

How organisations misrecognize skilled migrants' worth and contribute to precarity

ABSTRACT

Why are skilled migrants at risk of precarity, despite their competence being in demand? We investigate this at the level of organisations and how they evaluate skilled migrants' labour worth. Drawing on a 36-month qualitative investigation, our study explores how a HR initiative for recruiting skilled immigrants assesses their competences. With Lamont's sociology of evaluation, we approach recruitment as a social process of recognition of migrants' professional worth and identify four instances of recognition gaps: the worth of immigrants' labour, the worth of their academic skills, their expected social position, and the value attached to the cultural diversity they bring. This low social valuation can be linked to precarious positions. Our contribution to research on skilled migrants' precarity illuminates how organisational process play a role in their market worth devaluation. Contribution to HR inclusive recruitment literature stresses how the evaluative design of the process, rather than individual bias, reproduces discrimination.

KEYWORDS: boundaries, evaluation, justification, misrecognition, precarity, rationalisation, recruitment process, skilled immigrants, social recognition

1-INTRODUCTION

The precarity of immigrant workers is well studied, but much less so for skilled immigrants (Kim and Noh, 2026). Skilled immigrants often experience professional unrecognition and a low valuation of their skills (Landolt and Thieme, 2018; Ahmad, 2020) making them potentially at risk of precarity. Forms of employment, as well as welfare conditions and

migration regulations touch skilled migrants in comparable ways as other migrants (Groutsis et al., 2024; Maury, 2025; Kim and Noh, 2026). In Europe, where skilled immigrants are a competitive necessity (Eurochambers, 2019) explanations advanced for skilled immigrants' underemployment and potential precarity are commonly offered either at a macro labour market level (Ref), or at an individual level (e.g., Samaluk, 2016; Almeida et al., 2019). We propose to study the potential precarity of skilled immigrants at a meso, *organisational* level, and in particular, as an organisational capacity to recognise immigrants' labour worth.

Recognition of immigrants' qualification is typically done by intermediary organizations that classify and categorise education and skills (Diedrich, 2014; van den Broek et al., 2016). The potential limits of such organisational practices have been pointed at for vocational skills: social valuation precedes and shapes these recognitions (Diedrich, 2014). For academic degrees, a similar evaluation is in place since degrees from perceived comparable educational systems are equally valued (Damelang et al, 2019). The evaluation of the skills of immigrants is thus a core element in their recruitment and subsequent employment.

Processes of evaluation are closely linked to precarity because labour market incorporation depends not only on skills, but also on socially organized judgments of worth. Organisational and intermediary actors do not simply identify qualifications, they evaluate and translate them into labour market value (Rivera, 2012b; Liu-Farrer, 2025). When foreign experience is discounted, migrant credentials are only partially recognized, or migrants are deemed suitable mainly for subordinated roles, channelled into downgraded or underpaid entry jobs, and insecure employment (Damelang et al, 2019; Kim et al., 2026). Precarity, thus, is also produced through recognition processes that render some forms of labour less valuable and less deserving of stable incorporation.

We approach recruitment as a form of social recognition, drawing on Lamont's theorisation of evaluation as a boundary-setting process (Lamont, 2012, 2018). Our study investigates a recruitment initiative specifically designed for the inclusion of highly skilled immigrants, by

Nordliv (pseudonym), a Nordic financial services provider. Nordliv has developed this initiative to address exclusionary contextual conditions faced by skilled immigrants in their efforts to enter the labour market (Guo et al., 2021). Using an in-depth, multi-sited, qualitative study over a period of 36 months, we researched how this recruitment process attempts to create conditions for the labour inclusion of skilled immigrants through the recognition of their competences. To this unique empirical material, we ask: How does a recruitment process recognise immigrants' worth?

This led us to investigate all stages of a recruitment program, from needs analysis to the decision to hire, when most studies focus on one stage, often screening, and using either vignettes or field experiments (Damelang et al. 2019; Adamovic, 2022). Approaching recruitment as a social recognition, using the sociology of valuation (Lamont, 2012, 2018), provided a rare opportunity to study a *process*: its evaluative design, its workings, its internal logics (as in Rivera, 2012a & b; Fernandez & Sosa, 2005; Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020).

Our findings show that, contrary to its intended objective, this inclusive recruitment process partly devalues the professional competences of foreign applicants and leads to precarious positions. To evaluate the merits of applicants, the process establishes and then justifies boundaries (Lamont, 2012) between candidates. We show how societal hierarchies of worth (Lamont, 2018), which frequently position foreignness as less desirable, are embedded within the design of the initiative's recruitment process to justify its boundaries. Despite their qualifications, many skilled immigrants found their worth unrecognized or diminished, particularly on four key areas: the worth attributed to their labour, to their academic degree, to their social status expectations, and to their foreignness. The limited recognition of their labour worth led the organization to propose precarious forms of employment.

This study contributes to broadening the understanding of migration and precarity with a case on the precarity of skilled immigrants. Our main contribution stresses that the misrecognition of the labour worth of skilled immigrants can also be linked to the limits of organizational practices (Risberg and Romani, 2022). Organisational capacity to recognise

the worth of skilled applicants is broadly assumed to be unrestricted by objective and rational recruitment procedures. We show that even in a process specifically designed to recognise the worth of skilled immigrants, the recruitment process in itself is discriminatory, (re)creating social boundaries between the candidates. We thus add a process-oriented perspective that theorises recruitment as a social evaluation process (Lamont, 2012). We show how a recruitment process can be understood as a social valuation that shapes recognition along the established social hierarchy/categories of worth.

This study also contributes to the HRM literature on inclusive recruitment, which has primarily focussed on reducing biases in recruiters' screening and interviewing (Deros et al., 2021; Quillian et al., 2019). We add a processual approach that elucidates an implicit mechanism of discrimination of foreign talents: candidates are assessed in view of the group they are associated with (e.g., 'foreigners') and its position in the social hierarchy, rather than their individual merits. It is thus not solely the recruiters' individual bias that reproduces unfavourable outcome for foreigners, it is also the inclusive recruitment process, in its design, that discriminates against foreign talents. Lamont's sociology of evaluation equips us with conceptual tools - such as boundary identification and their justification - to critically examine the design of existing recruitment processes and mitigate embedded discrimination.

