Ambivalent Strategies: Student-Migrant-Workers’ Efforts at Challenging Administrative Bordering

Olivia Maury
University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract
Migrants’ struggles against borders have been examined extensively among refugees and undocumented migrants, whereas the everyday struggles in contexts of administrative bordering have remained insufficiently examined within the framework of so-called highly skilled migration. Drawing on in-depth interviews (N=34) with migrants holding a student residence permit in Finland, this article addresses the means of challenging administrative borders in a constrained situation produced by the border regime. I argue that student-migrant-workers employ pragmatic strategies by making use of the legal framework to secure their right to residence. However, the efforts at circumventing the constraints of the border regime often become re-inscribed within the framework of capitalist production, displaying the ambivalence of migrant practices. This article contributes to the scarce sociological literature on the struggles around administrative borders and the vague scholarly inquiry into student-migrants' efforts at challenging migration control.

Keywords
ambivalence, borders, pragmatic strategies, precarious work, resistance, student migration

Introduction
Scholarly interest in refugees’ and undocumented migrants’ struggles in border zones and cityscapes has been extensive (e.g. Ataç, 2016; Caraus, 2018; Erensu, 2016; Näre, 2018), while the everyday implications of the border regime and resistance towards it have received scarce inquiry in the context of migrants conceptualised within the framework of so-called highly skilled migration. This article fills this research gap by examining how non-EU/EEA student-migrants, often perceived as a vehicle for highly skilled
migration (Kahanec and Králiková, 2011; Suter and Jandl, 2006), challenge administrative bordering in their attempts to secure their right to reside in Finland.

Student migration is continuously on the rise both globally and in Finland (OECD, 2019), and it offers a productive angle for studying the everyday impacts of the border regime in migrants’ lives. The number of foreign citizens in Finland has increased tenfold since 1990, reaching a total of 258,000 in 2018 (4.7% of the overall population), while persons with a foreign background now account for 13.8% of the total population (Statistics Finland, 2019a, 2019b). The number of international students in Finland has tripled since the beginning of the 2000s to 20,362 in 2017 of which 72% come from non-EU countries, notably from Asia (45%) and Africa (10%) (Finnish National Agency for Education [EUDFI], 2018). Within the past five years, the number of issued first-time student permits per year has ranged between 5000 and 6000 (European Migration Network, 2020).

Not all students migrating for purposes of studying in the EU experience it as a frictionless process devoid of difficulties when it comes to border crossings and residence permit applications. The examination of non-EU/EEA student-migrants’ everyday lives in Finland and their constant concerns about renewing the temporary student permit, or finding another basis for staying in the country, reveal experiences situated far from the image of student migration as a form of ‘VIP-migration’, as suggested by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2017: 26). Instead, drawing on interview data with migrants holding a student permit in Finland and working alongside their studies, the article demonstrates that, for many non-EU/EEA nationals, migration for studies appears a struggle that demands innovativeness and stubbornness for them to achieve their personal and collective goals.

Analytically, I am concerned with the tension between the student-migrant-workers’ efforts at shaping their lives in a desirable way while being subjected to the border regime that intrinsically affects the formation of the political and juridical structure of contemporary labour markets and the working student-migrants’ biographies. This article demonstrates that the migrants in question find ways to bend the boundaries of the legal framework and subvert the aim of migration categories in order to secure their right to legal residence in Finland. I analyse the struggles over the right to reside in Finland in contexts of administrative bordering (Könönen, 2018) by underlining ‘the will and the capacity to seek alternatives’ beyond being reduced to a subject constituted solely by power and discipline (Weeks, 2018: 10, 36). Following theoretical insights from Gago (2017, 2018), I approach the student-migrant-workers’ strategies as pragmatic, that is, as employed in order to get by and to sustain their advancement towards their goals. This approach highlights the dynamic of attempts to capture opportunities and pragmatic negotiations with institutions under constrained situations marked by the contemporary capitalist system (Gago, 2017: 35, 2018: 349).

