"In Academia, Recruiters Care About What You've Done: Outside They Care About What You Would Be Able to Do Next"

Tommi Himberg

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Abstract In our interview with Tommi Himberg, he shares his journey from music research to education and science policy expert. While his position as a diplomat is relatively unique, Tommi gives advice on how there are many opportunities to make a difference in international policy from a variety of positions. He also discusses how his PhD experiences provide a foundation for his current role, and generally provided the basis for many transferable skills. Tommi further suggests that we all consider how our work relates to real-world challenges, particularly the UN's sustainable development goals.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Tommi: I'm Tommi, and after doing academic research on music psychology for a decade and a half, I now work in the Finnish foreign service. I'm posted in Paris, where I'm a counsellor on education and science policy in the Permanent Delegation of Finland to the OECD and UNESCO.

What was the focus of your PhD?

I studied rhythmic synchronisation of dyads. Initially I thought I'd do cross-cultural experiments but ended up working on the methods and especially on how to analyse dyadic data. I started my PhD in 2003 in the then newly established Centre for Music and Science at the Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge. I spent 4 years there and then came back to Jyväskylä, Finland, where I had done my master's, to take a job as an assistant and later as a university teacher. I thought I could quickly finish my thesis, but teaching and new research projects at the Centre of Excellence in Interdisciplinary Music Research in Jyväskylä got me sidetracked. I ended up spending many years as "almost-ready PhD" and then only completed my degree and graduated as PhD in 2014 after moving to Aalto University to a 100% research position. By that time, the focus of my thesis had also shifted a bit from rhythmic tapping studies and musical beats to more general temporal patterns of interaction, and also other domains in addition to music, such as dance and conversations.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

I was thinking about academia and becoming a professor at a university as the end goal. During my undergraduate and master's studies, I was active in student unions and worked for the rector of our university, but I deliberately put those ideas aside

as I knew that in order to make it in academia, you need to have full focus on your research.

How have your career plans changed as you've continued on to your current position?

They've diversified a lot. I can now see various options to continue after this current 5-year gig, and I'm surer now that something interesting will come along – where I cannot just use the skills and experience from my research career, but also the new ones I've gained in my current position. One thing that makes me a bit disappointed is that I really can't see a path back to research anymore; It's a bit like competitive sports where being outside for this long means it is virtually impossible to get back. The achievements that are valued in academia are such that you can only gain in academia, and other merits, even substantive ones, seem to be ignored. Having said that, I don't think I'd want to go back necessarily. But, in short, I can definitely see more diverse paths and options, just because in my current job I meet a wider variety of people, whereas in academia you tend to interact mostly with other academics.

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

At the permanent delegation we operate in between the international organisation and our country, which is a member of the organisation. So on the one hand, we sit in various committees and steer the organisation (in this case OECD and UNESCO) to a direction our country thinks is best. On the other hand, we try to engage our administration back home with the projects these organisations are doing and we try to communicate the outcomes of these projects to our capitals and also our societies at large.

To give a concrete example, OECD conducts lots of interesting research on education; best known is probably the PISA study which is a learning assessment of 15-year-olds in more than 80 countries. But there are lots of other studies, with topics ranging from funding models of universities to social and emotional skills in early childhood education. Education specialists in permanent delegations have an important role in prioritising which studies to run and also checking they are run and communicated in a way that is relevant and makes sense for the countries. The OECD carries out international comparisons, and as all education systems are different, there's always negotiation on what to look at and what methods to use, etc. In this part of the job, I benefit greatly from my research background, and many times it's not too different from discussing studies in departmental seminars. I definitely have an advantage over those colleagues who are diplomats by training!

The second part is then facilitating Finland's active participation in studies and projects, for example, if Finland wants to commission a country report on a topic. And in the end, whether Finland has taken part or not, when the results are published, I write summaries or reports or just try to Tweet about the findings and ensure the reports find their way on the radar of people who should see them. Again here it's not much different from science communication efforts, although the studies are often more directly relevant to policy-making and thus especially the online discussions can take a very different path from what they are when discussing a paper on statistical methods, for example.

In practice, my role is more to do with the oversight of everything that is going on, keeping up with a large number of processes and projects, quickly changing and less about being very deeply involved in an individual project. The 'real' experts are often people from capitals, e.g. at the ministries of education who we counsellors try to support in various committees and working groups. Having this overview and having to switch focus very often is very different from having one's own research project and needing to immerse oneself in it very deeply for months and months.

What do you like most about your work?

