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Out of the Immigration Periphery: A Case Study of Competence-based Immigration Policy Development in Finland

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Abstract

An impending talent deficit caused by declining working age population and surging need of professionals pose a severe threat for the knowledge-intensive countries like Finland. Competence-based immigration can partially remedy the situation if supported by appropriate policy making and governance. Through multiple-streams framework (MSF) approach this intrinsic case study analyses the construction of the national macro talent management framework during the last two decades. By examining the policy change through MSF, the article demonstrates how the issue of competence-based migration was moved out of the 'immigration periphery' and bridged to the economic policy.


The results show that despite the obvious need for strategic planning only trivial policy changes were made until recent years. This changed when a group of 'policy entrepreneurs' created a new narrative on immigration, defined a new policy arena, and firmly placed international talents on the policy makers' agenda. Political changes and external trends fortified the favourable circumstances. With systemic approach and a clear mandate from the government, the window of opportunity for the economically and societally significant immigration policy making is now finally open. However, recruiters and the public need to embrace the ethnic and cultural diversity to reap the benefits of the renewed policy.

Keywords:
competence-based
immigration;
Multiple Streams
Framework;
policy entrepreneur;
macro talent management;
economisation of
immigration

Practical Relevance

The case study of competence-based immigration policy development in Finland underlines the significance of:

- **Policy entrepreneurs:** The need for the policy change had been recognised for long, but the changes materialized only after a handful of policy entrepreneurs took the ownership and started pushing the theme up to the policymakers' agenda.
- **Framing of problems and solutions:** A different narrative, revised terminology, and new venues of discussion bridged the immigration tightly to employment, innovation, and economy, instead of its more accustomed place within the social policy.
- **Systemic approach:** The window of opportunity for the new policy opened only when the change of paradigm was accepted widely within the government, not concerning only a single ministry or a field of administration.

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Introduction

The width, depth, and the quality of the available talent pool are key determinants for companies' and countries' economic competitiveness along with overall societal development (e.g. Crook, 2011; Mastromarco and Simar, 2021). The value of 'talent', demonstrated by personal traits, educational qualifications or professional experience, is considered high especially in knowledge-intense industries where the need especially for IT professionals has surged. The talent gap across sectors has been growing rapidly: one consulting company presents the global talent shortage as high as 85 million people by 2030, with almost all countries in the world having higher demand for talent than supply (Korn Ferry, 2018). OECD and other international organisations have advocated for more favourable policies to support talent mobility (e.g. Basri et al., 2008; Tuccio, 2019), and countries are actively seeking solutions to looming talent deficit by promoting immigration.

The term 'competence-based immigration' (CBI) has a different emphasis from 'labour immigration': even though both refer to people moving from one country to another for work, CBI is used to refer to the type of immigration that focuses on the skills, educational level and professional experience of immigrants, rather than their employment status. Broadly speaking, the goal of CBI is to attract highly skilled talents who can contribute to a recipient country's economic growth, innovation and development in the long run, while labour immigration is more focused on filling specific job vacancies or addressing short-term labour shortages in certain industries or sectors. It must be noted that even though the collective term CBI also includes students and researchers, in this paper the policy development is primarily examined through the process led by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE) focusing primarily on highly skilled, educated talents moving to Finland for work, with great potential to contribute to the Finnish economy.

Even with acknowledged strengths in education and egalitarian values to support talent attraction (Evans et al., 2019), Finnish companies face severe difficulties in finding the specialised competence. Talent scarcity has hit especially SMEs, and even large corporations with competence for talent sourcing are not immune to shortages. Like in many other countries, the competition for desired employees has become a concern of regions and states (e.g. Kofler et al., 2020; Vaiman et al., 2019), calling for new national policy making. Finland has started the systematic policy development on CBI, but the gap to its global competitors is still wide. Even smaller countries like Estonia have opened their national talent attraction policy dialogue well before Finland (Kirss et al., 2014). Also the pattern of highly skilled migrants opting for a narrow range of countries, first and foremost the major English-speaking economies (Kerr et al., 2016) is a joint challenge for Nordic countries.

Despite the talk, many governments seem not to be seriously engaged in attraction of highly skilled immigrants (Cerna, 2016). One reason is the growing politicization of immigration, characterised by high level of public attention and polarization of actors (e.g. Kolbe, 2021) which affects all forms of immigration, including the highly skilled. In Finland, the breakthrough and the institutionalisation of the anti-immigration Finns Party in 2010s restrained more liberal immigration policy reforms. Immigration became a salient, overarching issue in 2015, when the record numbers of asylum seekers reached Finland (e.g. Avonius & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2018).

A considerable part of the research on highly skilled migration has focused on immigrants' labour market integration, migration paths, brain drain, or flows between certain countries (e.g. Hunter et al., 2009; Kerr et al., 2016; Sá, 2018). Also labour market discrimination and integration services in destination countries have been extensively studied, as well as recruitment from the company HR perspective (e.g. Allal-Chérif, 2021; Banks, 2019). However, little is known on the national frameworks that govern the operating environment for both recruiting employers and migrating talents and how the national macro talent management policies are introduced in the policymakers' agenda. Comprehensive research is needed to have broader understanding of overarching policies and practices which either facilitate or disrupt recruitment and retention efforts. Furthermore, research on immigration as a part of national innovation and economic policy making would broaden the scope to better reflect the current role and the composition of immigrant populations in destination countries.