2-THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Our interest lies in elucidating the role that organisational practices play in the potential precarisation of skilled migrants. We already know that intermediary organisations' processes define, classify and categorise education and skills of migrants, shaping their labour access prospect and rights (Diedrich, 2017; van den Broek et al., 2016; Maletzky de García, 2021). We know less, however about direct recruitment practices. Studies of the recruitment process by employer almost exclusively focus on individual bias. Although bias can manifest at all stages of recruitment (Guo et al., 2021), it has been most extensively

documented in the screening phase (e.g., Oreopoulos, 2011; Quillian et al., 2019; Ahmad, 2020; Adamovic, 2022). For example, religious or ethnic minority markers tend to disadvantage applicants, particularly for customer-facing roles, resulting in fewer interview invitations (Deros et al., 2017). While later stages of recruitment have received comparatively less scholarly attention, studies suggest that similar biases persist, favouring members of the majority population (Quillian et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2020). Proposed explanations for these disparities include prejudice, homophily, ethno-sociality (Holgersson et al., 2016), implicit bias, racism, and unconscious bias, and rarely, the design of the recruitment process.

In Human Resource Management, a stream of research focusses on ‘inclusive recruitment’ (Triana et al., 2021; Salgado et al., 2017), that is, how to design processes that will address these documented disparities. The proposed solutions are along two dimensions. One invites to remove visible markers of applicants’ foreignness (e.g. names, postal code, picture) in the early phase of the process. For instance, Deros and Ryan (2019) show how preventive measures can be taken to limit bias in recruitment processes, by anonymisation (see also Adamovic, 2022) and standardisation of screening tools. The other invites to train recruiters so that they change their impression formation processes and increase their awareness of biased decision-making (Deros et al., 2017). Training and mentorship of recruiters are to improve employers’ knowledge about the university systems and types of accreditations in the countries of origin of the immigrants (Almeida & Fernando, 2017), and develop recruiters’ cultural capital (Almeida et al., 2019) that will help them recognise the competences of foreign applicants (Tran et al., 2023). Organisations, by training recruiters, aim to remove mental barriers, reduce prejudice, and build a culture of inclusion capable of recognising the value and merits brought by applicants. While training has shown some promise, evidence regarding their long-term effectiveness remains contested (Deros et al., 2021). Similarly, anonymizing resumes has not yet demonstrated consistent evidence of reducing discrimination, particularly after the interview phase (Lacroux & Martin-Lacroux, 2020; Adamovic, 2022).

Despite mixed evidence, the implicit assumption of the literature remains that a fair assessment based on individual candidates' credentials should be possible and employers continue to strive for inclusive recruitment practices to reach a discrimination-free selection (Salgado et al., 2017). We argue that organisational recruitment processes respond to societal sense of worth.

Recruitment as a social recognition process

We approach recruitment as a form of social recognition (Rivera, 2012a&b; Tholen, 2024) and use Lamont's theorisation of evaluation as a boundary-setting process (Lamont, 2012, 2018). Social recognition involves the symbolic and institutional mechanisms through which boundaries are drawn between the groups deemed valuable and worthy of inclusion, and others, which will be marginalised and excluded, in our case, from (favourable) employment opportunities.

Recruitment encompasses identification of relevant candidates and the rationalisation, based on neutral and fair criteria (such as 'experience' or 'qualifications'), that one candidate is the most appropriate. For Lamont, recognition processes can be seen as ongoing actions that involve sorting out people, creating group boundaries and hierarchy between them (e.g., Lamont and Molnár, 2002), for example, between candidates who will be shortlisted, and those who will not.

Recognition builds on two components: the *identification* of differences between groups and the *justification* of this difference. Lamont uses the term 'rationalisation' to stress that this justification process is often "designed according to rational principles that are intended to maximize efficiency. These are generally perceived as 'neutral' and 'fair' (based on merit) but often institutionalized from accumulated historical inequalities or resources" (Lamont et al., 2014: 591). We adopt the term 'justification' to mention the overall legitimisation of boundaries, and Lamont's terminology of 'rationalisation' to stress the apparent rational, neutral, or effective way in which boundaries between social groups come to be justified.

For Lamont, recognition is ‘a social act by which an individual or group’s relative positive *social* worth is affirmed or acknowledged by others’ (Lamont, 2018:432). When a social group is devalued, Lamont calls this a ‘recognition gap’, which stresses the ‘disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society’ (Lamont; 2018:421). A social group that is not recognised - whose worth is seen as low - will encounter stigmatisation or discrimination which translate, in our case into negative labour market outcomes. In this study, we approach Nordliv’s Initiative as an attempt to valorise immigrants’ skills, by developing a specialised recruitment process capable of recognising their (professional) worth.

3-METHODS

3.1-Research setting

Nordliv is a large financial services provider in Northern Europe with its primary market in Sweden where the company is represented with branch offices in most cities. Nordliv’s corporate values are explicitly oriented toward social responsibility (CSR). The company has been awarded several CSR prizes and is considered exemplary in Sweden when it comes to the inclusion of immigrant workers at the workplace, specifically, with its ‘Initiative’. The Initiative is run by the company’s HRM department as a program for the recruitment of skilled immigrants. Nordliv sees the well documented under-employment of skilled immigrants (e.g., Irastorza and Bevelander 2021; Osanami Törngren and Holbrow 2016) as a combination of recruiters’ biases and structural discrimination in the Swedish labour market. The Initiative involves over 90 senior managers at various offices, offering internship positions, several times a year. Interns are recruited through a collaboration with the Swedish Public Employment Services (SPES). The SPES first screens their database for relevant candidates who are then met during a speed interviews event by Nordliv managers. At the time of our study, most candidates had migrated as adult from respectively Eastern Europe, Syria and India or Pakistan, on various motivations ranging from a search for asylum to family reunion. Successful applicants become interns for six months full-time, work closely with their mentor and receive basic compensation (about 365 EUR monthly) from the SPES. Subject to a positive evaluation and the availability of a

suitable position, Nordliv may offer the interns employment upon completion of their internship. In addition, with their status of intern, all participants are allowed to apply to internal Nordliv job vacancy, which, in itself, is a much more favorable setting than public job offers. Overall, about 70% of the interns secure a form of employment after the internship, either at Nordliv or elsewhere according to the Initiative's organisers. At Nordliv, most of the employment was in client support, in the form of zero-hour contracts. Figure 1 provides an overview of the Initiative.

Figure 1 around here

3.2 -Data collection.

