

Cultural Competency in the Workplace

*A practical guide to recognizing and enabling
international talent in Danish workplaces*

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Lige Adgang
til job, uddannelse og fællesskaber

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Introduction

Access to international talent is increasingly critical for organizational growth and innovation – especially at a time when Denmark is facing a structural shortage of qualified labor, which is already affecting productivity and competitiveness.ⁱ

At the same time, organizations experience challenges in attracting, recruiting, and retaining international talent, while skilled international professionals often face barriers in accessing employment opportunities and navigating workplace norms, expectations, and participation.

These challenges often arise in how competence, communication, and potential are interpreted in practice, with significant consequences for:

- who is **invited in**, and how **competence is assessed**
- who **progresses**, who **thrives**, and who **leaves**

Moreover, research shows that companies with high ethnic and cultural diversity in leadership are 36% more likely to outperform financially. Organizations with diverse leadership report 19% higher innovation revenue, and companies that actively work with inclusion are 70% more likely to succeed with new market strategies.ⁱⁱ

Realizing the potential of cultural diversity is therefore not only a question of inclusion, but also a driver of organizational performance and long-term sustainability.

To realize the potential of diversity in multinational workplaces, cultural competency is key.

Cultural competency involves awareness of how norms, one's background, and frames of reference shape evaluation and interaction. It also involves the ability to reflect on how one's own reactions, assumptions, and expectations influence interpretation, and to navigate differences in ways that support participation and contribution. In practice, this is about improving the quality of interpretation and decision-making.

Approaching this work with curiosity and engagement supports a more open and active understanding of others' perspectives. Cultural competency is not about reaching quick conclusions, but about treating interpretation as a hypothesis rather than a final answer – remaining open and adjusting understanding as new perspectives emerge.



The project behind the guide

This guide builds on qualitative data and insights collected during 2025, including interviews and a mapping workshop with 12 highly educated international professionals living in Denmark,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as a mapping workshop with representatives from five Danish companies.

The guide also draws on insights and practical experience from previous initiatives led by Foreningen Lige Adgang, including career mentoring programs and collaborations with Danish workplaces, which have contributed to identifying key barriers and effective practices in recruitment and workplace inclusion.

The guide was developed as part of the project Successful Labor Market Integration of Highly Skilled Migrants by Foreningen Lige Adgang, supported by **Fonden Københavns Sprogcenter**.

How to read this guide

This guide focuses on how cultural norms influence everyday situations across the employee journey – from recruitment to collaboration and career development.

This guide supports you – whether you are a hiring manager, HR professional, team leader, or colleague in an international team – to build cultural awareness and contribute to strengthening inclusive practices in the workplace.

It is **designed to support reflection and action** by highlighting:

- where interpretation may create unintended barriers
- how these situations can be understood structurally
- what you can do in your role to contribute to a more inclusive practice

The guide does not provide fixed answers. It is intended to **strengthen attention to situations where norms are implicit** and where small differences can have significant consequences.

Recruitment

How competence is recognized

Recruitment processes are often designed to identify 'the most qualified candidate'.

In practice, this process also reflects **implicit assumptions** about what competence looks like – and how it should be communicated.

These assumptions are shaped by:

- Danish and own organizational norms for communication and self-presentation
- Organizational culture and previous hiring patterns
- Familiarity with educational, career paths, and professional networks

As a result, recruitment processes can unintentionally **privilege familiarity** and **penalize difference**.

What studies show



International professionals in Denmark have **lower employment rates** and **weaker attachment to the labor market** compared to people of Danish origin^{iv}

Up to **60 percent** of highly educated refugees in Europe are **overqualified for their jobs**^v

At the same time, **Danish companies** face ongoing challenges in recruiting qualified labor^{vi}

This points to a **structural mismatch**: Competence is not only a matter of supply – but of how skills and experience are recognized and utilized.

Typical barriers in recruitment



Similar patterns shape how international professionals experience recruitment processes in Denmark. Candidates describe not being invited to job interviews despite relevant qualifications and experiencing barriers in gaining access to opportunities that match one's competencies.

These experiences are often linked to patterns such as:

Limited access to networks and informal entry points

Many positions are shared through informal networks, referrals, or internal recommendations. Candidates without established local connections often have less access to opportunities or visibility among employers.

Difficulty getting international experience recognized

When employers have limited familiarity with international education systems, roles, and organizations, it can be harder to assess the level, relevance, and transferability of candidates' experience.

