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Being an academic and engaging in social change

2021-06-03



Screen shot by Charles Mathies

Lukuaika: 4 min.

Author: [Charles Mathies](#)

In early April this year, I set out for a trip to Migri (Finnish Immigration Service) to renew my residence permit. Like any immigrant in Finland, this is normal, even when you have permanent residency. However, what transpired over the next few days and weeks, was not normal. As a researcher investigating international student migration in Finland, I am familiar with the issues immigrants face when renewing and applying for residence permits. I was not though, prepared for the reality of being trapped in a Kafkaesque experience of endless bureaucratic queuing for 21+ hours.

Much of the queuing took place outdoors due to COVID19 protocols and I shared my experience and reflections via a 25-tweet thread. The reaction to my initial and subsequent threads was swift. [The initial tweet](#) trended and attracted a good deal of attention from the media ([YLE](#), [Helsingin Sanomat](#), [Iltalehti](#), etc.) and public commentary (Twitter, comments sections in media, etc.).

It also received direct response from Migri and senior government officials. These responses included multiple actions from increasing the number of appointment times a week (including Saturdays), with 60 additional reservation spots, to dedicating additional resources to speed up the permit processing.

“Whose voice is heard?”

The reactions and subsequent actions suggest two things. First, “who” I am influenced the reactions and responses. I am a white, highly-educated male of Western background and it was clear I had privilege as I received multiple apologies and statements of disbelief that this was occurring. My privileged position made the issues of access and processing times of renewing residence permits visible to a wider audience. This large audience in turn created pressure on Migri and other Finnish government agencies to do something about these issues. This was frustrating for many other immigrants and advocates who for years voiced similar concerns and complaints. While I am glad this sparked a needed public commentary and action, I too am angry and uncomfortable that it took a privileged person, like me, speaking up before significant change occurred.

Second, it was striking that the media and many commenting (on Twitter and the media stories) brought up that I hold an Academy of Finland Fellowship and I research migration. The framing was that if a recognized expert of migration is having trouble navigating Migri’s system, this means that Migri’s system is truly problematic and needs attention and resources. This framing suggests that academics can use their position as researchers to advocate and help enact change.

Putting training into action

The swift move into action by Migri suggests academics can have an influential voice in enacting change in Finland. One way, perhaps, is for academics to use their skills and expertise as part of

their voice and identity and not shy away from it. I believe much of the reason for the response I received, beyond my privileged position, was how I framed my Twitter threads. I thought as a researcher first; how can I use my personal experiences to explain the cultural experience of renewing residency permits in Finland. I took aspects from my academic training to use my situation as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. I offered an assessment of the situation and used research, both mine and other scholars', to frame and guide my comments. For example, in my Twitter thread I explained Migri is highly dependent on the resources it receives and has experienced years of budget cuts. It also has an expanded number of migrants seeking service. In other words, the expectation for Migri is to do more with less. The situation of long queues and processing times is largely a result of a number of years of decisions beyond Migri's control. I used my training to criticise the system behind Migri, but not necessarily Migri nor its personnel themselves, shining light on where the issues lie and offering both short and long-term solutions to address them.

This type of action is not for everyone and that is fine. Not all academics feel comfortable publicly commenting on issues, even in their area of expertise. But for researchers who wish to advocate for change, there are ways to use your academic training and role as a researcher to engage. Honestly, it is humbling as much as it is surprising the response my comments generated. Often, as academics, we are not able to make as direct and quick change like this situation; it typically takes years of advocacy and engagement. But it does take courage, perseverance, and a willingness to become a visible actor within Finnish societal and policy debates. There will be trolls and hate mail, of which I received my share and in some places, there may be efforts by elected officials to silence our voices, as was the case recently in Denmark. This week the Danish Parliament adopted a statement asking university management to regulate so that their researchers do not produce "politics disguised as science", which received strong reactions in the social media, such as [Twitter](#). In short, there will be efforts to suppress our voices and actions if and when we speak up and act, but the rewards of seeing positive change for a community I not only research, but also I am a member of was for me, and is, worth it. This would likely be the case for other scholars in the ETMU community as well and I encourage all to think of using their training as part of their identity when they engage and advocate.

[Charles Mathies](#) is an Academy of Finland Research Fellow based at the Finnish Institute for Educational Research in the University of Jyväskylä. Charlie's research focuses on the role of global markets, politics, and infrastructures in the movement of knowledge, data, and people. His current fellowship focuses on international student migration and mobility in Finland and Europe.

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Hyväksyn!