In the field of immigration, macro talent management (MTM) has emerged as a relatively novel concept. The current theorization (Vaiman et al., 2019) defines MTM as the regional or national frameworks with unique economic, political, administrative, technological and cultural conditions, which set the grounds for international talent mobility either by empowering or disrupting the employers' ability to attract and retain the necessary human capital. While the emerging research has well presented the MTM concept, few comprehensive studies of the country-level approach and policy development processes to build a coherent framework have been conducted.

Against this background, this case study presents the policy evolution of CBI during the last two decades in Finland. Although the policy outputs have an impact on labour immigration in general, this research focuses on the highly skilled immigrants. The principal research question is: How was the immigration framed as the economic policy issue, and how was CBI brought to the national agenda? The process of framing is analysed to understand how CBI has emerged in the national agenda as a desired resource in the Finnish economy. This research provides understanding on policy development on a salient immigration-related theme and identifies elements critical for moving an issue up on policy makers' agenda, rather than focusing on barriers hindering development. The analysis using MSF explains reasons for the previously halted policy development and demonstrates the process of establishing the link between migration and the economy in the policy making process. This article describes the steps leading towards economisation of immigration. As CBI is primarily addressed from and justified by the economic perspective, it has shifted the way the immigration as a whole is regarded and positioned in the public administration and policy making.

This article outlines the Finnish context, the theoretical framework, and the making of the research. The policy development process is analysed with the MSF framework presenting three different streams that must merge to yield policy changes (Kingdon, 2014). By examining how the MSF streams eventually unite, the article demonstrates how the issue of CBI is moved out of the immigration periphery and how it is bridged to the economic policy. The article continues with the analysis of the construction of the Talent Boost (TB) infrastructure, shedding light on the framing of the immigrants as relevant stakeholders of the economic and innovation policy. Lastly, the article concludes with the discussion on the paradigm shift and implications of this work for future policy making and further research.

Theoretical Background

Out of several public policy analytical approaches reviewed for this research, John Kingdon's (2014) Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), first introduced in 1984, constituted the most appropriate tool to analyse the policy generation process. The framework's elements and basic assumptions are well suited to ambiguous, contested problems and situations where policy makers operate under significant time pressure and fluid participation in decision making (Kingdon, 2014; Weible and Sabatier, 2017), all matching the circumstances of this case. MSF was considered particularly useful for this research as other frameworks dismiss or underrate the role of individual brokers to explain agenda setting and policy making processes.

The core of MSF consists of problem, policy, and politics streams, which are neither linear nor automatically setting each other in motion (Cairney, 2011), but have their own dynamics. According to Kingdon (2014), the problem stream consists of issues requiring attention, the policy stream is where solutions to problems are identified and proposed, and the politics stream is a combination of public mood, elected officials, lobbyists and interest groups. A policy change is possible only when the three independent streams merge: this requires attention to a policy problem, acceptable solutions developed to it, and favourable political conditions. When the streams are joined together, windows of opportunity for a policy change are opened (Kingdon, 2014).

As the streams have no inevitable connection to each other, 'policy entrepreneurs' must couple them together, develop solutions, and present them to receptive policymakers at the right moment (Weible and Sabatier, 2017). Successful framing of problems and solutions results in their placement on the political agenda (Knaggård, 2015). Policy entrepreneurs may be

politicians, civil servants, or devoted individuals from outside of the public administration. They have the grit and knowledge to frame and communicate a policy problem with its solutions so that it captures the attention of their intended audience (Cairney, 2011). In this case study, three policy entrepreneurs were identified (interviewees #3, 5 and 11 in Table 1 below). Two interviewees (#6 and 10) had similar features and vision as policy entrepreneurs: they did significant groundwork at the strategy formulation phase, but because of changes in their professional roles they were on the scene for a relatively short time.

This case illustrates that MSF is well suited to explain how a specific immigration policy theme – construction of the national macro talent management policy – is framed, promoted and accepted within policymakers. Whereas Kingdon (2014) defined policy entrepreneurs as change agents taking advantage of windows of opportunity to promote policy change, this case study shows how policy entrepreneurs build bridges between silos and actively operate to advance their agenda.

In the field of public administration, economisation refers to the application of economic principles and practices to enhance performance and effectiveness. According to Hirschman & Berman (2014) economists and economics can reshape the cognitive infrastructure of policymaking either by spreading an economic style of reasoning or by establishing economic policy devices tools that allow policymakers to see the world in certain ways. This case makes a contribution to the literature by presenting the onset of the economization in the Finnish immigration policy when immigration is taken out of the immigration periphery to the tables of the economic decision makers as a key input in the knowledge-intensive ecosystem. A market-oriented approach has made immigration more acceptable, even desirable for some part in the labour market and the society, but the exclusive focus on economic benefits may overlook social equity considerations – this is where Finland is juggling to find a balance in its CBI policy making.

