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Danish municipalities' efforts in attracting and retaining skilled migrants: Towards a discourse analysis of how municipal measures frame skilled migrants

Abstract

Motivated by the growing political and economic significance of global talent mobility, this study focuses on municipal initiatives that aim to foster inclusion and retention. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Danish municipalities contribute to attracting and retaining highly skilled migrants through local initiatives and discursive practices. It further examines how highly skilled migrants interpret, negotiate, and respond to such institutional representations and contributes to broader discussions on migration, integration, and identity construction in municipal contexts. Despite strong national recruitment policies, Denmark continues to face challenges in retaining international professionals, which highlights a gap between attraction strategies and migrants' lived experiences. This research note addresses this issue by setting a research agenda for exploring how municipal programmes construct the identities of highly skilled migrants through communication and events, and how migrants respond to these constructions.

Keywords: highly skilled migrants, municipal initiatives, inclusion, retention, identity construction, migration governance

1. Introduction

Driven by labour shortages due to the shrinking working-age population in OECD countries and the competition to build knowledge-based economies, global competition to attract highly skilled migrants will continue to increase (Pekkala et al., 2016). Permanent-type migration to OECD countries set a record in 2023 with 6.5 million new permanent immigrants, which is 28 % above 2019 levels (International Migration Outlook, 2024). Although the United States and the United Kingdom have remained the top OECD destinations for new migrants, the European Commission has proposed a set of voluntary measures to make it easier for third-country nationals to work in the EU and to help member states address widespread labour and skills shortages (Friis & Mia, 2024). As both an EU member state and an OECD country that has received fewer (-9 %) new permanent-type immigrants in 2023 than in 2022, Denmark has followed a similar path by setting forth measures to attract and retain highly skilled migrants (International Migration Outlook, 2024).

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1.1 Initiatives towards attracting highly skilled migrants

At the national level, the Danish government has launched a reform of international recruitment to improve competitive conditions for companies to recruit more highly skilled migrants (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2023). The reform promotes the equal treatment of international professionals and has lowered salary thresholds for work permits, which is explicitly designed to attract global talent from outside the EU (Denmark's National Reform Programme, 2023; KPMG, 2025; The Copenhagen Post, 2025). The reform also seeks to increase the number of international students in fields that require a highly educated workforce by proposing that universities offer 1,100 study places on programmes taught in English per year between 2024 and 2028, and 2,500 annually from 2029 (Denmark's National Reform Program, 2023).

At the municipal level, organized initiatives to support the relocation and retention of highly skilled migrants have emerged or intensified. This can be exemplified by two municipalities in Denmark that have recently adopted measures to attract an international, skilled workforce: the City of Odense, a city of 210,838 inhabitants in 2024 (Odense i Tal, 2024) and the City of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city, with 373,512 inhabitants in 2024 (Aarhus i Tal, 2024). Both cities already host full universities and numerous international students and expatriates. To strengthen Odense's international profile and help position it as the "world's best robot city" (Vedtaget Budget 2025), Odense municipality has doubled the number of employees who support highly skilled migrants and expanded the pre-existing newcomer service to what is called an "international house", which serves as a central hub for international newcomers (Odense Byråd, 2018–2021). Aarhus municipality has also launched similar initiatives. To enhance the city's internationalization efforts, Aarhus City Council has established a committee comprising representatives from both the public and private sectors to develop new initiatives aimed at increasing the number of foreign professionals by 40 % between 2025 and 2030 (Aarhus International Strategi).

Municipalities in Denmark are playing a growing role in international migration by implementing strategies to support immigrant inclusion and retention. This paper therefore seeks to illuminate the efforts extended by Danish municipalities to attract and retain highly skilled migrants. Our interest is particularly directed towards the municipal level of governance in welcoming highly skilled migrants and how municipal discourses frame them. Hence, we propose to pursue the following research questions:

1. How are migrants constructed in the strategic communication material of municipality welcome measures?
2. How are migrants discursively constructed in organized municipality events?
3. How do migrants respond to this discourse?