The argument of this article is twofold. First, I argue that the student-migrants’ ways of creatively making use of the existing residence permit system by adjusting documents or finding meaning in other migration categories can be grasped as a pragmatic strategy of denouncing the immediate effects of the border regime with the objective of holding on to the right to reside in the country, and consequently, striving towards a desired future. Approaching strategies as pragmatic highlights the simultaneity of migrants’
autonomous aspirations and its intertwinement with complex forms of labour exploitation (Gago, 2018). Thus, the analysis put forth in this article points to the ambivalence of migrant practices (Mezzadra, 2011), as the efforts to reduce the constraining effects of the border regime are often re-inscribed within the framework of capitalist production. Consequently, the second argument is that the pragmatic strategies, through which the student-migrant-workers seek to take hold of moments of freedom, often include undertaking precarious low-paid work, which ambivalently posits migrants’ efforts of striving towards one’s goals as fuel to capitalist value accumulation.

By approaching the temporary student residence permit as a facet of the global border regime, I advance a critical analysis of the contemporary and flexible capitalist mode of production. I demonstrate how migrants’ encounters with administrative bordering practices underpin the spatial re-organisation of labour and heterogenisation of labour beyond the limits of the nation-state and the citizen-worker (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Here, the temporary residence permit plays a central role as it allows for the flexible capture of labour power (Maury, 2020b).

The article contributes to the scarcity of sociological literature on struggles in the context of administrative bordering and the vague scholarly inquiry into student-migrants' efforts at challenging migration control by highlighting the daily resistances by which student-migrant-workers enact their presence without necessarily being expressed as ‘political’ battles demanding something in particular (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015: 80). Lastly, the focus on pragmatic strategies paves the way for an analysis of migrants’ everyday attempts to resist and transform migration policy objectives, purporting resistance not only as a reactive form of refusal but as creative and active (Foucault, 1984: 95).

I begin by outlining existing research on migrant struggles and point at a gap in the research on student-migrants. Next, I discuss the research context and design. The analysis focuses on the room for interpretation in the context of administrative bordering, and moreover, on the strategies developed by student-migrants to challenge administrative bordering in order to circumvent the constraints of the border regime. The concluding discussion highlights the ambivalence of migrant practices pinpointed in the analysis and the way in which these practices contribute to uphold the filtering function of the border regime.

**Between Student Migration and Border Struggles**

Research on migrant and border struggles has often reflected rather visible and dramatic forms of resistance in militarised border zones, in migrant camps and in detention centres (cf. Ataç, 2016; Erensu, 2016; Näre, 2018). These acts of resistance have commonly been approached as a purposeful response by the oppressed to sovereign power, purporting such resistance to be reactive while overlooking its creative dimensions (Hughes, 2016). However, the more subtle forms of resistance through which migrants enact their presence and secure their right to remain (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015) has gained less empirically grounded research attention, especially among student-migrants. While there are multitudinous forms of resistance towards borders and border regimes, this article focuses on attempts at contesting borders in their dispersed form (Walters, 2002) in the administrative context of ‘everyday bordering’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018).
Everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) has been studied widely, not least among migrants in undocumented (Caraus, 2018; Ellerman, 2010) and temporary conditions (McLaughlin, 2010). Cohen and Hjalmars... to enable subsequent mobility (de Hoon et al., 2020). Others have pointed to how migrants gain legal residence by switching migration status (e.g. Goldring and Landolt, 2013; Schuster, 2005) or by possessing ‘clean fake’ documents (Reeves, 2013) and how they strategically interact with the police at ‘internal borders’ to gain the right to remain in the territory without official authorisation (Fabini, 2019). In the Finnish context, Könönen (2018) has demonstrated how migrants become subject to ‘administrative bordering’ through the administrative practices of permit renewal, which provokes border struggles in the form of tensions between migrants’ subjective aims and immigration bureaucracy. Border struggles are hence posited, following Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 13), not only as organised movements but also as struggles emerging when people try to resist and reduce the effects of borders.