Data and Methods

This article focuses on the Finnish immigration policy transformation over the last two decades. The case study examines the particular case of the Finnish policy development building on existing research on CBI and policy development. The historical development and the findings are specific to the Finnish context, but the process of bridging the ‘immigration periphery’ to the economic policymakers’ agenda has significance beyond the Finnish audience.

As a foundation for the research, the governmental programmes in 2003–2019 were examined to form the baseline of the policy development on labour and CBI. Document research included several reports, forecasts, strategies, roadmaps, and other governmental publications as well as material and reports produced by various projects. Statistics Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, and European Migration Network were the primary sources of statistical data used in the research.

To collect more insightful information and stakeholders’ accounts, 18 open-ended interviews were conducted with experts, officials, and policymakers up to the level of the Permanent Secretary. Semi-structured interviews followed the same outline, but the questions were tailored according to each respondent’s role and perspective. The respondents were asked to describe the policy evolution at different stages and identify milestones, obstacles, pitfalls, and trends affecting the process. They also provided information on key players and their roles in the process, as well as on build-up of mutual understanding, evolution of institutional co-operation, and inclusion of economic aspect of immigration in the policy making, among others. The questions also covered external factors having impact on the policy making process, and ethical considerations.

The interviewees presented in the Table 1 below were selected because of their proximity to the policy making process at different times between approximately 1998–2021.

Table 1. The interviewees of the research conducted on 25th January – 30th June 2021

Organisation	Unit or Principal Role at the time of the policy development work	Interview ID
Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE)	Management	#5,8
	International Expertise and Labour	#2,3
	Integration	#4
	Innovations and Enterprise Financing	#12
Ministry of Interior (MOI)	Labour immigration strategic planning, project steering	#1,7
	Migration	#16
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Management	#9
	Labour immigration development	#13
Ministry of Education and Culture	Higher education policy	#14
	Science policy	#15
Finnish Migration Service	Management	#18
Business Finland (BF)	Finland Promotion Services / Talent Boost (TB)	#11
Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions	Immigration affairs	#10
Confederation of Finnish Industries	Management	#6
Public Employment Services	Labour immigration project planning and steering	#17

The interviews were conducted in the first half of 2021. The individual interviews were conducted via video communication tools and lasted 1–2 hours. The author took comprehensive notes, and non-verbatim transcriptions were made of the recordings. The data were inserted into ATLAS.ti for identification of merging themes and their correspondence to the MSF streams and other MSF elements. In the comprehensive analysis, the policy entrepreneurs were identified, and the significance of their role became evident which guided the research further. The author verified the data by thorough document and literature search, and by assimilating her lengthy professional field experiences with the data.

Background information was also drawn from eight interviews of renown researchers in connection of the preparation of the Roadmap 2035 (PMO, 2021) for CBI (interviews 19–26), and throughout the author's assignment as a research intern in MEAE at the time of the data collection.

The interviews of this study are susceptible to selection bias as people actively working on policy development tend to paint positive outcomes of their work. To draw a balanced picture, experts representing different facets of immigration, including exploitation of foreign workers and labour market discrimination, were also interviewed (interviews #2, 4, 5, 10 and 13). For increased validity, statements and claims were crosschecked with existing documentation, records, and other interviews as a form of data triangulation.

The Finnish Context

For the long time, discussions on and the public image of immigration in Finland was very narrow with little room for labour immigration and economy. The pervasive mentality was crystallised by Forsander and Trux (2002):

Since the second half of the 1980s, Finns have discussed immigration as a problem. The talk has focused on whether they should be received, and if so, how many people should be allowed to immigrate. --- Immigrants have been viewed as social problems to be assimilated out of sight through means available to the welfare state. The ways in which immigration is linked to the world economy and shifts in the world political situation have been ignored almost entirely.

This reflection has persisted until recently: even though new migrants arrive to Finland primarily for work and studies, immigration-related affairs have been categorised under social sector in public administration. This positioning has contributed to underrating immigrants' capabilities and value in the working life and the loss of human resources for the society.

At the same time, Finland has changed from being a country of net emigration to one of net immigration in a matter of few decades. A study based on Statistics Finland's population projections demonstrated the detrimental state of the demographic development of Finland (Aro et al., 2020): the 2010s saw a rapid decline in birth rates and a further increase in the share of the aged population. Immigration has been the sole factor maintaining the population growth since 2015: the total population would decline as of the next decade without positive net immigration to Finland (Sorsa, 2020). In 2010s, the annual net immigration in Finland has ranged between 12 000–18 000 persons.

Labour immigration has been identified as one of the instruments to revert the decline of the working age population. The notion of the need of the additional foreign labour was included in the Finnish government programme for the first time in 2003 to fill the gap left by the ageing population. The gap has only widened since, and the Finnish economy has been recently experiencing continuous labour shortages in sectors like health care, hospitality and tourism, and construction across the country. The government has implemented several initiatives to facilitate labour immigration, such as streamlining residence permit processes and providing services for all employers seeking to hire foreign workers.