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1.2 Municipal initiatives

A number of municipalities in Denmark offer free services to highly skilled internationals, as well as their accompanying partners and families, to facilitate relocation and retention in the country. These services have manifested in several forms, such as international houses, newcomer services or international communities, and they are often run as a partnership between public municipalities, private companies, universities, and, in some cases, community volunteers (see Table 1). The services vary across municipalities depending on the scope of the support and are offered in the form of organized events or personal consultations. The overall aim is to equip highly skilled migrants with practical information, support their integration into Danish culture and society, create networking opportunities, and assist with job searches (International House Copenhagen, International Community by Erhverv Aarhus, International House Odense). Some municipalities focus primarily on newcomer services which provide essential practical information, such as obtaining health cards or residence permits, finding accommodation or enrolling children in school. Other municipalities offer international communities or international houses which provide broader, ongoing support throughout an international professional's stay. These services may include regular events to facilitate networking, initiatives to support the career paths of accompanying partners, and activities promoting cultural understanding. Importantly, international houses also provide a physical location where internationals can drop in and access resources directly.

1.3 Overview of municipal initiatives

Municipal initiatives in Denmark can be traced back to 1994, when Copenhagen Capacity was created by Copenhagen Municipality, Frederiksberg Municipality, Copenhagen County, Frederiksborg County, and Roskilde County (counties were abolished in the administrative reform of 2007). The organization Copenhagen Capacity works closely with Invest in Denmark, the official investment promotion agency within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (Invest in Denmark n.d.), and its main purpose is to attract international companies, investments, and highly skilled migrants to the region of Eastern Denmark (Copenhagen Capacity n.d.).

In 2008, the first International Community initiative was established in Aarhus by the business organization Erhverv Aarhus, Aarhus University, and the City of Aarhus with the aim of developing the region as an attractive destination for international employees and their families (International Community by Erhverv Aarhus n.d.). Following this, International House Copenhagen was founded in collaboration with the University of Copenhagen and the Capital Region to make the city more open to international researchers and ease their relocation and integration into Danish society (Young, 2013; International House Copenhagen n.d.). In the same year, Esbjerg Municipality launched Newcomer Service to support interna-

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tional employees and their families, which later expanded into International House in 2021 (Esbjerg Kommune). Currently, we have identified 15 municipalities that offer such services in varying forms (see Table 1):

Table 1: Overview forms of newcomer services in Danish municipalities

Municipality	Name	Run by/Partnership	Types of Services Offered	Target Group(s)
Copenhagen	International House Copenhagen	City of Copenhagen with partnership between public bodies, educational institutions, and private organizations and businesses	Registration and guidance, events, job and career programmes	International talents (employees, job seekers, students and their accompanying spouses)
Kalundborg	Newcomer Service	Kalundborg Municipality	Assistance with practical matters such as finding accommodation or childcare/school	Danish and international newcomers
Lolland	Newcomers Service	Lolland Municipality	Settlement service and job search support	International newcomers
Bornholm	Newcomer Service	Regional Municipality of Bornholm	Settlement service and job search support	International newcomers
Aarhus	International Community	Erhverv Aarhus with partnerships between the City of Aarhus and Aarhus University	Settlement service, local engagement, social and networking opportunities	International professional, accompanying family member, student or graduate
Aalborg	International House North Denmark	Aalborg Municipality with partnership between public organizations and businesses	Job seeking, business startup, and culture & leisure	International professionals and accompanying spouses, international graduates and residents
Horsens		Volunteer organization that collaborates with local organizations	Social gathering and networking events	Internationals
Herning and Ikast-Brande	Expat in Herning and Ikast-Brande	Municipalities of Herning and Ikast-Brande	Newcomer service	Internationals in the area and newcomers
Odense	International House Odense	City of Odense municipality in partnership with SDU	Newcomer service, spouse service, events and activities	International highly skilled employees, accompanying partners
Esbjerg	international house	Esbjerg Municipality collaborates with the International Community of Esbjerg, which is run by international volunteers	Newcomer service, partner/spouse service	Danish and international newcomers, international employees and their families