Research on student migration has increasingly diverged from the image of the international student as the ideal highly skilled and wealthy migrant enjoying smooth cross-border mobility. Research demonstrates that migrants holding student residence permits or visas often have experiences of low-paid work and precarity due to their insecure and temporary migration status (Maury, 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Neilson, 2009; Robertson, 2011, 2019a). However, research on student-migrants’ efforts at contesting the border regime remain scarce. Neilson (2009) has analysed the protest of taxi drivers in Sydney in 2008, many of whom were international students, as challenging the hierarchies of differential inclusion and as a means of claiming recognition and redistribution beyond the limits of full membership in a political community. In her research on international students switching to a migrant status in Australia, Robertson (2011) has highlighted international students’ agency in their efforts at obtaining residency by manipulating the means of control with the aim of gaining personal advantage. Furthermore, Dear (2018) has approached the university as a prominent site of bordering in the UK, demonstrating that practices of collective resistance, such as the 2018 University College Union strike against the eroding labour conditions in universities, often adopt an intersectional perspective to address and resist border control on campus.

This article contributes to filling the research gap between student migration and border resistances in two prominent ways. First, it highlights the capacity of working student-migrants to challenge practices of administrative bordering (Könönen, 2018), approached here as an art of government through which the activation of the border is enforced (Walters, 2002: 564) in the context of applying for and extending residence permits. Second, the article contributes to the understanding of how efforts of circumventing the restrictive effects of the border regime among migrants holding a conditional
legal status become closely entangled with the performance of precarious work, thus bringing forth an ambivalence ingrained in the strategies employed. The argument is situated within a wider critique of the capitalist mode of production, which functions not merely as an economic system but as a modality through which forms of life are produced (Virno, 2004: 49). Moreover, the heterogeneity of subjects embodying labour power can never be reduced to mere abstract measures of value as antagonistic features of labour always exist, which from the perspective of capital need to be tamed and subsumed through mechanisms of power such as the border regime (see Mezzadra, 2011; Gago, 2017; Scheel, 2019). Thus, border management regimes constantly need to develop their practices and technologies of control in order to respond to the autonomous force of migration (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015).

Research Context and Design

Earlier research has demonstrated that student-migrants constitute an important part of the migrant work force in Finland (Könönen, 2019; Maury, 2020a). Given the serious lack of statistics on migrant labour in Finland (Könönen, 2019: 789), the numbers of working student-migrants are only indicative. Research findings estimate an employment rate of around 50% for international students, both during their studies and after graduation (Laine, 2016; Shumilova et al., 2012), while an estimated 80% of non-EU/EEA student permit holders currently work according to officials at the Finnish Immigration Service interviewed for this research project.

The research data was collected through thematic in-depth interviews (N=34) in English in 2017 and 2018 in the Helsinki region with non-EU/EEA migrants holding a student residence permit and who were engaged in predominantly low-paid service work alongside their studies. Most of the research participants had made their decision to study in Finland because of free tuition, as compared to the higher costs of more desirable destinations, such as the US or the UK (see also Eskelä, 2013; Shumilova et al., 2012). Others had personal connections to Finland or an interest in a specific study programme, while some previously had sought asylum in Finland or had held a residence permit based on work.

I came into contact with the research participants through Facebook groups, university e-mail lists and by visiting universities in the Helsinki region. The research participants came from North and South America (3), Eastern Europe (7), South-East Asian countries (12), South-West Asian countries (6), North Asian countries (3) and African countries (3). The research participants studied primarily in international programmes at the bachelor’s and master’s degree level in universities and universities of applied sciences. The interviews, which lasted on average for 80 minutes, centred around the complexities of studying and working at the same time, with a particular focus on the legal framework regarding student student-migrants’ rights. The thematic design of the research provided room for the research participants to introduce topics they found important for the discussion, topics that tended to mirror each other quite extensively throughout the data. Moreover, the research participants emphasised the importance of bringing the discussed issues to light through research and public discussion. All research participants gave their consent for me to use the interview data for research purposes and
were informed about the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any point. In addition, I conducted an interview with two national chief administrators of the Finnish Immigration Service, one of student permits and one of work permits to discuss contradictory information concerning the process of permit renewal that arose during the interviews with the student-migrants. These interview excerpts have been translated from Finnish into English.