The Initiative was chosen for its explicit purpose of addressing the structural discrimination of skilled migrants on the Swedish labour market, and its ambition to create a path of recruitment of foreign-born employees. We chose an in-depth qualitative investigation to capture the workings of the recruitment process. We combined the experience from several researchers at several events, in different cities, to maximise the range of perspectives collected and establish a stronger credibility of the themes identified (Schreier, 2018). Given the case-study nature of the empirical material, we make no claims about the generalizability of our findings. Instead, we expect that the insights obtained from this case can be transferable and inform research studying similar processes. Table 1 provides an overview of the span of empirical material collected and how it was used in our analysis.

Table 1 about here

Strengthened by the national recognition for its work and the high commitment of its team to the Initiative, Nordliv's HR department was open to collaborative research with multiple universities. It helped us access the field, spread information internally about our research and collect informed consent. Author 1 collaborated with Nordliv between 2016 and 2020, participated in several of its activities such as training and recruitment events for the

Initiative (June and December 2019) and facilitated Author 2's entry. Author 2 did an organisational ethnography at Nordliv over 18 months between 2018 and 2019, during which he was involved in the Initiative, observed the March 2018 event (where he met Author 3) and co-organised the December 2018 event. Author 3 was also involved in a research collaboration with Nordliv between 2017 and 2020 and participated in three recruitment events. Author 4 was a participant observer to the December 2019 recruitment event together with Author 1.

In total, the four authors observed six recruitment events, in two major Swedish cities, between March 2017 and December 2019 that invited about 250 candidates for a hundred positions. We interviewed 38 persons (a total of 41 interviews). Our emphasis on the process evaluative design motivated that we centred on key actors in the design and or the execution of the Initiative, and less so on its beneficiaries: 15 recruiting managers, eight local SPES caseworkers, six candidates for an internship in the Initiative, and six employees of Nordliv, of which two former interns, two HR employees including the head of the Initiative and one intern (see table 2 for details). Our original material comprises the transcript of our field notes from 38 hours of observation, our notes of 30 informal interviews and the transcript of 11 semi-structured interviews, as well as the ethnographic notes related to the Initiative by author 2 over 18 months. All names have been anonymised and, for the interviews performed in Swedish, since all authors speak Swedish, the translation into English was done by the authors.

Table 2 about here

3.3-Data analysis. Our analysis procedure followed an abductive thematic analysis, alternating inductive approach for exploration of the process and its outcome, and deductive approach for elucidation of instances of recognition (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). We adopt naturalistic inquiry's criteria of research trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Pratt et al., 2020). A first inductive thematic analysis (stage 1) aimed to explore which were the various steps of the recruitment process both at Nordliv and the SPES. This analysis was conducted independently by the first three authors, who

then compared their coding. The original material allowed us to sketch over seven steps, depending on the events.

We then examined the material through the lens of our research question, aiming to elucidate how the recruitment process functions as a form of recognition of skilled migrants' worth (stage 2). The first author engaged in a coding process on her own collected material (23 interviews). She deductively identified moments of recognition using Lamont's conceptualisation of recognition (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). For each step, author 1 aimed to identify whether a boundary was established between groups (e.g. eligible applicants and those who were not eligible) and how it was justified (e.g. requirements for academic qualifications). Four boundaries and their justification were identified, overlapping several steps of the recruitment process. To strengthen the dependability of these findings, Authors 2 and 3 then performed a similar analysis on their own material and confirmed these four boundaries with similar and sometimes complementary justifications. Finally, we analysed interviews by Author 4 and Nordliv's documents about the Initiative, and found additional evidence of similar boundaries and their rationalisation.

In a subsequent analysis (stage 3), we aimed to explore the outcome of this recognition process, that is, which social position or status is granted to the applicants through this process, and thus, whether their worth is recognised. We independently and inductively analysed how individuals or group's relative positive social worth is affirmed or acknowledged (Lamont, 2018), for example, with the praise of the skills gained abroad that they bring to the organisation. When the worth of the skilled professional was devalued, we classified this as a 'recognition gap' (Lamont, 2018). This third analytical stage identified one clear recognition and thus valorisation of immigrants' skills, those in high demand in Sweden (e.g. IT skills). We also found four instances of recognition gaps: the worth of immigrants' labour, the worth of their academic skills, their social status expectations, and the value attached to the cultural diversity they bring.

For clarity purposes, we chose to present the recruitment process in four major steps (1) Needs analysis, (2) Positions and ad drafting, (3) Screening and (4) Interviews and decision

to hire, as illustrated in figure 2. This allowed us to highlight the boundaries and justifications found in the material, as well as the instances of (mis)recognition (figure 3), and thus to elucidate how this recruitment process functions as a form of recognition of immigrants' professional worth.

4-FINDINGS: RECRUITMENT AS A SOCIAL RECOGNITION PROCESS

Our main finding reveals that, despite the Initiative's intended purpose, each major stage of its recruitment process overlooks the foreign value that skilled immigrants bring.

**** Figure 2 around here ***

4.1-Needs analysis for the Initiative

HR Managers in charge of the Initiative describes it as a 'recruitment channel' to validate and retain foreign talent, which is seen as important to the firm's business operations. Officially, the program is described as: 'an initiative where labour market inclusion for foreign-born who have an academic degree, contributes to the organisation's talent management' (Nordliv, Annual Report, 2018: 19). On Nordliv's website, the program is said to 'aim at increasing the diversity of [Nordliv's] workforce (...) introducing talented and engaged professionals to [Nordliv]' (Nordliv, external website, 2025).

The needs analysis is a moment of recognition of the skilled immigrants' worth: it posits and then justifies a boundary between those who are needed and can join the initiative as participants, and those who will not. The boundary clarifies who is needed for Nordliv and the answer given by the organisation is: 'foreign-born in possession of an academic degree'. This terminology refers to persons born outside of Sweden, who have a minimum of a bachelor. In practice, it can be a person who moved to Sweden as an infant, grew up in Sweden and has a Swedish academic degree, as well as someone who just moved to Sweden and has a foreign academic degree. No additional criteria are made explicit in the presentation of the Initiative, yet, for positions outside of the headquarters, caseworkers at SPES told us that candidates should also speak Swedish or, at least, be considered capable of speaking Swedish adequately by the end of the internship.

Why foreign-born persons are needed, that is, the justification of the established boundary, remains unclear, however. The official description of the Initiative does not specify why foreign academically educated are needed nor how their foreign skills and experience will contribute to the organisation. In an internal document explaining the various steps that mentors need to take, the needs for academic qualification and foreignness are not explicit (see figure 1). Instead, this document creates a routinization of the needs analysis, it rationalizes the boundary by adding an administrative description apparently based on a 'rational' authority: a clear description of the tasks to maximize efficiency (Lamont, 2014: 591).