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Municipality	Name	Run by/Partnership	Types of Services Offered	Target Group(s)
Billund	Newcomer Service	Billund Erhverv and Billund Municipality	Settlement support and job search support for accompanying partners	International employees and their families
Sønderborg	Newcomer Service	Sønderborg Municipality	Settlement service, job search support for accompanying partners, social network	Danish and international newcomers, international employees and their families
Vejle	Newcomer Service	Vejle Municipality	Settlement service, partner career support	International employees and their families
Kolding	New in Kolding	Kolding Municipality collaborates with public organizations and The Expats Association of Kolding run by international volunteers	Settlement service, but plans to extend partner career support as of 2026	International employees, students, graduates, accompanying family and partners

Source: Own chart.

Some of these initiatives are centralized, which means that they provide services to more than one municipality. For example, International Citizen Service (ICS East), located in International House Copenhagen, serves international citizens across 37 municipalities (Outside of Copenhagen, International House of Copenhagen). Similarly, International House North Denmark supports internationals in northern Denmark by offering services across 11 municipalities.

2. Literature review

The immigration of highly skilled migrants is frequently described in political discourse as an economic necessity (Bauder, 2008). Highly skilled migrants are thought to contribute to the establishment of new businesses and jobs and improve the competitiveness of existing businesses through innovation (Hall & Beaverstock, 2012). A study conducted in a panel of 20 European countries reveals that "a larger pool of migrants in the skilled professions is associated with higher levels of knowledge creation" both in the public and private sectors (Bosetti et al., 2015). Another study which was carried out in 15 European countries, including Denmark, suggests that economic considerations affect individuals' attitudes towards migration and that natives strongly prefer the immigration of highly skilled rather than low-skilled migrants due to their contribution to taxes and social security payments (Naumann et al., 2018). In Denmark, skilled migrants are acknowledged as economic assets in terms of filling labour shortages, sustaining the welfare state, and contributing to national growth through taxation (Cengiz & Karlsson, 2021; Aragones & Salgado, 2016; Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2023). They are discursively constructed as "a good business deal" and estimated to contribute around DKK

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183,000 annually in tax revenue (Klintefelt, 2024). However, despite the positive framing of highly skilled migrants and institutional investments by the media and business associations, Denmark faces persistent challenges in retaining international workers (Copenhagen Capacity, 2024; Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2019).

2.1 Persistent challenges of retention

A record number of internationals have recently left Denmark, which suggests a disconnect between official narratives and lived experiences (The Copenhagen Post, 2025). Statistics show that only 35 % of highly skilled migrants remain in Denmark after five years (Copenhagen Capacity, 2024), and 42 % of international graduates from English-taught master's programmes in Denmark leave the country within two years of completing their studies (Aterini & Wolf, 2019). Studies highlight subtle workplace discrimination, underemployment, and weak workplace inclusion (Lueg, 2024; Risberg & Laurence, 2022). A strong aversion to accepting highly skilled migrants among highly skilled natives (e.g. in Denmark or the United Kingdom) has also been reported (Naumann et al., 2018). The most recent Expat Survey (Copenhagen Capacity, 2025) confirms that job security and inclusion are decisive factors in retention. However, research also suggests that EU migrants who integrate relatively easily into the labour market often depart quickly, whereas those facing greater challenges remain (Jensen & Pedersen, 2007), which indicates a gap between national and municipal discourses of "international talent" and the lived realities of highly skilled migrants. Understanding this gap requires attention to how institutional contexts both enable and constrain the work and life experiences of international employees (Bjerregaard, 2014). Studies show that although countries and host institutions are eager to recruit international academics, internal processes are rarely adjusted to accommodate their specific career capital (Richardson, 2008).

The Danish case suggests a similar pattern: attraction policies are robust, but retention remains fragile. In the context of a "boundaryless workforce" (Tung et al., 2008) whereby professionals can move easily across borders, Denmark's challenge lies not only in recruitment but in ensuring that institutional and workplace practices foster genuine inclusion and long-term belonging. In the meantime, the tension between national discourse, local initiatives, and migrants' lived experiences raises important questions about how highly skilled migrants are discursively constructed and how they respond to such portrayals in practice. This study explores this disconnect by investigating how municipality events discursively construct highly skilled migrants and how highly skilled migrants respond to these narratives. The study aims to uncover whether municipality discourses align with highly skilled migrants' perceptions of identity and belonging within Danish society.