I like the variety of it; the core of it is about interacting with people from all kinds of backgrounds and nationalities. There's a lot of freedom and creativity involved, and the results are very concretely making the world a better place. This direct impact, being able to influence national and international, even global, policies, is probably the most satisfying aspect of my job.

And from the point of view of personal life, the absolute best part is the ability to maintain a work-life balance. There are long hours occasionally and, of course, loads of stress at times. However unlike in academia where I was constantly struggling with bad conscience about unfinished work and not being able to take time off, now when the workday is over I can leave that be and focus on family or hobbies or other stuff without work creeping into my mind. I didn't even realize how important this was until this changed.

And what do you like least about your work?

There are a lot of meetings and some of them can get quite boring, and sometimes it's just email after email all day. So there are dull moments occasionally. But perhaps the worst part are the unavoidable frustrations of international cooperation, where things often advance much slower than what you'd like, or good processes just stop for random political reasons. And in the most annoying cases, things get complicated because some partners haven't followed the process and start asking/demanding changes after you thought there already was a consensus.

But, creatively navigating these difficulties or trying to anticipate them to avoid them completely is one of the coolest parts of the job. For example, working hard with others and then finding a creative solution that makes the text of a statement acceptable for everyone is very satisfying – not unlike convincing a very stubborn Reviewer 2!

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

There are loads of things and I probably can't even see all of them myself. First of all, just having the degree brings a lot of credibility when discussing education policy and especially when discussing science policy. And concretely, especially OECD is a data-driven organisation that essentially does a lot of policy-related research, and thus, knowledge about research methods, interpreting data, validity, reliability, sampling and other survey methods, etc. are things that often arise in meetings and I can follow/comment on while many others without scientific training can't. Without a PhD and the postdoc experiences I wouldn't also be this quick in reading and absorbing new information. I'm also using the same methods of note-taking, summarising and mind-mapping that I learned when doing PhD and after. Also I find that all the teaching and science communication activities (presenting, lecturing, popularising, social media, etc.) have been super useful. The results of OECD reports are often complex and being able to explain them clearly is important (so that ministers, their aides and government officials understand why the results are important and what they should do about them). Also giving talks and lectures is useful practice for all the public speaking one has to do in meetings where you might have loads of 'scary' people in the audience. Ambassadors and ministers from non-friendly countries are not more scary than grumpy professors from competing labs in conferences, though.

And of course negotiating a text for a declaration or convention is not so different from polishing your article manuscript based on peer reviewer comments or feedback from your professor or co-authors. Neither text gets accepted until you can find a consensus that everyone is happy with.

The thousands of hours of reading and writing prepare you for the most important component of any job as an expert!

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

First, it might be good to broaden the scope a little. I work as a diplomat in foreign service, and in a permanent delegation to an international organisation, but these posts are very rare, and in some countries reserved exclusively for career diplomats.

However, the secretariats of international organisations are full of experts whose work could be described as doing applied research and where academic merits have a lot of weight in recruitment. Most of these organisations have internship programmes or junior professional programmes that are good pathways to careers in international organisations.

There are also many opportunities where researchers can get a taste of this line of work. If you've enjoyed the international cooperation aspects of research, e.g. involved in organising international conferences, having experience in scientific societies or having held positions of trust in university admin (faculty councils etc.), you have gathered relevant experience. Also, if you are involved in social movements or activism of any kind (from promoting open science to science communication to supporting refugee scientists) and have a motivation to make the world a better place, you'd share a lot with people who work in international organisations or in diplomacy.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

While you can build much of the useful skill set by just doing research, you would be even better prepared if you took an active role in your community, in whatever way you find rewarding. Organising events, doing things for one's community or volunteering are very rewarding in themselves, and good ways to balance hectic research work. Such experience also helps in demonstrating that you do not fit the old stereotype of hyper-focused and impractical scientist!

Organising conferences, being involved in scientific societies or researchers' unions are in my opinion especially good ways to gather experience and merits that are valued both in the academia as well as outside.

And speaking of merits, it would be a good idea to either regularly apply for non-academic jobs or in other ways ensure that your 'non-academic' CV is up-to-date not just in terms of its content but also its format. To oversimplify, in academia recruiters care about what you've done (your publications, positions, awards, grants) and outside they care about what you would be able to do next (skills, goals, motivation, attitudes). While in academia a long list of publications speaks for itself, outside it is just an example of one particular skill, and you'd need to spell out how that high-profile publication you coordinated that international group of researchers for reflects your leadership qualities, how setting up this new measurement rig demonstrates your capacity for problem-solving and how your use of social media in scientific communication shows your creativity.