In practice however, it is commonly acknowledged that Nordliv lacks access to foreign language skills. '[Nordliv] has discovered that it's an advantage to have someone who knows the language of their customers' commented the SPES Gothenburg liaison officer. HR managers working with the Initiative often mentioned foreign language as the business case for foreign-born interns. It remains unclear, however, how language is an academic competence.

Lars, who leads the Initiative, usually presents the Interns as 'talents' and a great 'resource' but does not justify the boundary for foreign-born academically educated either, instead, he claims that the Initiative is a risk-free endeavour. 'An internship takes six months and the SPES pays the [interns'] compensation (...) So, we don't take risks, we get a resource, and we can end the [internship] whenever we want if it doesn't work' (Lars, head of HR). The justification indicates risk minimisation rather than a positive argument in favour of skills gained abroad. Each one of the authors has had conversations with HR managers about the possibility of Nordliv compensating the Interns, and their refusal is firm. The Initiative rests on the condition that the welfare state, here embodied in the SPES, pays interns' compensations. However, only skilled foreign-born persons who arrived in Sweden recently, and who are currently unemployed, and accept to be part of an integration program, are eligible for compensation. It is thus a much narrower population than 'foreign-born academically educated' who will, in practice, receive some financial support for the internship.

In sum, in this first phase of the recruitment process, the recognition of the value of skilled foreign-born applicants is rather weak. The boundary of 'foreign-born academically educated' is, in practice, ambiguously defined by Nordliv and not justified in terms of what benefit they will bring to the organisation. What is clear however is that the value of these foreign skills is not worth a financial commitment by the organisation in the form of an internship compensation.

4.2-Opening of position and ad drafting

In this second step, the boundary identifies where the intern should be positioned in the organisation. The kind of positions offered for internships are diverse and depend entirely on which managers propose to have an intern. Internship positions are available in IT, sales, accounting, legal, finance, and HR sections of Nordliv, as well as in front line positions in customer service. An internship position for the Initiative can only be opened if there is an identified recruitment need.

While the Initiative identifies potential participants as 'foreign-born academically educated', the internship positions do not always require higher education or specific skills. The 'ad' is often a short description of the internship offered with an indication of expected skills. It is for the SPES caseworkers to do a first screening among their pool of candidates. In this second step of the recruitment process, the identification of the boundary for the selection of interns is materialised in the kind of positions opened for applicants. However, this boundary is blurred in practice since interns find themselves in both high-skill positions (e.g. programmer) as well as customer service positions (e.g. clerk, with no requirement for an academic education).

The justification of this blurred boundary is done by HR managers and mentors, yet slightly differently. For the HR managers in charge of the program through the years, pragmatic arguments prevail. Having a wide range of positions is a way to keep the Initiative visible and working. The administrative component of the program justifies its widening. With the Initiative, Nordliv has a possibility to recruit persons fluent in the languages of ethnic

minorities present in Sweden and to address them ‘in the way and on the level where they are (...) and you know, it will be [increasingly] challenging [as other companies] will be competing for the same competence’ (Senior HR manager). It was also justified as a way of being inclusive: after all, customer service internships provide a first professional opportunity to unemployed (skilled) immigrants in Sweden. This Swedish experience becomes ‘the first line in their CVs’, as one HR manager puts it, and is for employers, an indicator of suitability (Almeida and Fernando, 2017; Risberg and Romani, 2022).

The mentors’ justification is slightly different. They refer to their mentoring as a civic engagement and justify the internship position in front-line customer service mostly as a business opportunity for their operations: they want to attract non-Swedish speaking customers. Zareeb, a former intern who now works as a middle manager and is also a mentor adds: ‘It’s a job opportunity that is more real than anything [the candidates] have had so far. Nordliv intends to recruit, most organisations doing [similar kind of programs] don’t intend to recruit them’. The justification of the diverse internship positions offered (high-skill and front-line position) appears to rest on a mix of pragmatic concerns (i.e. maximise the size of the Initiative, business opportunity) as well as ideal ones (inclusion and civic engagement).

In sum, in this second phase, the recognition of the value of applicants is also weak since the boundary for relevant positions is blurred (qualified positions and customer service), and its justification is not primarily linked to the benefit of having professional immigrants and the professional skills they would enrich the organisation with. Rather, it rests on pragmatic and ideal grounds expressed by the HR professionals or the mentors.

4.3-Screening of candidates by both the Swedish Public Employment Services-SPES and Nordliv

The Initiative’s internship positions are communicated solely to the SPES office which collaborates locally with Nordliv. SPES caseworkers scan their database of foreign-born holding an academic degree that has been validated by a Swedish authority. In this third

step, the boundary involves identifying the candidates that Nordliv wants to meet. Asked to describe this process, the Gothenburg SPES contact person explains: 'well, it's really simple. We [see] that they have an academic degree. We obviously prefer (...) those with an academic degree in the [service area of Nordliv], but it's also fine with a technical degree. (...) And sure, if the person has experience in the [industry] or in a similar company, this is an advantage'. For the customer service internship positions, there is one additional criterion: 'a level of Swedish so that, after six months, you can have a client conversation without any misunderstanding'. Mattias (HR manager) further explains: 'In the headquarters, we have types of job roles [for which] you don't need to speak Swedish. But when you are working in the branches (...), you need to meet with clients who only speak Swedish'.

The scanning done by SPES identifies potential candidates who are then invited to an information meeting about the Initiative. It is the possibility of an internship at Nordliv that is presented, rather than a specific position. This meeting determines which candidates will be proposed to Nordliv.

'It's mostly the motivation of people that makes a difference, those who are the most interested' are the ones whose CV is then considered, explains Hejke, one of the contact persons for Nordliv at the Stockholm SPES. Satu, who has multiple experiences selecting candidates for the Initiative in Stockholm explains: '[those] who are confident, that – you know – have this calm (...) mature (...) I already know which ones are for sure going through. (...) And some of them I just know before they even go, that they're not going to move on. And usually, [I am] right: [the latter] have lost their confidence'.

Once the SPES caseworkers have selected candidates, their CVs - and sometimes personal letters - are sent to the head of the Initiative, Lars, who shares them with managers interested in recruiting an intern. The managers then rank their preference, but 'It's not that all [managers] have a preference, some just attend [the speed interviews event] and meet with the interviewees who were assigned to them' (Lars, Head of HR).