The needs for labour immigration remain high in manual and vocational professions, but also the importance of CBI including international talent attraction and retention has gradually emerged (see Heikkilä & Pikkarainen, 2008; Myrskylä & Pyykkönen, 2015; Raunio et al., 2009). The research has stressed the immigration as an asset in the economy rather than the mere question of number of employees: international students and workers possess necessary qualities to contribute significantly to the growth, internationalisation, and innovation of the Finnish companies (Raunio, 2015; Raunio & Forsander, 2009; Rilla et al., 2018).

Despite the steadily increasing awareness of immigrants' significance to the Finnish economy, the progress was slow to address the identified pitfalls, such as labour market discrimination, bureaucratic residence permit processes, and Finland's limited attractiveness for talents (e.g. Heikkilä & Pikkarainen, 2008). The overall statements in policies and strategies offered neither clear indication on desired course of action nor resources for systematic talent attraction and retention. EU structural funds provided temporal means in 2007–2013, but the international recruitment efforts remained scattered (Interview #1). Resources were reduced on the account of economic downturn which illustrates the short-sightedness of the policy making at the time. Looking back, even the Ministry of Interior states in their report (2018):

Labour immigration in Finland has taken place with no comprehensive strategic planning and coordination by the public authorities. --- In the efforts to anticipate labour needs, foreign labour has not been separated from general labour demand, which has played a role in slowing down the preparation of an active labour immigration strategy. Various interest groups' agendas have in many cases taken centre stage in the debate on needs for foreign labour.

The launch of the Talent Boost (TB) agenda in 2017 in connection with PM Juha Sipilä's governmental programme (PMO, 2015) was the first comprehensive effort to adopt a different policy approach. The programme was designed to enhance CBI, Finland's attractiveness, and openness of the Finnish working life (MEAE, 2021). The programme's objective is to redirect the immigration narrative towards the economic policy, and to advance ecosystem thinking both at the governmental and municipal level. Even as a latecomer to the global talent attraction scene, Finland is currently relatively well positioned: the government has given a clear mandate to the ministries to lead national MTM efforts and to co-ordinate related work with Finnish cities and regions. Such mandates still lack in many countries. Within the EU, the blue card directive of the European Council has harmonised the entry and residence conditions for highly qualified non-EU nationals, but the EU member states can also maintain national, parallel schemes for talent attraction (EU Directive 2021/1883). The harmonisation in many areas of immigration policy within the EU has had only a limited effect on national policy responses on highly skilled immigration (e.g. Cerna, 2014).

Findings

Over the last two decades, the basis of the Finnish immigration policy has undergone a major transformation. Social policy suited well to guide the integration of modest numbers of humanitarian migrants in 1990s and 2000s, but the profile of immigration has since changed drastically pushing the framework towards economic and innovation affairs. As Raunio (2015) points out, the business ecosystem needs to connect immigrants to mechanisms that add value to the society, rather than to social service structures of precarious job market.

In the Table 2 below, the process, main features, and the approximate phases of the development of CBI are illustrated. These have been connected to MSF elements described in this study to explain the circumstances for the paradigm change.

Table 2. Phases of competence-based immigration development in Finland in 2000s, based on Raunio et al. (2009)

Years	Main features of policy making	MSF elements
2000 – 2004	Identification of the need and the phenomenon, discussion	Problem stream
2004 – 2008	Strategy formulation	Problem + Policy streams
2008 – 2016	Project planning and implementation, testing and developing services locally	Problem + Policy streams, engagement of policy entrepreneurs
2016 –	Systematization of operations, building national co-ordination and infrastructure, a paradigm shift towards the immigration as a part of the economic policy making	Problem, Policy and Politics streams merging, window of opportunity opening

In this article, the policy development process is described chronologically through the phases identified above and analysed with the help of the MSF elements. The analysis and Kingdon's key assumptions point to the same direction: as policymakers have very limited time and capacity to address ambiguous problems, the policy entrepreneurs play a critical role in determining which policy options are considered and adopted by the decision makers. Therefore, a substantial part of the analysis revolves around the policy entrepreneurs.

A longstanding problem

Labour immigration as a factor alleviating the shrinking working age population has been recognised since the turn of the millennium. The government programme in 2003 cautiously proposed the renewal of immigration policies in favour of labour-based immigration on the account of the worsening old-age dependency ratio (PMO, 2003a). This entry was echoed in the subsequent governmental programmes in 2003 and 2007 (PMO, 2007, 2003b).

The need for the active immigration policy was further expressed in the Government Migration Policy Programme (MOL, 2006) in 2006 'to safeguard the availability of the skilled workforce and to strengthen the skills matrix of the population'. The programme introduced concrete elements to advance immigrants' integration but as Saukkonen (2005) pointed out it lacked volume and clarity in the elements of the labour-based immigration and discarded efforts to prepare for an ethnic and cultural diversity in the Finnish society. However, it is noteworthy that labour immigration with related integration services were positioned closer to the labour and economic policy, and not framed predominantly as the social policy or a security issue, which had been the pattern previously.