Non-EU/EEA students are issued a temporary one-year residence permit, which requires a study place, secure means of support (6720 euros/year\(^1\)) and private health insurance, as the student permit holder is not entitled to Finnish social security. The holder of a student permit has the right to work, if the average amount of work is 25 hours or less during the semester, and full-time when classes at the educational institution are not in session or if the full-time work is done as part of a traineeship required for the degree. Upon graduation, one can apply for an additional year of temporary residence to seek a place of employment and is moreover eligible for a work permit without labour market testing (Ministry of the Interior, 2004).

Non-EU students in Finland inhabit a more precarious legal position than Finnish students or students who are EU citizens, as they are compelled to conform to the regulations of the student permit; hence, they become more dependent on wage work since they do not have access to welfare services (Maury, 2017, 2020a). Moreover, prior research has demonstrated that Finnish students often work in relatively stable employment relationships with the objective of obtaining both work experience and income (Aho et al., 2012; Saari et al., 2013), while student-migrants’ primary motivation for work is to sustain themselves in rather unstable employment relationships on a part-time basis and zero-hour contracts due to their precarious legal status (Maury, 2020a).

For the sake of confidentiality, I have anonymised the transcribed interview files by replacing people’s and employers’ names with pseudonyms and by substituting the names of places with broader territorial indications. Nor do I indicate the research participants’ study field or age in the analysis. I have categorised the data following the reoccurring topics of borders, labour and precarity, discrimination and subjectivity, which have been subjected to thematic content analysis. This article deals explicitly with the parts of the data categorised as subjectivity, grasping the ways in which student-migrants enlarge their space of action at the crossroads between a constraining border regime and precarious labour markets. Although student-migrants certainly employ a multitude of strategies to create desired futures for themselves, I do not provide a detailed description of the migrants’ strategies as such, but rather, from a situated perspective, highlight the creative forces emerging when attempts to govern migrants encounter the migrants’ subjective practices and desires.

**Navigating the Space for Interpretation**

When deciding to come to Finland to study, most of the research participants had high ambitions and hopes for their future. Several of them, however, had encountered difficulties along their student path. Although most of the research participants described themselves as coming from a middle-class background, only a few of them received direct financial support through family networks. Most of the research participants experienced
the living expenses and the yearly economic requirement of the student permit to be high, which led a number of student-migrants to engage in various types of part-time work situated in the low-paid service sector, already overrepresented by workers with a migrant background (Statistics Finland, 2018). Through the analytical notion of student-migrant-worker (Maury, 2017, 2020a; Neilson, 2009), I bring forth the combination of work and studies and highlight the research participants’ struggles over how to position themselves in relation to administrative migratory categories as well as their intentions to form desirable lives.

The student-migrant workers put effort into navigating a migration system fraught with ambiguities. On the one hand, strict requirements specify just what is needed for an application to be successful. On the other hand, these requirements, defined by law, become subject to interpretation when handled by immigration officials, giving shape to a ‘law in action’ (Calavita, 2010). For student-migrant workers, a primary concern in the process of renewing the student permit is demonstrating that they have a secure means of support in addition to the required competence to advance in their studies. However, several student-migrant workers expressed the opinion that the interpretations of how this sum may be demonstrated varied between staff at the Finnish Immigration Service.

Tuan, a student from South-East Asia, explained that officially 6720 euros are needed to renew the permit. He stated: ‘my friend, he did not have that, just 3000 euros, but he had the bank statement from his income from his company [and] he passed.’ Tuan compared this to another friend who had 5000 euros in savings but did not have the permit renewed because his monthly work income, apparently, was deemed too low.

The difficulty in finding clear guidelines for demonstrating sufficient funds highlights the space for interpretation enabled by the law and the discretionary power of the personnel at the Finnish Immigration Service, as demonstrated throughout the EU (e.g. Eule et al., 2018). The interview with the administrative personnel at the Finnish Immigration Service endorsed the perception that decisions are made on a ‘case-by-case’ basis (Spire, 2009):

Of course, it [the permit decision] is always subject to case-by-case consideration. For example, the work relationship, how it can be taken into account, depends on whether the applicant, for example, has been working there before or if it is a zero-hours contract and the applicant has just started working there; then, we don’t know how many hours the person has [been working]. So, in principle, the income cannot be based on this kind [of work], but then again if it is part-time work and [the applicant] has already been working for a year. . . so because of this we require these bank statements and pay slips so we can see that [the applicant] regularly has gotten these earnings and then it can be taken into account. (Interview at the Finnish Immigration Service)