Typically, the screening establishes two categories: the positions in need of a specific and rare professional skill (e.g. IT, programming) and those where, what we call 'ethnic skills' are required (e.g. customer service that is expected to be in a language different than Swedish). For the latter, any candidate sent by the SPES speaking this language will be interviewed. We call 'ethnic skills' the skills that are tied to a person's ethnic background (whether foreign-born or not) or cultural heritage, such as language or ethnic community social and cultural capital.

In this third step of the process, there is again an ambiguous recognition of the skills and value of the professional immigrants. At the SPES, the identification of the skills is based on an academic degree, whatever the discipline, and rarely on a specific match to a given position. This academic degree is necessary also to be selected for internships in front-line positions. However, when we enquired about the required skills to apply to regular customer service positions, only the equivalent of a high school degree is expected (Nordliv's recruitment and career pages, 2019/2024). The boundary of foreign-born academically educated is rationalised with the process of scanning the SPES database. The case workers apply the criteria defined by the initiative, independently of the position offered. With this routine, they rationalise the selection of academically educated and simultaneously, create an inequality in terms of expected skills for customer service positions.

The recognition of the candidates' motivation is ambiguous. It is not the willingness to work in a specific position that is assessed, as is usually the case in a recruitment, but rather, the readiness to join the Initiative and to spend six months at Nordliv without (real) income. Those desperate for work are discarded, despite their willingness to work.

When the resumes of the selected candidates arrive at Nordliv, an internal screening takes place. In it, the recognition of academic skills is strong for the positions requesting specific professional skills (e.g., IT). For the front-line internship positions, the recognition of the worth of foreign-born academically educated is again unclear. Customer service requires them to speak reasonably well Swedish, which, in itself, is not a skill specific to foreign-

born academically educated. Their capacity to speak a foreign language (often Arabic, Turkish, Farsi), an ethnic skill, is however recognised.

4.4-Interviews and final selection

This last step involves identifying the boundary between those who will be recruited as interns, and those who won't. During the interviews, which are organised in the form of 20 minutes speed interviews, what sets apart the successful candidates is the (perceived) strength of their skills, and their suitability to the team.

All observed interviews for a high-skill position show that recruiting managers verify the skills stated in the CV. They often present a case situation and ask the candidate to tell them how they would solve this case. It was not uncommon that these conversations took place in English. These interviews were very similar to any other recruitment interviews, building on questions designed to capture skills. For customer service internship positions, social and ethnic skills were assessed. For example, a recruiting manager, originally from the Middle East, who headed a branch office in a marginalised suburb densely populated by immigrants was interviewing for a front-line position. The candidate was from Syria and the interview became a very positive and informal conversation. After the interview, the recruiting manager explained to Author 3 that she was paying attention to the cultural background and the social skills of this candidate. For a similar position, another recruiting manager explained why he wasn't looking at the CV of the candidates selected for him: 'I'm more interested in having a person who wants this, wants to work [with us] (...) has the ability to meet customer and meet people, so that it is much more a gut feeling of how I think this person would work in that type of customer meeting'.

Fit to the team is also assessed, in similar ways as with most recruitment interviews. For example, candidates who did not expand their answers were labelled 'cautious', implying they would not contribute greatly to the team. The fact that many of them spoke a (new) foreign language was however not mentioned in the case of frontline positions, where interviews were done in Swedish. Johan, manager of a branch office that has repeatedly

recruited Interns, comments on his rejection of a candidate: 'You also need to consider that the person will fit to the team. (...) A guy like him will understand what the job is about in one day and then will bore himself to death'.

After the speed interviews, the recruiters rank their favourite candidates by sending an email to the event organizers. The boundary between those who will be offered a position and those who won't is based on drive and skills. It is not uncommon that fluency in Swedish is seen as a proxy for drive. For example, a recruiting manager offering a high-skill position internship argued:

'I chose Layla, that's the personality. (...) She's been [in Sweden] for less than three years and talks amazingly good Swedish. And for me, that shows that she's driven and motivated and wants to learn new things. And she had the perfect CV. She had no choice; she had to escape from Syria when there was a war.'

The choice of whom to eliminate from the process is based on the identification of insufficient skills. 'Is his CV correct? He couldn't explain what education he has, really poor English and his Swedish is hard to understand' was a comment made to justify the elimination of one candidate. Another candidate was also disqualified based on his lack of language skills and foreseen problem with the team: 'He seems to have the right "skills" for [IT], but it feels like there will be too many language-related confusions. He would need to develop his English'.

When several recruiters want the same applicant, Lars, the head of the Initiative makes the decision. When it comes to customer service positions, he explains:

'[in] the branch office in [a marginalized suburb], they need someone there who knows Arabic. Then I thought "Ok, is there someone among these who speaks Arabic?". We had one guy from Canada, (...) we placed him in a branch in [an exclusive, high-income suburb where many expatriates live].'

The identification of the boundary between those who will receive an offer and those who will not, is thus based on drive, expected fit to the team, and skills. However, for the front-

line positions, the required skills are not professional but apparently only social and ethnic skills (speaking a specific foreign language, coming from a respectable or English-speaking country such as Canada). It is thus only for the high-skill positions that we see a recognition of the foreign experience and qualification. The justification of the boundary between the applicants was done in very similar ways as in any professional recruitment interviews, building on skills assessment questions, we believe, taken from HR documents developed to support recruiters.

5- DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Examining the Initiative's recruitment as a process of social recognition, we identified boundaries and their justifications. In this program, specifically designed to recognise the value of foreign skilled immigrants, we find however a systematic devaluation of the characteristics of skilled migrants. At each step, applicants are compared to those with a Swedish work experience, those with a Swedish education, those who already fit into Swedish society. Lamont calls this a 'recognition gap' or 'misrecognition' which stresses the 'disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society' (Lamont; 2018:421).

Four recognition gaps devaluing skilled migrants' worth

We find four recognition gaps in the recruitment process of the Initiative. This elucidates how skilled immigrants, despite their education, do not occupy a privileged position in the labour market but rather, face comparable hurdles as other migrants because they are mainly seen as non-Swedes.

Figure 3 about here

The first recognition gap is situated in the needs analysis for recruitment, and the estimated worth of the skilled immigrants' work. Nordliv's refusal to provide monetary compensation for the internship is not only creating a precarious situation, it is also a clear indication that they do not see the labour of skilled immigrants as worthy of payment. This

is a recognition gap of the value of their work. In Sweden, only high school pupils or newly examined students would not be remunerated for an internship, in other words, those who have not yet proven their market value. Many of the skilled immigrants selected for the internships, however, have multiple years of experience abroad. The value of this foreign experience is not assessed on an individual basis but is rather assessed at the level of a group that is symbolically assimilated with one having no work experience at all. What is valued is *Swedish* work experience. Since immigrants often do not have any, they are not recognised as valuable employees.