Lack of ownership obstructing the policy making

Despite the recognised need, the abstractness perforated also subsequent plans and governmental programmes, as there was neither ownership nor a sense of urgency to advance

the topic. It was openly admitted that Finland had had neither an action plan nor strategy for labour immigration prior to the action plan of 2009 (MOI, 2009). Paradoxically, also that document was largely overlooked as its preparation coincided with a structural economic crisis and high unemployment, thus labour immigration becoming politically sensitive.

Attempts were made to create a strategic plan, but without genuine inter-ministerial collaboration the circumspect policy prevailed. Conflicting priorities within organisations exist even to date: the MEAE has been balancing between business life representatives' demand for smooth entry of foreign workers on the one hand, and the employment of Finns and labour market testing to prioritize Finnish job seekers on the other hand. (Interview #6)

Resourcing formed another obstacle: funding did not follow the plans which therefore became dead letters. The report of National Audit Office (VTV, 2012) remarks that the 28 proposals listed in the Action Plan on Labour Migration in 2009 were neither scheduled nor prioritised. Furthermore, there was neither political nor administrative pressure to implement the plans: the domain was tasked to active, but scattered projects.¹ Officials and labour market organisations formed a formal steering mechanism, but no organisation had real ownership of the overall execution as ministries focused narrowly on their own domain. Using Kingdon's terminology (2014), the problems, ideas, alternatives, and solutions were left floating in 'policy primeval soup' without gaining wider acceptance among the policy makers.

The alarming demographic indicators and rapidly changing external conditions, like increased labour mobility resulting from the EU Eastern expansion in 2004, did not yield substantial changes. National immigration legislation was updated and EU directives implemented in due course, but the immigration policy turned out to be patched and stitched. The National Audit Report on labour immigration (2012) concluded that the promotion of labour-based immigration has not become a cross-administrative, long-span operation; root causes stemming from changing responsibilities and unclear roles. Shifts of responsibilities from one ministry to another were deemed detrimental for long-term control and assessment of activities. (VTV, 2012)

The audit report is significant as it demonstrated the disunity and the lack of leadership in the policy stream. This position appeared also in interviews: the historic friction between ministries was described as the 'Thirty Years' War' where co-operation had suffered from bureaucratic turf, struggle for power, matters of principles, or personal notions (interview #8). Another meaningful notion of the audit remains largely unsolved to date: the report (VTV, 2012) expressed concerns on the poor information base of the labour-based immigration. Effective policy making requires comprehensive background data on the quantity and types of foreign labour as well as unambiguous definitions of labour-based immigration.

Inconsistent, scattered information and imperfect statistical data weakened effective policy making further. When drafting pilot projects, the decision making on issues like country selection was largely based on personal preferences rather than solid examination of target country's educational system, compatibility with the demands of the Finnish working life, or the relevant attraction factors (Interviews #1, 7 and 13). Because the projects were designed to respond to immediate needs in the labour market, they unsurprisingly yielded rather short-term results during the project funding, having value mainly on the learning and knowledge building of stakeholders. This underlined the need for a more systematically reasoned approach for the policy making.

Policy entrepreneurs as changemakers

Identification of a problem and evidence on possible solutions do not suffice to automatic appearance on decision makers' agenda. In MSF, the policy entrepreneurs are the ones speaking up about a policy problem and solutions in such a way that catches the attention and concern of the intended audience (Cairney, 2011; Kingdon, 2014), crossing outside organisational silos.

In this case, the policy entrepreneurs were located inside the regime: the interviewees systematically referred to a handful of MEAE civil servants to whom the commencement of the policy change around 2015 could be credited to. Prompted by broad professional and international experiences, these policy entrepreneurs started expanding the territory of immigration policy talk to new audiences within the government. The change of venue was not

to seek readily sympathetic audiences but towards unforeseen environment. Bringing the immigrant issues to completely new tables, for the amazement of some, was an important juncture in the policy stream:

The immigration policy was far too disconnected to have an impact [in the economy]. If you stay in the immigration and integration periphery you can shout as loud as you can, but your voice is not heard, unless you connect to the larger guns of employment and economic policy; this is where the magic happens. (Interview #5)

At first, the participants of innovation ecosystem groups were puzzled and were only thinking of refugees and asylum seekers, there was no understanding what would be the added value to the theme. (Interview #3)

It is noteworthy that the management had not given specific instructions for this approach. Based on existing, albeit vague governmental strategies, the work for the recognition of the paradigm shift was first tacitly accepted, and later advocated for in the upper level. The management's support formed an essential sounding board which was required to build understanding towards the role of the immigration in the business and innovation ecosystem.

Repetition, endless repetition. We had to construct the narrative from the scratch and push the story forward. --- In the beginning only a handful of people came to these meetings, rolled their eyes, and said 'interesting'. --- It was such tenacious work. (Interview #5)

Gradually, within six months or so, the recognition developed that those [economic growth and innovation] units would indeed have a take in immigration. Shortly after it was comprehended that other ministries must be actively involved as well. (Interview #3)

Amid scorn, resistance and even ridicule, strong confidence and sheer perseverance was required from the policy entrepreneurs. The push for the policy change did not result from evidence-based, rational policy making following a predictable policy cycle, but required literally only few exceptionally committed persons in positions with some leverage, backed by the management.