The decision regarding whether or not to renew a student permit is eventually made by the administrative official in charge of the application, who has the power to evaluate whether the applicant’s personal work history appears stable and lucrative enough. Moreover, the role of insecure employment, brought up in the interview excerpt, highlights the interconnection between the precarisation of work (Maury, 2020a) and permit renewal as an entanglement increasingly creating room for the administrative personnel to exert discretionary power.
Due to the varying outcomes between different residence permit applications and regional differences between the ways applications tend to be handled, several research participants described the logic of decision-making as ‘completely invisible’, to use the words of one participant. The obscure logic reduces the student-migrants’ possibilities for making complaints concerning the decision on their application, which often results in the applicant merely accepting the decision. Most of the research participants experienced this process as creating obstacles to prevent them from achieving the common goals of graduating, finding a job corresponding to one’s education and most often staying in Finland or elsewhere in Europe. This tiresome situation caused several research participants to refrain from even articulating their future aspirations. As a woman from Eastern Europe phrased it: ‘I’m not telling it [future aspirations] out loud, loudly and boldly, because there are many circumstances – like bureaucratic ones – that can stop me’.

However, the ‘bureaucratic circumstances’ did not always hinder the student-migrant-workers from moving forward with their lives in a preferred direction. Rather, such circumstances just made many of them resort to alternative strategies for obtaining and holding on to their right to stay in the country. The following two sections analyse the student-migrant-workers’ strategies to secure a legal status and their drive to build more desirable lives.

**Conforming Students, Yet Efficient Workers**

Leila obtained income through babysitting and cleaning, despite having several years’ experience in highly skilled work in her country of origin. Her income was, however, not high enough to sustain a life in Finland and she faced a common source of distress: securing the means of support without exceeding the allotted number of work hours. Therefore, together with her employer she made an informal agreement for an increase in her hourly salary for babysitting, in return for which she would work a few hours unpaid.

I cannot do more than 25 hours a week, so we agreed that, on contract, that I will do 25 paid and [in addition to that] 3 hours unpaid (Leila, North Asia).

Leila did not think of her efforts of securing the one-year residence permit apart from an overarching strategy to stay in Finland in the future. She was convinced that by working hard she would obtain her ‘big dream’ of founding a social work enterprise. She counted herself among one of many steady working student-migrants who had ‘made the decision to come’ embodying ‘the power to get to Europe’. By struggling to follow her dream, Leila would be able to leave her constrained position behind and instead get ‘power, which is knowledge and money’, as she phrased it.

Another research participant, Vera, who worked in paid and unpaid jobs for various media-related start-ups, described the impossibility of counting the hours of freelance work. In order to renew her student permit, she nonetheless needed to conform to the calculus of work hours applied by the immigration service. Vera approached the limit of 25 hours a week only as a formality and stated with ease:
If someone wants to forego this limit and work more, they can just agree with the employer. They can just write that it’s 25 hours in the contract and increase the pay, and the person will be working more in fact. (Vera, Eastern Europe)

Both Leila and Vera evoked a certain drive to stay in Finland, completing their degree and following their dreams. They both felt that the troublesome combination of ensuring enough income while having the right to only a limited number of work hours could be solved in co-operation with the employer by modifying the employment contract so it would fit the legal framework of the residence permit. While finding a way to work around the legal framework, the co-operational agreement based on the performance of unpaid work hours reinforces dependence on the employer and opens up potential situations for increased exploitation (Anderson, 2010; Maury, 2020a).

Providing a manipulated work contract for the purposes of renewing the residence permit, with hours fixed in accordance with the legally approved number of work hours but only partly reflecting the realities of the working arrangement, appears as a pragmatic strategy. It consists of using precisely the method of control – the limit of 25 hours a week – in order to circumvent the administrative efforts of enforcing control over the student-migrants. Peculiarly, this need to modify one’s work activities in order to fit a pre-assigned mould, is provoked by the legal framework of the migration system with its strict requirements. Controversially then, and similarly to what Scheel (2019: 137) has argued, the migrants’ autonomous moments emerge precisely as they engage in and prepare for the administrative process of permit renewal.