A second recognition gap touches on academic skills acquired abroad. To be selected for the Initiative, all candidates must have an academic degree. However, some of the positions offered (front-line positions) do not require such a degree, indicating that foreign academic skills are subordinated to Swedish ones. The recognition of the value of foreign academic skills is thus blurred: strong recognition for some specific positions (e.g., IT), zero recognition for front line positions. For the latter internships, it is instead the ethnic skills of the intern that are valued. Their ethnic profile becomes the merit that gets them the position. Consequently, value is placed on *job-related* skills, whether acquired through academic training (e.g., programming) or associated with ethnic belonging (e.g., speaking Arabic). This points to the misrecognition of foreign academic qualifications.

The third recognition gap touches on the candidates' readiness to do the internship. It is not the motivation for a specific position that is assessed, instead, it is the immigrant's readiness to work in a position of unpaid intern, to accept a precarious position, to engage in hope labour or self-exploitation (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021; Diedrich & Risberg, 2023. Maury, 2025). What is being evaluated is a disposition for self-sacrifice (of one's economic capital) and acceptance of a subordinated position (Irastorza & Bevelander, 2021). Those desperate are discarded because they do not show allegiance but instead survival needs. Expectations of a certain social status or position adequate to one's academic degree is misrecognised: candidates are assessed in view of their acceptance to participate in the lowest and precarious organisational echelon (underpaid and temporary positions), to be part of the labour market.

A fourth recognition gap is identified in relation to cultural fit. In all recruitment processes, candidates are assessed in view of their fit to the position and the team they will join. Cultural fit in particular is expected and assessed through candidates' language proficiency. Swedish is used as a proxy for the motivation to integrate in Swedish society and is positively perceived by the recruiters (as in Almeida et al., 2019). The cultural diversity brought by the immigrants is thus not valued, rather, it is expected that interns will adhere to Swedish linguistic and behavioural norms.

In this Initiative aimed at addressing the structural inequality faced by highly skilled immigrants, we observe only one clear instance of recognition and social valorisation: the recognition of professional skills that are in high demand (e.g., IT). However, even this recognition remains conditional upon a (cultural) fit to the team. These four recognition gaps contribute to the continuous marginalisation of skilled immigrants by misrecognising their worth in comparison to the (perceived) general population. Our case illustrates how an organisational practice, albeit unwillingly, deprives skilled immigrants of the value of their education and professional experience. The four recognition gaps touch on the worth associated with (1) the labour of the skilled immigrants, (2) their academic skills, and the expectation that they will (3) accept a subordinate and precarious social position, (4) and adapt to the local setting rather than be recognised for the difference they bring.

An organisational process leading to potential precarity

In response to our question 'how does a recruitment process recognise immigrants' worth?', we elucidate the construction and justification of boundaries that hamper the individual recognition of applicants' competences, and instead, conflate them with the devalued social group to which the applicant is perceived to belong: the 'foreigners'. These 'foreigners' are seen as having no local work experience, no Swedish degree, no cultural fit to Sweden and being those belonging to the lower echelons of society. These recognitions gaps illuminate why skilled migrants face precarious work conditions or underemployment: because their skills are not recognised, they are foremost seen as 'immigrants'.

Our main contribution to the literature on the precarity of skilled immigrants is the emphasis that organisational practices can also, unwillingly, contribute to the misrecognition of skilled immigrants' labour worth. What passes as rational recruitment processes are in practice social evaluation processes that reproduce existing social distinction and hierarchies (Lamont, 2018) in which foreignness is less desirable than 'Swedishness', broadly understood as Swedish experience, education and cultural fit. In our study, all HR managers engaged in the Initiative were genuinely in favour of cultural diversity and wanted more foreign-born professionals, and yet, they created a process that misrecognised skilled immigrants' labour worth. Our study stresses that *Organizational practices*, even those designed to be inclusive, reflect societal sense of worth. Today, anti-migration discourses are stronger in society, and the desirability of 'Swedishness' is more naturalised than it was at the time of our data collection, increasing the risk that organisational processes reproduce social distinction and inequalities.

In the study of precarity, this case also stresses how unpaid work becomes a part of accessing highly skilled work, when immigrants engage in a voluntary form of self-exploitation (Maury, 2025). As in Trlifajová and Formánková (2023) we point that precarious positions are not necessary a trap, but can be used purposefully by immigrants in their integration strategy. While most of the interns recruited at Nordliv were on zero-hour contracts, others found meaningful positions inside and outside of Nordliv.

Recruitment processes

We contribute to research approaching recruitment as a social process elucidating how the design of the process, rather than its actors, can lead to marginalisation. Previous studies have pointed that recruitment processes search for cultural match or fit, especially in the later stages of hiring, and how minority groups have a limited chance to this (Rivera, 2012b; Tholen, 2024). Our case shows instead that it is the *intrinsic evaluative design* of the recruitment process, that, at each stage, devalues the foreign academic achievements and skills. In addition, we show how fit is more than a match of candidates, it becomes both a selection criterion (e.g. expected education, knowledge of Swedish or English) but also a justification of the boundaries established between the candidates (Nichols et al., 2025).

The applicants' ethnic skills match to Nordliv's needs in frontline positions justifies offering them unqualified positions, the applicants' lack of common language skills justifies their elimination from the IT team where their skills are in demand. Fit becomes an ambiguous concept used to circumvent the purpose of the inclusive recruitment process and to serve the interests or comfort of the recruiters (Nichols et al., 2025; Risberg and Romani, 2022).

We invite to add to HR literature's focus on individual biases in inclusive recruitment (e.g. Almeida et al., 2019; Derous et al., 2021) the examination of societal biases embedded in an apparent objective and rational process. We show that the evaluative design for the recognition of the group of skilled immigrants is relative, it is assessed in terms of 'its disparities in worth' (Lamont, 2018:421) with other social groups (e.g., professionals with a Swedish degree or persons without a migration background). Approaching recruitment as a social evaluation process (Lamont, 2012, 2018), we stress that the evaluation of the candidates is thus attached to the social recognition and valorisation of immigrants in society, which is generally not as strong as the majority group (Guo et al., 2021).