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2.2 Research gap and proposed approach

Existing research on migration governance in Denmark has paid attention to national discourses, policy reforms, and welfare state concerns (e.g. Jensen & Pedersen 2008; Tung et al., 2008; Jensen et al., 2017; Bjerregaard, 2014; Cengiz & Karlsson, 2021; Brown, 2024). Other studies have focused on the economic contribution of highly skilled migrants and their role in sustaining welfare systems (Aragones & Salgado, 2016; Brodmann & Polavieja, 2010). However, there is limited research that systematically examines how highly skilled migrants themselves experience and interpret the discourses that position them as "talent" or "good business". In particular, the municipal level, where attraction and retention policies are operationalized in practice, remains underexplored.

This research note proposes to address this gap by investigating how municipal initiatives, particularly international houses, newcomer services, and international communities, construct the identity of highly skilled migrants through their organized events and how these individuals respond to such constructions. Municipal events and services are not only sites of practical support but also arenas in which ideas of belonging, inclusion, and "Danishness" are negotiated. By focusing on these sites, the study will capture the interplay between institutional discourse and migrants' lived experiences.

2.3 Theoretical framework and methodology

This research note suggests drawing on discourse and narrative theory to examine how highly skilled international professionals are constructed in municipal discourse and how these individuals respond to this discourse. Following Gee (2010), we understand discourse as the integration of language, action, symbols, and values to enact socially recognizable identities. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), materials from municipal welcome events will be analyzed through van Leeuwen's (1996) and Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) frameworks on identity and immigration. To complement this approach, we will use narrative theory to emphasize how individuals use stories to make sense of experiences and construct belonging (Loseke, 2007; De Fina & Tseng, 2016). Drawing on Weick's (1995) concept of sense-making, the study aims to explore how migrants interpret and create meaning in unfamiliar environments, and to reveal how migrants negotiate identity and belonging in local contexts.

Methodologically, we propose to combine ethnography, more specifically, virtual content analysis and participant observation, with narrative interviews. First, we will provide a descriptive overview of all welcome and newcomer measures in Denmark, as such a comprehensive overview does not exist. From this overview, we will select a limited number of sample cases, that is, four municipalities that represent the diverse forms of initiatives. Participant observation at welcome events will be employed to capture how identities are constructed through interaction (Jor-

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gensen, 1989; Van Maanen, 1995), and virtual ethnography will be used to analyze online communication on municipal platforms. Finally, narrative interviews will offer insight into migrants' own stories and meaning-making processes (Riessman, 2008; Loseke, 2007; Lueg 2025).

2.4 Conclusion: Towards an analytical focus on everyday welcome and retention practices

The Danish case illustrates the paradoxes of migration governance in a small welfare state. Although national and municipal institutions have invested heavily in attracting international professionals, retention remains a weakness. Initiatives such as international houses and newcomer services exemplify the growing role of local actors in shaping Denmark's international profile. Yet persistent patterns of discrimination, underemployment, and premature departure suggest a disconnect between official narratives and the lived experiences of migrants. This research note argues that understanding these dynamics requires shifting analytical attention from attraction policies to the everyday practices of retention. By examining how municipalities discursively construct the identity of highly skilled migrants and how such individuals interpret or resist these constructions, the study will generate insights into the barriers to and enablers of long-term inclusion.

In doing so, the project contributes to the following three broader debates: first, the Europeanization of welfare states and the states' strategies for reconciling openness to global talent with restrictive approaches to other migrant groups; second, the role of local institutions in global mobility governance; and third, how highly skilled migrants negotiate identity and belonging in host societies. The Danish case thus offers a window into the contradictions of "talent attraction" in Europe, showing that success in the global competition for labour requires not only recruitment but also institutional change to sustain inclusion and belonging.

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