The need to collect sufficient financial resources demonstrates how the migrants in question become torn between the ‘pre-eminently political identities’ (De Genova, 2002: 422) of being a student, migrant and worker. For those without enough savings or financial support, one formula for increasing the possibilities of successfully renewing the student permit is to become an efficient and conscientious labouring student subject in the Western legal space, immersed in an economic system that profits from precarious and poorly paid labour. The urge to ‘cut costs in every corner’ is effortlessly realised by cutting from foreign workers, as one student-migrant-worker concluded: ‘well, it’s the capitalist economy’. The conscientious student-migrant worker is thus produced at the administrative border in a similar way as ‘hard workers’, ‘good wives’ and ‘good parents’ are produced according to immigration requirements (Anderson et al., 2009: 7). The need to maintain an income in order to renew a residence permit produces new forms of labouring practices (Della Puppa, 2018), which often implies downward social mobility and accepting precarious work so as to comply with the state’s formal and informal requirements (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018). Consequently, becoming a seemingly conforming student-migrant, yet an efficient worker, is a strategy employed pragmatically to secure the right to stay in the country. Moreover, it divulges a form of resistance, not as a reactive opposition towards the existing structures of migration control, but by striving to reduce the constraining effects of the borders by actively seeking and constituting alternatives from within the existing structures – alternatives which often are translated into the language of capital.
Mobile Statuses

Juggling work and studies usually becomes tiring and stressful for those holding a student permit, and it is often accompanied by the fear of making any mistake that would lead to deportation. Idha explained that she and her acquaintances had been strictly advised by the Finnish Immigration Service to comply with the requirements so as not to be deported. After three years of studies, Idha’s attempt to renew the student permit failed. The wearying situation demanded that she find another solution to legalise her status in Finland.

That year, I was working and not finishing my credits. Or, I wouldn’t say I wasn’t finishing. I had my työharjoittelu [internship] going on at the same place. When we used to renew the visa and they tried to cut down on the students, a lot of students before me had that trouble, students before me were told they would be deported for this if not for that; a lot of students have gone through that chain as I did. [ . . . ] Luckily, for me my work permit was accepted, and I continued working with that. I just couldn’t continue studying ‘cause I had to work, and I had to get the four-year permit, ‘cause I wasn’t sure if I was gonna continue after the first year. I had to work the first year, then get a four-year visa, and then I applied for schools immediately once I got four years; ‘ok, now there’s a chance’! *laughs*. (Idha, South Asia)

While studying, Idha was engaged in care work and manual work. After receiving the news that her student permit had not been extended, she decided to put her studies on hold and apply for a work permit. One of her employers agreed to give her a full-time employment contract, which is necessary to apply for a work permit and emphasises the need for the employers’ goodwill in fulfilling the requirements for the work permit (Anderson, 2010). Idha’s application was successful, as the work sector was exempt from labour market testing otherwise assessed together with the work permit application. She was granted a one-year work permit, which then was extended for a period of four years. According to Idha, the work permit finally gave her ‘a chance’, as she was able to apply to university again without legal constraints and without having the impression of constantly being under the watching eye of the Finnish Immigration Service. Hence, obtaining a residence permit based on work was, somewhat controversially, what permitted Idha to apply to university and continue studying.

Similar controversies between the assigned purpose of the residence permit, such as studies or work, and the lived reality while holding the permit were brought throughout the interviews. Nina, a migrant from Eastern Europe, described how many of her friends had experienced a sense of relief when changing the student permit into a work permit. She stated: ‘Psychologically, they need time to rest, and maybe go to “TE-toimisto” [the unemployment office] to get something else, they have more freedom, they are not tied to one job and are not afraid of losing the job.’ Nina’s description of the reasons for switching status demonstrates the drive to achieve ‘more freedom’ and to become less tied to administrative immigration control.