Our contribution to the HR inclusive recruitment literature is this attention to the design of the evaluative process building on the identification of boundaries and their justification. Knowing this, we invite to scrutinize and potentially revise existing processes with the examination of each boundary present in its design and how it is justified. A focus on boundaries and their justification thus provides a tool to search for unjustified treatment. Our contribution complements the existing works on bias-reduction of trainers (e.g., Derous et al., 2021; Triana et al., 2021) with a focus on the possible inherent biases in the process itself, for example, when individual candidates are assessed in view of the social group to which they are seen to belong, rather than their individual competences.

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Table 1: Overview of the empirical material and how it was used in the analysis

Material	Origin	Description	Role in the analysis
Transcripts of 11 semi-structured interviews	Interviews were conducted on site by all four authors	Interviews conducted with key persons, typically lasted between 40 to 90 minutes, were recorded and then transcribed	Thematic inductive analysis (stage 1) to identify key steps in the recruitment. Then deductive thematic analysis (stage 2) to identify boundaries and their justification. Final inductive thematic analysis (stage 3) to assess the worth attributed (recognition or misrecognition)
Notes of 30 informal interviews	Informal interviews with recruiters or applicants	Notes taken during the events, in between two speed meetings, and immediately after the events. Informal interviews lasted in average 25 min	
Field notes related to the Initiative	Field notes taken during the 18-month organisational ethnography of Nordliv by Author 2	Notes explicative of the Initiative, info on its participants and beneficiaries, notes about the organisation and outcome of several events	
Field notes of 38h of observation	Field notes were taken by all four authors during the events	Notes describing the setting, organisation and processing of the events, recruiters' practices in interviews	Supported the thematic analyses of the verbatim of the interviews as well as the notes related to the informal interviews (all stages)
Anonymised email conversations about candidates	Author 2 was co-organising one of the speed interviews event and thus cc:ed in the decision process	Short statements that justify the choice of a candidate. Email conversations to try to find a fit with a candidate who was perceived as meritorious	In the deductive analysis (step 2), evidence of justification of the choice regarding professional and ethnic skills, as well as fit
Corporate documents	Nordliv internal and external web, training of mentors before they recruit an intern, annual reports, SPES pages	Screenshots of pages about the Initiative from Nordliv internal web, annual reports and external webpages of Nordliv and SPES. Slide deck for the training of mentors participating to the Initiative. Screenshots of the description of required merits for positions in front line customer service	In stage 1, evidence the stated ambition of Nordliv with the program, its structure and goal. Stage 2: evidence the rationalisation process in place: see figure 1. Evidence that customer service positions don't require academic qualifications

Table 2: Overview of the processes observed and nature of the empirical material collected.

Process	Date	Observations	Interviews	Scale of the recruitment
Annual Recruitment Day - Speed interviews event at Nordliv in Gothenburg, full event 15.00-20.00	March 2017	Field notes from observation of the full event (5 hours) welcome of candidates by the head of the Initiative, observation of the logistics of speed interviews, mingle with recruiting managers and candidates	Interview with 2 managers prior to the event; informal interviews with 1 HR manager, 1 SPES caseworker and 2 recruiters on the day of the event (Total: 6 interviews)	50 persons sent in their CV for the SPES info event; the SPES chose 40 potential candidates and sent their CV to Nordliv; Nordliv invited 30 candidates to the interviews (with 15 managers)
Annual Recruitment Day - Speed interviews event at Nordliv in Gothenburg; full event 15.00-20.00	March 2018	Field notes from 2 researchers observing the same event (10 hours). Welcome of candidates by the head of the Initiative, observation of 9 speed interviews, mingle with recruiting managers and candidates	Informal interviews with 2 managers involved in the speed interviews and 1 SPES caseworker, Interview with 1 manager responsible for the Initiative and 1 interview with another SPES caseworker (Total: 5 interviews)	50 persons sent in their CV for the SPES info event; the SPES chose 40 potential candidates and sent their CV to Nordliv; Nordliv eventually invited 30 candidates to the interviews with managers from 9 branch offices; all candidates had 3 interviews with recruiters
Organisation of one speed interviews event at Nordliv HQ	December 2018	Cc:ed to email conversations about the internal screening of candidates, as well as the decision process post interviews	Conversations with the head of the Initiative about the process	
Observation of 1 speed interviews event at Nordliv HQ, full event 14:00 to 18:00	December 2018	Field notes from observation of the full event (4 hours) welcome of candidates by the head of the Initiative, observation of 2 speed interviews, mingle with	Interview with 1 applicant and 1 SPES worker (Total: 2 interviews)	70 candidates were interviewed for about 20 positions. All recruiters had 9 interviews, all candidates had at least 2 interviews.

		recruiting managers and candidates		
Annual Recruitment Day - Speed interviews event at Nordliv in Gothenburg; full event 15.00-20.00	March 2019	Field notes from observation of the full event (5 hours) welcome of candidates by the head of the Initiative, mingle with recruiting managers and candidates	Informal interviews with 2 former interns and 1 SPES caseworker (Total: 3 interviews)	30 candidates were interviewed for 13 positions in Customer Services in several branch offices of the Gothenburg area. All candidates had 4-5 interviews with recruiters
3-day speed interviews event, 14:00 to 18:00; part of a larger civic event in Stockholm	June 2019	Field notes from observations over 2 days (6 hours). Welcome of candidates by SPES agents on the site of the event, setting of the speed interviews and non-participant observation of parts of speed interviews.	Multiple interviews with 3 SPES workers (5 interviews) Informal interview with 5 Nordliv employees including the head of the Initiative, informal interviews with 4 recruiting managers 5 applicants 1 Intern (Total: 20 interviews)	54 candidates were interviewed over a period of 3 days, for about 20 positions available in multiple branch offices in Stockholm. Each applicant is considered for at least 2 positions and meets at least 2 recruiting managers
Speed interviews event at Nordliv HQ, full event 14:00 to 18:00	December 2019	Field notes from observation of the full event (8 hours, 2 researchers) welcome of candidates by the head of the Initiative, observation of 12 speed interviews (6 per researcher), mingle with recruiting managers and candidates	Informal interviews with 5 recruiting managers Meeting with the head of the Initiative and HR assistant for a feedback session the following week (Total: 5 Interviews and notes from the feedback meeting)	35 applicants were interviewed for 16 positions, mostly at the headquarters. Each applicant is considered for at least 2 positions and met at least 2 recruiting managers. All recruiters had 6 interviews

Figure 1: Nordliv's Initiative (anonymised remake)