Branding and framing for acceptance

Along with the new venues of immigration discussion, the terminology and the positioning of the immigration talk were renewed. This was critical in the policy process: to determine on what terms the issue is handled, and how and from where is it presented, as stated in one of the interviews:

The new project was located in the ministry's [MEAE] central steering unit. The business and innovation managers had never heard of the Integration unit. I would have been laughed out if I had proposed from there the new perspective to international talents. --- Even then it didn't work out, but I was listened to and allowed to stay. (Interview #5)

Establishing the ownership in the higher level of hierarchy signalled new organisational commitment to the theme, breaking accustomed boundaries between ministerial units. As the word suggests, framing defines how issues are portrayed, categorised, and presented (Cairney, 2011). Here, the frame was moved with a jolt from the immigration periphery to headlines of the economic growth, from social affairs to the world of business and innovation ecosystems. This entailed accenting the added value, not social responsibility:

We had to reason better that good integration is not just societal goodwill, but it brings along employment and economic growth. We can't keep on drumming you need to take integration and equality seriously, because campaigning won't take you far. 'Be a good guy!' won't resonate to all. It's much more powerful to argue that by being good guys there will be economic growth. (Interview #5)

This presentation of immigration predominantly as an economic issue, underlining immigrants' contribution to the economy, embodies the economisation of immigration. From a policy standpoint, this kicked off a policy formulation process with increasing emphasis on economic considerations of immigration, followed by administrative and legislative reforms to accelerate residence permit processes especially for highly skilled immigrants working in sectors facing talent shortages.

Breaking through silos and introducing a new perspective on immigration was fundamental to address the policy problem. The migration policies mixed in different policy areas have been claimed to intensify immigrant exploitation (Martin & Prokkola, 2017) whereas in this case the interaction of policy arenas was deliberately planned and encouraged with positive economic outcomes.

The terminology used in the narrative was revised to gain prominence and credibility. The word ‘immigrant’ carried a strong notion towards humanitarian immigrants fleeing from war zones which was not a desired image for the promotion of CBI. The new narrative building on competences of ‘international talents’ was deemed critical to change the mindset and gradually enable a new approach and modus operandi in international talent attraction and retention.

We worked on changing the mentality and the vocabulary on how to talk about labour immigration with more specific expressions and choices of words. I proposed the term international talents instead of immigrants to brand the activity as international talent attraction. --- These were big discussions within the ministry, it was not readily accepted that immigration could be integrated into the economic policy. There was no actual support for this work from the management, but they didn’t prevent us doing what we did, and we weren’t blocked politically either. (Interview #6)

The quotes above describe the environment where the policy entrepreneurs crafted the new immigration product to the policy market. The persistent efforts and short-term projects in 2014 – 2016 within MEAE softened up the terrain to gain legitimacy and build consensus among experts. Meanwhile the private sector was gradually getting more vocal in the public discussion about the looming talent deficit and started expressing the need of co-ordinated talent attraction campaigns. (Interview #8) The temporary projects were converted into a formal TB agenda in autumn 2016 which roughly coincided with the recruitment of the first specialist within the Finnish government administration to promote CBI.

Recruiting a full-time specialist was one of the first indicators that the theme was gaining foothold within the ministry. It was accompanied with the realisation that we are dealing with the change of the paradigm, a structural change involving the whole government, not a quick, separate project. (Interview #3)

The steering of the agenda ‘Growth from international talents’ was novel in the policy stream: the agenda intertwined immigration together with economic and innovation policies. As a result of persistent lobbying, the steering group exceptionally consisted of directors of all departments, not only in the field of immigration. (Interview #3). Albeit internal to MEAE, this body started incorporating the MTM perspective into the Finnish policy making by taking the holistic look on the operating environment forming the framework for CBI. The recognition of interrelationships and mutual interest prompted different ministries to join the work, the motivation further fortified by external events at the time.

The political stream redirected

External events in the world and shifts in national politics have shaped the third stream of MSF, the political stream, over the last few years. The immigration setting changed drastically in 2015 when so called ‘European refugee crises’ shook the Finnish immigration policy makers and the public: from the relatively steady annual flow of 1 500–6 000 asylum seekers, the reception mechanisms were challenged by 32 476 asylum seekers arriving to Finland in 2015 (MOI statistics). Apart from the acute issues like border management, initial reception and accommodation of newcomers, Finland faced a new question: what to do with this many people?

The crises demonstrated that the Finnish immigration policy did not correspond with the current reality, as described by one of the informants:

Obviously 2015 was the largest landmark for us. In a way, it was the best what has happened because it forced us to think. --- When the immigration realities hit us, we became a normal EU country because also our borders received numerous spontaneous asylum seekers. It forced us to think the whole chain, including our overall stance towards immigration. (Interview #16)

The quote above succinctly argues that the external events impelled the change more effectively than any previous strategies or policies, being a critical juncture in the politics stream. This view

was widely shared across ministries. According to one of the respondents, the situation redirected the political stream vis-à-vis immigration as a factor in the economy:

The massive increase of the asylum seekers brought along the political demand for a new approach. We couldn't afford providing integration services for so many, and the services weren't even scalable for such a number. We had to introduce new methods, which reinforced the thinking that the immigration could be seen as a vehicle for employment, it costs us less if these people are working. It was new, no matter how awkward it now seems. (Interview #5)

The turbulent external circumstances had made evident the need of the renewal of the Finnish immigration policy, but reforms were side-lined as politically unattractive, causing a prolonged state of indecisiveness. This remained the situation until June 2017, when the anti-immigrant Finns Party unexpectedly broke into two separate entities.