Likewise, Akin described his reasons for switching status. He had pursued studies in various fields and had experience with various jobs in the service sector. His stay in Finland extended over many years, during which time he had grappled with arranging his
life to fit his studies and work and move his family to Finland. Therefore, he decided at a certain moment to switch from a student permit to a work permit:

When you are a student, you are limited ‘cause you have to renew [it] every year; as a worker, you have to renew after four years, you have a lot of time to plan. With permanent [residence], it’s easy, but it wasn’t easy to arrive; it took me many years. . . . Actually, I was supposed to graduate last year, but I had to quit my studies for two years to face my work when I was applying for my family [reunification]. That’s how the system affected me: I quit studying for two years before I went back [to studies]. (Akin, West Africa)

Akin found status mobility (Schuster, 2005) as a way to achieve his diverse goals, including bringing his family to Finland, which points to the significance of social and family networks, often underestimated in research on student migration. However, switching from a student permit to a work permit did not stop him from studying, although it caused an interruption in his studies. Akin’s experiences in dealing with the immigration administration also involved discrimination. Akin explained that the yearly renewal of his student permit had provided him with experience and confidence, and he stated: ‘when I applied for my A-status [work permit], I read the law, so I knew’. Thus, he demonstrated his preparedness for arguing against any inconsistencies in his application process, concretely bringing forth his contextual knowledge of the process.

The application process was not straightforward and his basis for applying for a work permit was questioned following several work contracts of his involved in the process. As it was not the first time Akin had been put in this difficult situation when dealing with immigration control, at the time handled by the Police, he expressed his concern about some of the staff ‘making it difficult for a certain set of immigrants’, suggesting that ‘maybe the person [staff] does not like foreigners’. Akin’s carefully chosen words regarding the personnel points towards the involvement of discriminatory practices, suggesting that social constructions of age, gender, race, national origin, class and migration status might impact the application process and its outcome, as demonstrated in prior research (Alpes and Spire, 2014; Leinonen and Pellander, 2014; Scheel, 2019). Moreover, especially racialisation, together with gender, affects how easily a person’s identity or legal status can be subject to control by the police and border guards in everyday situations (Keskinen et al., 2018; Reeves, 2013). Könönen (2018: 147) notes that African migrants are targeted with extensive scrutiny in the process of administrative bordering in Finland, while people with a Sub-Saharan African background in Finland generally experience more discrimination based on ethnic and immigrant background than average at the EU level (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017).

The abovementioned excerpts demonstrate the narrow space for action when holding a temporary student permit. Somewhat counterintuitively, by switching to a work permit the overworked students ‘psychologically’, as Nina put it, no longer felt as though they were being tied to work, despite the work permit requiring full-time work in often predefined sectors. The impression of having more freedom derived chiefly from their newfound access to the social welfare system, from which they had been excluded while on a temporary student status, and consequently, the experience of not being as tied to work for the sake of income, necessary for renewing the temporary student permit. Earlier research
has demonstrated that status mobility is a necessity for non-EU/EEA graduates if they are to continue residing in Finland after graduation (Könönen, 2019). The current analysis, however, highlights that status mobility can secure residency while studying and liberate from the constraining circumstances of the student permit already before graduating. Hence, the capacity of migrants to actively influence their living conditions in Finland through calculating possible steps to secure their residence demonstrates the way in which status mobility becomes a pragmatic strategy. By undermining the administrative migration categories, this strategy appears not as a form of resistance towards the border regime per se, but rather as a path to continue studying in Finland and achieving one’s goals.

**Conclusion: Ambivalent Strategies**

This article has analysed student-migrant-workers’ efforts to remain legally in the country and to direct their lives towards achieving their desired goals. It has offered a nuanced picture of resistance towards the constraining border regime, diverging from its mediatised and highly visible forms, and instead highlighting the particular tensions taking shape between, on the one hand, the administrative bordering practices and on the other the student-migrant workers’ attempts at challenging the governing of their everyday lives. The analysis has highlighted how the insecurities created through the student residence permit and the associated border regime lead student-migrant workers to find alternative routes for obtaining a more secure status and societal position. This article has argued that the use of the existing structures of the migration system appears as the student-migrant workers’ pragmatic strategy for ameliorating the possibility of extending the residence permit or changing the basis for residence in order to go on with their lives and to take hold of moments of ‘freedom’.