There are many resources online and at universities that will help you hone your CV for non-academic purposes. At first these formats might feel alien and strange, but it's worth the exercise. And I really like the tip I saw someone give in Twitter: as a post-doc, you should apply for at least one job outside academia every year – just

to stay aware of what is out there and what skills are expected and how those processes work. This also helps you widen your perspectives about opportunities and prevent you from feeling trapped in one career.

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

This is an excellent question. If researchers are prototypes of specialists, diplomats are the prototypes of generalists. I feel that in my job now, I'm at my peak of generalism, and I feel I'm covering a huge swathe of fields and areas. At the same time, in the diplomatic landscape I'm a substance specialist with a relatively narrow focus. So scope and focus are relative things; in my current world, a 'field' or 'topic' is what in academia would be covered by a faculty, not a department and definitely not what a research group or individual project would cover.

But I do care deeply about education and science, so while I can't often drill down and focus on a specific question or idea that would fascinate me, and I need to be able to hop from one thing to another sometimes very quickly, I still have the feeling of working with topics that motivate me intrinsically. And as mentioned earlier, the ability to have a direct impact on policies is very rewarding!

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

I think it would be important to look at a few different aspects of freedom here. First, having a more stable (and often better paying) job gives you more freedom in life in general, but also in your job. If your research funding is running out, you need to keep churning out grant applications under very heavy pressure and there's very little freedom in that.

The other side is the content and ability to choose what to work on. I am lucky to work in an organisation where experts are trusted to make smart choices about what they focus on (a smart choice is such that it combines your own preferences as well as those of your organisation). In every job, including academic ones, there are things you will need to do whether you particularly like them or not, and in my experience, the ratio of nice things and not so nice things is at least as good in my current job as it was when I was doing research.

Finally, to choose how to work, what tools to use and when to work, etc. are a bit different. In academia there is usually more freedom about these compared to, say,

in a ministry. But having regular working hours and a centrally maintained set of tools also has its upsides – the office hours also mean work doesn't leak into evenings and weekends. And while I would personally run a different stack of tools, I can live with the ones I'm given as at least I don't need to pay any attention to updating or maintaining them.

In general, I also think the generalist nature of my role gives me a lot of freedom. I've joked that having to work with two different international organisations is of course hard, but it has the benefit of always having something interesting to do in the other organisation if the work in the other one seems stuck on its tracks. In a way, structured procrastination is easy when there's a lot on your plate!

Have you thought about returning to academia?

Yes, occasionally, and as my "gig' here is a fixed term, many people have asked if I plan to return or if I'd like to. There are aspects that I miss – the teaching and many aspects of doing research, especially the deep reading, planning and setting up experiments, etc.; but realistically I don't think it would be easy to get back. None of what I've done recently would be considered as merits in academia. And having a gap of 5 years in my already mediocre publication record will not help, either. Also, I am currently more intrigued about the other doors that might have opened.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

Remain open-minded about career options, and explore your possibilities. And make sure you recognise and document all your skills, not just the ones that academic hiring processes value. Research training gives you a huge package of extremely useful and transferable skills, but unfortunately they are often unnoticed as in the academia they are taken for granted. Being able to operate in many languages, in international teams; gathering, synthesising and presenting huge amounts of complex information; ability to evaluate the reliability of information, track down primary sources; construct or criticise logical argumentation… all have huge value and are not easy or very common skills, even if in academia they are the 'baseline' everyone is expected to master. Having a wider range of career options will help you as well as others see your skills and your value, and it will stop you from feeling you must just gratefully accept whatever you are given in academia, no matter how short-term/poorly paid/uninteresting.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

I'd like to propose a small challenge: pretty much everyone knows about the sustainable development goals (SDG's) that have been set by the UN to be reached by 2030. There are 17 objectives and within them 169 more specific targets. Can you connect your research to one (or more) or these? How is your research contributing to achieving the SDG's?

Some research funders are already posing this question to the applicants, but I think it could be interesting and useful for everyone to think about this. To answer, one needs to learn about the goals and related international projects, and this is useful in itself, as pretty much the whole world and the whole international community is working towards these goals. You might also find out about interesting job opportunities while researching this. Also, at least for me it was helpful thinking about my research in this wider (very wide!) context that is usually not so obvious. I'm convinced that with some imagination and sufficiently open interpretation of what forms a possible connection, everyone can find something in the SDG's that connects with their research. And if you find something that connects, it might boost your motivation. And if there's no connection yet, perhaps the thinking process leads you towards your next research idea that might connect?

Thank you for sharing your career journey and advice, Tommi!