For the first two years [2015–2017 in PM Sipilä's government] there was a lock for the government participation. Along with the split of the Finns Party the blockage to promote labour immigration was removed. Consequently, the budget negotiations included for the first time distinct entries for the promotion of labour immigration. This was a drastic change. (Interview #8)

Apart from the visible events, subtle trends had strengthened the undercurrent for the change over the years. Several respondents singled out the recognition of country-wide, pervasive labour deficits as the key trend, albeit the acknowledgement came slowly: 'The general admittance that we need workforce from abroad, took place during the last five years only.' (Interview #8)

Another trend building the undercurrent has been the rising awareness on the relatively poor attractiveness of Finland, as apart from the student mobility, Finland is not performing particularly well in international rankings on talent attractiveness like Global Talent Competitiveness Index, or OECD Indicators of Talent Attractiveness. 'This is a mental change: Finland is not choosing, but Finland has to be chosen.' (Interview #20) With these new external and political circumstances combined with underlying trends, the politics stream merged with the problem and policy streams enabling the environment of a new policy.

Talent Boost spearheading the paradigm shift

The window of opportunity, the occasion for the policy change, had finally opened: the theme had caught the attention, gained an adequate level of acceptance and prominence, and emerged on the agenda of political decision makers. In 2017, this was the momentum to launch the national TB programme: the first comprehensive, cross-administrative effort to boost the immigration of specialists, employees, students, and researchers to Finland. The programme was not a stand-alone project of any ministry but aimed at redirecting the immigration narrative towards the economic and innovation policy and advancing ecosystem thinking both at the governmental and municipal level. The high level of the steering committee's composition and the chairmanship of permanent secretaries of two ministries propped up the status of the programme.

Apart from policies regulating immediate labour availability, the programme included new elements for active international talent attraction. Two target groups require different methods, as pointed out in an interview:

The root causes for the purpose on labour immigration had to be specified. One modus operandi is needed for gap-filling labour immigration which aims at substituting the missing groups of employees to maintain the operations, and another approach for groups of talents who possess new skills, knowledge, and networks to create new growth and business opportunities. (Interview #22)

Greater diversity and openness of the Finnish labour market was another new entry on the programme agenda (MEAE, 2021). It is recognised that ethnic and cultural discrimination are embedded at the Finnish labour markets (e.g. Ahmad, 2020), and many international job-seekers have to settle for entry level or precarious positions not corresponding their competences. (e.g. Myrskylä and Pyykkönen, 2015; Sutela, 2015). Therefore, the call for greater diversity had to be targeted to employers, and TB activities were implemented by their accustomed partner Business Finland (BF). However, within the engineer-driven BF the theme was considered extrinsic:

The DNA had old patriotic vibes: it was discussed whether it's right to attract international start-ups or use resources to serve international entrepreneurs in the first place. We had to explain repeatedly what's the benefit of this [TB] for Finland and for companies we want to support. (Interview #11)

The first campaigns targeting international start-ups yielded positive results. With persistent dialogue and resources from MEAE, the scope of activities gradually expanded. However, building institutional understanding on the benefits of international talents is yet to be completed (Interviews #11 and #12):

A major challenge was to convince BF that international talent issues do belong to their domain, and the process is still on-going. --- It contributed to the change that the ministry could execute results-based management to BF. Now you can demand things, so it's a completely different chance to start building permanent operations. (Interview #3)

The continuity of TB operations was secured in 2020 with permanent budget funding allocated to regularise the activity. This coincided with centralising labour immigration administration and policy coordination to MEAE, and a new unit set up in May 2020. This was decisive, as for the first time the funding was guaranteed to build the infrastructure reflecting the paradigm shift. The first years without funding were laboursome for the policy entrepreneurs, but in retrospect, the arrangement was considered positive:

We had to shake the existing operations and funding mechanisms. Actually, it was a blessing. If we had received funding straight in 2017, we could have set up a detached project organisation operating independently, but without any influence on existing mechanisms. Now we had to bulldoze a place for it. (Interview #3)

With the established position, an active immigration policy is being crafted. The recent Roadmap for Education-based and Work-based Immigration 2035 of the Finnish Government (2021), sets the target of the overall increase of at least 50 000 work-based immigrants, double the current annual volume. The target for new foreign degree students is to treble to 15 000 by 2030, with 75 % of the foreign students finding employment in Finland (PMO, 2021). As an implementation and follow-up tool, annual action plans are drawn up for the roadmap. The fact that Finland has as late as in 2021 set numeral goals for labour immigration indicates the topic's sensitivity in the political scene. Despite the challenges, the last four to five years have witnessed significant repositioning of CBI. If the objectives of the Roadmap materialized, the Finnish immigration policy would be strongly attached to the economic policy.