The strategies employed unfold within the terrain of capitalist production, which divulge an irreducible tension between the subjection to administrative bordering and subjectivation to counter the various forms of bordering as well as the creative, but preliminary solutions, invented therein (Fabini, 2019; Lorenzini and Tazzioli, 2018). The empirical examples of modifying work contracts to remain within the allowed number of work hours and switching from a student permit to a work permit in order to escape the precarious and legally insecure position of a temporary status have the side effect of reinforcing the student-migrants’ bond to precarious low-paid work. Their efforts at circumventing the methods of control highlight the ambivalence of migrant practices (Mezzadra, 2011), as the student-migrants strive to, on paper, conform to the regulations of the migration system, but which come to include precarious work in an unrelated branch of employment in order to secure a continued legal status in the country. From this standpoint, the search for moments of autonomy may ambiguously spur ongoing processes of capital accumulation. The analysis further emphasises that the pragmatic forms of securing a legal status are preliminary, while also being intertwined with the methods of control. By addressing the ambivalence of the strategies used, the article contributes to research emphasising the role of immigration law and policy in producing migrants as a cheap and flexible labour force (Anderson, 2010; Könönen, 2019; Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018; Maury, 2017, 2020b) by highlighting not only coercion but also the migrants’ subjective capacity to act.
Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that the need to creatively make use of the residence permit system in order to remain within the country is provoked by that same system and its legal framework. This challenges perceptions of the border regime as producing silent and docile bodies and points instead to the filtering function of the border regime (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013): less wealthy migrants are potentially filtered out if they do not find the means for satisfying the requirements of the migration system and the residence permit in question. As has been argued, one formula for trying to secure one’s legal stay in the country is to become an efficient worker and ensure that one’s work arrangements fit the requirements of either the student permit or the work permit. However, no single formula is fool proof due to the discretionary power of the migration officials, with local and global power relations constantly being reshaped in the social and historical context, often significantly formed by discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion and age (Alpes and Spire, 2014; Leinonen and Pellander, 2014; Scheel, 2019) as well as vestiges of colonial power (Krivonos and Näre, 2019).

Lastly, the article has broadened the perspective on migratory practices beyond the ‘taken-for-granted types’ of migrants often discussed in isolation from one another (Robertson, 2019b). The migrants’ movement between different statuses demonstrates the incongruence between the residence permit categories and the permit holder’s lived experiences, and it points to the weak analytical potential of administrative migration categories when assessing the lived realities of migrants (see also Krivonos, 2015; Könönen, 2019). The analysis of wage-working student-migrants demonstrates on the one hand that work often is no less part of the lived experience of the student permit holder (Maury, 2017, 2020a, 2020b), while a work permit on the other hand can provide possibilities for pursuing studies. This radically calls into question the governmental aims of managing migration through strict visa policies and the overlooking of the subjective forms of life within a migration category, which come to be described as the ‘abuse of study visas’ (Suter and Jandl, 2006: 7), in order to reside in the country for purposes other than studying. Thus, the student-migrant-workers’ strategies of securing a legal status demonstrate that the incongruence between a permit category and the lived reality often is an outcome of particular border regimes and its entanglements with local welfare systems as well as the capitalist quest for flexible workers that intimately shape migrants’ biographies. However, the student-migrant workers’ capacity to invent and produce signifies the possibility for ongoing resistance and an excess in terms of labour that capital always needs but can never fully control (e.g. Gago, 2017; Mezzadra, 2011). In sum, the article has demonstrated that the border regime causes student-migrant workers to resort to alternative methods for securing their stay, with an emphasis on a migrant’s legal status, while leaving room for further nuanced research on how gender, race and nationality affect the strategies of securing legal residence.

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ORCID iD
Olivia Maury https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9894-1682

Note
1. The sum changes occasionally, but it has remained the same during the years 2013–2021. Through new amendments to the law, two-year permits are available but require double the amount of financial resources.

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**Olivia Maury** is a doctoral researcher in Sociology at the University of Helsinki. Her research focuses on the production of precarious labour through the border and residence permit system, by highlighting migrants’ subjectivities and the dynamic relationship between migratory movements and mechanisms of border control.

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