say that this steering group of National Lifelong Guidance Forum, which is led by turns by both ministries, is a perfect example representing the idea of looking at these issues jointly together. (Expert, AFLRA)

One of the most important benefits of a collaborative approach to regulation is that it produces higher stakeholder satisfaction and more learning than conventional approaches (Ansell, 2012). In this respect, the one-stop guidance centres were constantly described as a prime example of a genuine collaborative process.

During recent years, the one-stop guidance centres surely have progressed. Well, we are not so much associated with those; I think they have evolved more in the field of labour policy. But the idea that the young do not have to seek the right service and run around, while all the services are brought together so that they can get all they need at a single location—this idea has evolved simultaneously in all authorities. (Expert, RSAA)

The challenge of building trust among collaborators concerns apprehension over other collaborators' good intentions or capacity to imperil the effort's success.

This relates directly to deeply embedded cultural factors in Finland. According to Välimaa (2021, p. 178), generalized trust is a strength of Finnish society, and it is rooted in public institutions and societal structures and supported by the traditional cultural depiction of Finns as hard-working, honest, humble citizens.

Evidently, interpersonal relationships can also be a challenge to collaborative processes. Our interviews indicated how they can prevent commitment and collaboration. For the sake of decency, this was typically referred to only indirectly.

There must still be friction. I can't tell you why, but I'm sure we have people who could do it all the better. I can say that often the friction is between people. And I am not pointing fingers at anyone. (Expert, TUE)

The challenge of generating commitment to the process is based on a wide variety of conceivable obstacles. It is a question of overcoming reluctance to participate fully because partners are too busy, unsure of the results or anxious that other collaborators will dismiss their perspectives and interests (Ansell & Gash, 2008). To overcome these inhibitions, collaborators need to work together to create an environment focusing on mutual gain, both professional and personal. According to one of our interviewees, these challenges are typically based on funding rather than legislation.

In my opinion, there are very few legal obstacles. But when you're talking, you can't say how you're going to be funded, so that's where the problem comes in. (Expert, UAS)

The existing institutional structures support the commitment to collaborative processes only if the partners consider it to be advantageous and desirable. It is a different matter whether they are involved only at a procedural level or whether the involvement of these bodies involves some 'real' form of engagement with them. In the first scenario, the collaboration remains only apparent and superficial – only 'drinking coffee at the meetings', according to one of our interviewees. If the benefits are not fully realized, education and guidance services can also appear as separate strategic choices.

When we are talking about autonomous units, ... it is a strategic choice how much we decouple from the provision of education itself and then connect it to guidance services. (Expert, UAS)

Finally, project-based funding was seen not only as an opportunity but also as an obstacle to sustained and long-term commitment.

Most of the development work is currently done with project money. The money is always good, but it directs what that money is spent on. Because you

don't get the money if you can't write in what you're looking for. It's out of our basic work. (Expert, RSAA)

Multi-relational accountability challenges

The third category of potential challenges in collaborative governance relates to changes in the accountability environment (Waardenburg et al., 2020.) Internal performance monitoring measures, quality assurance structures and accountability arrangements may or may not recognize contributions made in the context of the collaboration — or directly discourage them.

Evidently, our analysis indicates that evaluative practices are diverse and context specific; they are deeply embedded in the jurisdictions of the three ministries involved. The interviews were rich with detailed descriptions of specific and sporadic evaluative practices.

And finally, you ask them to fill out a form, and it evaluates the experience of the visit, how the counselee experienced it. Then we have this kind of impact survey. (Expert, UAS)

At the same time, the interviewees were conspicuously evasive about – or unfamiliar with — the evaluative practices used in other administrative branches.

I don't know how the Offices for Employment and Economic Development assess the effectiveness of career guidance. Someone else can answer that better. (Expert, MEC)

The challenge of accounting to collaboration partners lies in the need for collaborators to account for their performance to unfamiliar partners. Some collaborators may be unwilling to be held accountable in this new setting, fearing an additional yardstick. Still, understanding evaluation as a shared and collaborative action, should be emphasized. In our data, the interviewees did not explicitly articulate the question of accountability as a shared obligation (see e.g. Joanis, 2014). On the contrary, they emphasized accountability within a given jurisdiction, as a hierarchical mechanism.

Well, in upper secondary education, the accountability for results is probably reflected again as the results of the Matriculation Examination and the transition to higher education in general. (Expert, MEC)

In a situation where the overall comprehension of accountability remains rather ambiguous and underdeveloped, legislation was seen as a means to define the issue (see the citation presented earlier by MEC on the missing legislation of one-stop guidance centres). At present, evaluation and accountability are

largely based on each institution's own indicators and outcomes.

The final challenge of accountability relates to new external channels, meaning that in the new governance context, in which citizens become active participants and partners in the process of generating public value, collaborations must ensure their democratic legitimacy. In other words, the collaborative network must convince the public of its performance and benefits.

As a general rule, the interviewees were not able to see any new channels of accountability apart from the current jurisdiction-based system. Sectoral legislation and jurisdiction are still vital manifestations of agency in this respect. Moreover, the viewpoint of involving citizens into collaborative governance processes was absent in the data. Evidently, new external channels of accountability are not well-developed in Finland.