Economisation of immigration is often regarded with negative connotations, e.g. wealthier states cherry-picking the best and the brightest talents thus causing brain drain in the countries of origin, or immigration policies dividing immigrants to the wanted and unwanted categories on the basis of persons' economic usefulness only. In the Roadmap 2035 (Finnish Government, 2021), the Finnish policy balances between the presentation of intense economic benefits on the one hand, and good intentions to combat any exploitation of foreign labour on the other. In the policy expressed in the Roadmap 2035, the pursuit of an open, diverse and inclusive labour market for all immigrants as well as the call for the equality for all members of the society cushion the pure economic motives.

Threats to the planned course of action

Even though the necessity of CBI has largely been accepted across political parties, the foundation remains wobbly. The biggest threats come from the political opposition which toys with anti-immigrant sentiments and overstrict entry conditions. These combined with labour market discrimination jeopardize the efforts for enhancing Finland's global attractiveness, and easily lead to the exit of well-educated, mobile internationals. Moreover, regional ecosystems close to businesses and talents play critical roles but have diverse capacities for the implementation of the national strategy.

The gradual economisation of immigration with emphasis on economic benefits of immigration is also risky. The simplified narrative on demographic gap, workforce, or fiscal revenue is appreciated in the business life and easily understood by the public. However, emphasising the net value of a person may kindle intolerance towards those who might by some be considered unproductive members of the society, and pose a risk of unintentionally dividing

groups of immigrants to good, desired taxpayers and ‘the others’. Furthermore, the economy spearheading the discussion easily stirs frustration among internationals already residing in Finland but unable to find proper career opportunities. Fair treatment of all immigrant groups on the Finnish labour markets, and minimizing the exploitation of foreign labour are prerequisites for establishing sustainable MTM policies. Prioritisation of economic considerations raises the risks of immigrants being considered as economic assets, overlooking the varied reasons for migration, and neglecting the complex social, cultural and humanitarian dimensions of migration. The economic aspects of migration must be balanced with a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of international mobility.

Conclusions

This study illustrated the paradigm shift in the Finnish immigration policy making: how the immigration was moved from the ‘immigration periphery’ labelled by social sector issues, to be a recognised part of the economic and innovation policy over the last two decades. Using the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), reasons for deferred policy development were identified and the formulation of the novel Finnish macro talent management policy examined.

The competence-based immigration emerged in the national agenda late. The need for labour-based immigration, the ‘problem stream’ in MSF, had been identified already at the turn of the millennium, but the circumspect policy statements yielded only trivial changes, and the cross-sectoral theme fell between the cracks without true ownership among ministries. The tide started turning in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment around 2015, when few determined civil servants, ‘policy entrepreneurs’, brought together processes from multiple policy realms and managed to push CBI up on the policymakers’ agenda. Without the active involvement of the policy entrepreneurs the drifting in the should-do-narrative would have been likely to continue.

Successful framing of problems and solutions started by taking immigration themes to the venues where employment, innovation and the economy were discussed. To be listened to in these tables, the concept of immigration was branded accordingly: the new narrative was built on skills and competences of ‘international talents’. Policy entrepreneurs’ tenacious work coincided with private sector’s increasing concern on looming talent deficit. This resulted in the new policy arena intertwining immigration, economic and innovation policies together, examining how the national framework is empowering or disrupting international mobility, and what consequences it has to the Finnish economy.

However, this ‘policy stream’ has little significance on its own: to open the window of opportunity for a genuine policy change, it must merge with the ‘political stream’. While it had become evident in 2015–2016 that the Finnish immigration policy needed to be revised, reforms on CBI were side-lined as politically unattractive. With the split of the anti-immigrant Finns Party the lock was suddenly removed in 2017, and the circumstances became favourable for setting up a unique approach to enhance international talent attraction, and to increase the diversity and openness of the Finnish labour market.

Over the past years, Talent Boost programme has systematically built the infrastructure and systemic approach to CBI. The policy was strengthened by the preparation of the roadmap in 2021, which included clear numeral targets. This indicates the change of the mindset: Finland wants and needs immigrants. These concrete steps, together with the capacity building in the municipalities implementing actual attraction and retention activities, form the basis of the new Finnish MTM.

To conclude, the window of opportunity for the new CBI policy is now open. The next few years will determine if the Finnish society can move forward with the paradigm shift to acknowledge the significance of the immigration in the innovation and economic policy, and establish a coherent, enabling MTM framework and a living service ecosystem within it, whilst holding on to fundamental values of equality and social justice of all population groups. The burning question now is if the working life and the society as a whole can embrace ethnic and cultural diversity, or can the changing political power relations root out the entire programme before it is fully established.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare

Notes

¹The European Social Fund funded 46 pilot projects promoting labour-based immigration in 2007 – 2013. The national co-ordination mechanism MATTO provided a co-ordination platform but had no authority over the operations.

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