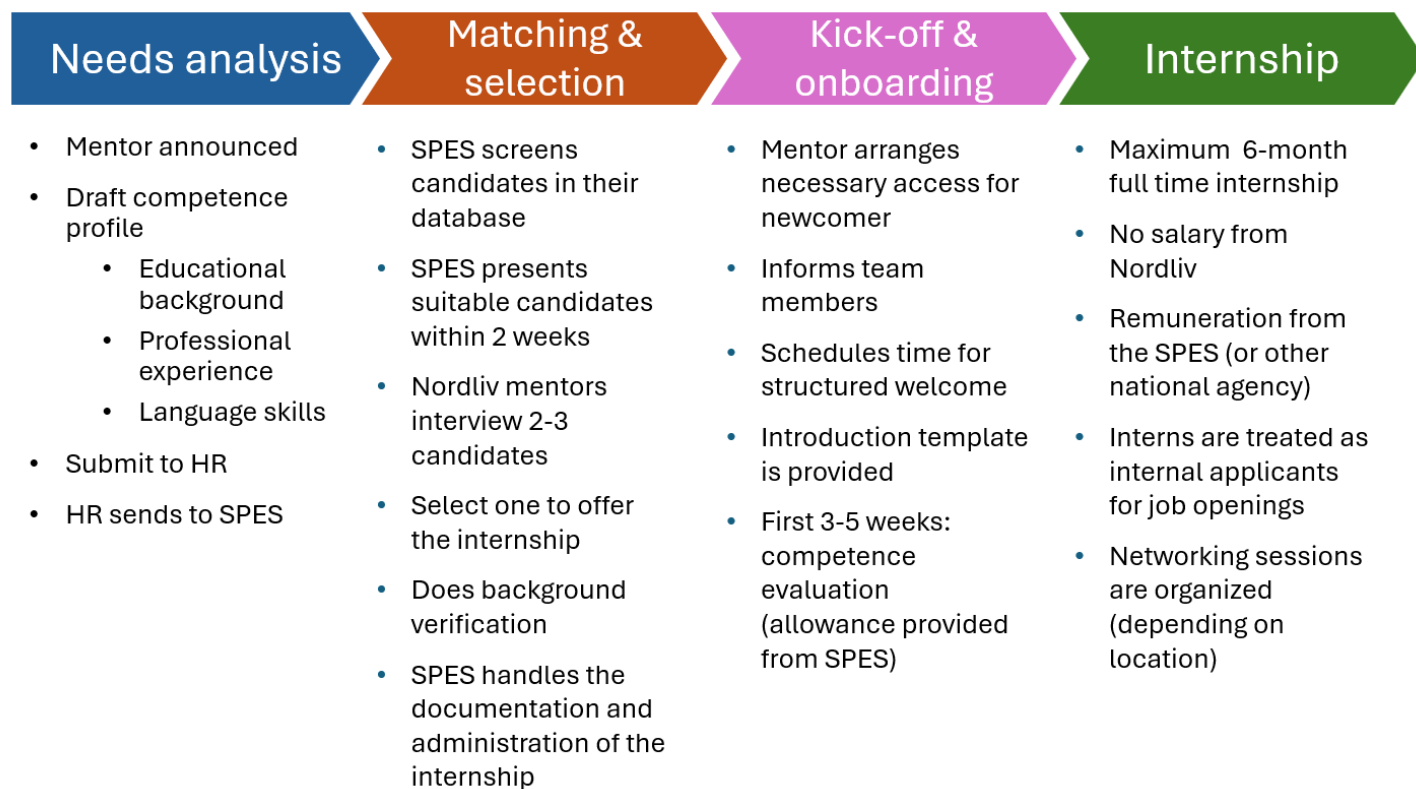


Figure 2: For each step of the process: overview of the boundaries and their justification

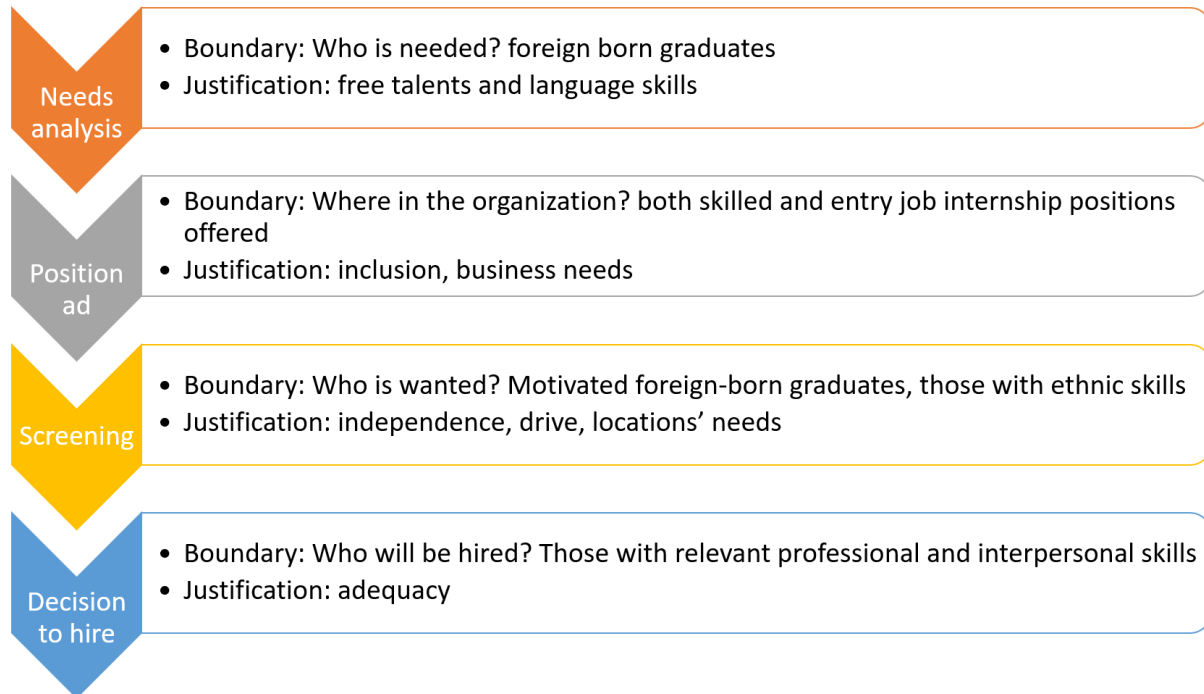


Figure 3: Four recognition gaps