Conclusion and discussion: key challenges of collaborative governance in lifelong guidance

In recent decades, in Finland, many public sector strategy papers have emphasized the importance of closer cooperation between different administrative actors. In this study, we examined the implementation of collaborative governance in the context of lifelong guidance. Our research data consisted of interviews with ten experts working on issues related to the governance of lifelong guidance at the national level. In the interviews, a shared view was expressed that cooperation is essential for the effective delivery of guidance services. On the one hand, collaboration was seen as a way to reduce the administrative overlaps caused by silos, thereby promoting cost efficiency in administration. On the other hand, closer collaboration between different actors was seen to benefit especially young people in need of guidance services. By improving collaboration, disconnected services could be linked to each other as a continuum of services.

However, previous studies have shown that in practice, the implementation of collaborative governance typically faces the following three types of challenges: substantive problem-solving challenges, collaborative process challenges and multi-relational accountability challenges (e.g. Bryson et al., 2015; Emerson et al., 2012; Waardenburg et al., 2020). We also identified these challenges in our research context of governance of lifelong guidance in Finland. The transition from sectoral to collaborative governance is challenging, mainly due to the institutional constraints of past structures and practices, but also due to the challenges of implementing a new way of thinking.

While the challenges often appear practical, we argue that some of them are crucial, key challenges, even paradoxical in their very nature. The first key challenge generally relates to the aim to increase collaborative governance. The need for greater collaboration and intersectoral cooperation has been recognized due to the interdependence of challenges faced by many young people in terms of employment, education and life management in general. Traditionally, each ministry has been responsible for the tasks in its own area. Now, in policy documents, intensified collaborative agency is called for. However, this raises the question of when collaboration between actors is sufficient. When collaboration is seen as a continuous and never-ending process, the assessment of whether it has been achieved as planned may ultimately turn out vague.

The second key challenge, linked to the previous one, relates to the creation of a collaborative network and the formation of shared objectives in lifelong guidance. Our interviewees made it very clear that the network of cooperation should cover a wide range of various actors. At the national level, different actors have met under the auspices of the National Lifelong Guidance Forum, which is chaired alternately by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education and Culture. In addition to the ministries, the members of the forum consist of several organizations, including administration, educational institutes, academics and interest groups.

However, at the same time, each actor brings to the collaborative network its own key interests and organizational rationales. The wider the network of actors is understood, the more diverse and fragmented the setting of shared objectives may appear. In other words, when it is understood that the field of lifelong guidance is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon — a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973) — its governance gets paradoxically even more challenging. Moreover, it is important to note that even if the current network is extensive, it always creates a new organizational boundary. With the field of lifelong guidance constantly evolving through various projects and initiatives, it is crucial to analyse how new stakeholders are positioned within existing networks and methods of operation.

The third and final key challenge in collaborative governance is linked to the concept of multi-relational accountability. Waardenburg et al. (2020) distinguished the relations in the following three directions: accountability towards one's own organization, towards other actors in the network and towards society at large. The idea of multi-relational accountability can be approached using rational choice theories and cost – benefit thinking. If a change is in conflict with the actor's own interests or if the benefits it brings are

judged not to cover the costs of implementing it, it does not make sense for a rational actor to promote the new policy (Shepsle, 2005).

It is therefore essential to consider the costs and the benefits associated with collaborative action from the actors' perspectives. As Torfing (2012) noted, the driving force in the formation of governance networks is the actors' recognition of their mutual dependence. However, as our interviews indicated, evaluating collaborative action has not proven to be straightforward. On the contrary, the primary responsibility of different actors to prove the effectiveness of their actions is directed towards the traditional, Weberian-based administration structure. In simple terms, the Ministry of Employment and Economic Affairs and its subordinate job-seeking services are primarily interested in evaluating employment rates, the Ministry of Education and Culture in formal degree completion rates and the Ministry of Social Affairs in various indicators in its own sector. Investing in a system of joint or mutual accountability is irrational if its benefits cannot be articulated in practice.

One interesting topic of discussion here is the so-called alliance model. This model is not so much relevant to public administration as such but has in Finland become familiar in recent years in several large-scale infrastructure projects (bridges, railways, power plants, etc.). The core idea of the alliance model is that different parties involved in a project (client, designer and contractor) are committed to each other in such a way that achieving the objectives as planned brings financial benefits to all parties, while in the case of a failed project (e.g. schedule delay, budget overrun), all parties contribute financially to cover the costs. While we are not suggesting that the alliance model is applicable in collaborative governance as such, it may still open up new perspectives on the issue of mutual accountability.

To sum up, despite the challenges discussed earlier, Finland is well suited to promoting collaborative governance in lifelong guidance. The public administration in Finland is known for good governance, trust in authorities' actions and low corruption rates. In addition, there is genuine interest among the actors of lifelong guidance in working together. However, perhaps the biggest challenge lies in demonstrating the benefits of cooperation to society. To ensure that the benefits of collaboration in lifelong guidance do not remain just a matter of words in strategy papers, it should also be possible to demonstrate the benefits in concrete terms. It is expected that we will see new types of metrics and indicators for this purpose in the future. Finally, we would like to stress that the challenges discussed in this article should be taken seriously. At best, similar collaborative efforts in other policy areas can benefit from our findings.

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