Preference for local experience

Experience from a Danish context may be used as a proxy for familiarity with workplace norms and expectations, which can shape how other types of experience are assessed.

Limited transparency and unwritten expectations

When expectations around how to structure applications, present competencies, and communicate motivation are not made explicit, it can be difficult to navigate. A lack of clarity about stages, expectations, and decision criteria can make it harder for candidates to understand and respond to what is being assessed.

High or inconsistent language requirements

High expectations for Danish proficiency, combined with limited opportunities to develop language skills in a professional context, can delay or limit access to relevant roles. Language expectations are at times applied inconsistently or introduced in later stages of the process.

Career paths interpreted without context

Career gaps, transitions, or shorter employments – often linked to relocation or entering a new labor market – can be difficult to contextualize and to prevent negative interpretations.

Limited access to internships and student jobs

Internships and student jobs are a common pathway into the Danish labor market, but access is often limited to students or individuals affiliated with systems such as an A-kasse.

Bias in evaluation and early-stage filtering

Some candidates experience that nationality, background, name, or communication style influences how they are assessed. This may be reinforced when there is an emphasis on “culture fit” rather than “culture add”.

These barriers do not affect everyone in the same way. Experiences may also differ depending on how candidates are perceived in relation to, for example, ethnicity, gender, or migration background.



I applied to a company. They were looking for a business developer to help them penetrate the UK market [...] someone who could speak English, so I was like 'okay I'm your man'.

I went through the final phase and they told me 'but our working language is Danish and everyone in the office speaks Danish. Although we speak English, we would prefer if you spoke Danish or a Nordic language, so we would rather go with this candidate'."

- Business Developer from Cameroon

"[When I apply for jobs at] universities, they want references. And I'm working in my business where I'm self-employed. So, I cannot give references

- Chemist from India



It's a circle where I don't have a job, because I don't have experience. I cannot get experience, because I don't have an internship. I can't get an internship, because I'm not a student or able to have an internship through the A-kasse (...) maybe I need to go to university here."

- Data Analyst from Pakistan

Danish culture on a spectrum



Drawing on frameworks for cultural mapping and how these can be applied in a Danish workplace context,^{vii} this section outlines how **differences in norms** for behaviour and communication **shape expectations** and interpretation in practice.

Cultural spectrums provide an indication of general tendencies that shape expectations in a given context. They are not intended to explain individuals or predict behavior, but to make visible how values, customs, and norms influence **what is recognized as appropriate, competent, or professional**.

Danish workplace norms are often characterized by:

- low formal hierarchy (egalitarianism)
- a strong emphasis on individual contribution and initiative
- collaboration over competition

These norms shape both **how competence is expressed** – and **how it is recognized**.

Degree of distance to and formality with managers



Expectations for how to act, contribute, and interact in groups



What is valued and recognized in contribution and achievement



The spectrum figures illustrate an indicative placement of Denmark based on visual interpretation of cultural mapping frameworks, including Signe Ørum's work^{ix}.

While these dimensions are often perceived as neutral, Danish workplace contexts are, on many of these, positioned relatively far toward one end. At the same time, there is a widespread assumption that Danish workplaces are **inherently egalitarian, fair, and inclusive** – a notion referred to as *Nordic exceptionalism*. While often rooted in positive intentions, this can make it more difficult to identify how specific norms may advantage certain ways of working and communicating over others.

How this shapes expectations in recruitment

In many Danish recruitment contexts, **candidates are expected to:**

- speak clearly about their individual contributions
- demonstrate initiative and independence
- communicate confidently without appearing overly self-promoting

This reflects a particular balance, sometimes associated with **Janteloven**: showing ownership and confidence, while remaining modest and non-hierarchical. Candidates with experience from other cultural contexts may instead:

- emphasize team contributions over individual achievements
- defer to seniority when describing decisions
- communicate either more modestly, or more assertively, than what is expected

How differences are interpreted

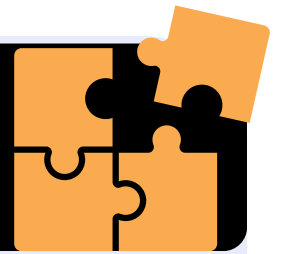
These differences may be interpreted as:

- lack of initiative or ownership
- lack of clarity
- or, in some cases, being overly dominant or self-promoting

However, these interpretations **do not necessarily reflect differences in competence**, but differences in how competence is expressed and recognized across contexts.

This creates a risk that differences in communication style and self-presentation are interpreted as differences in competence – especially when expectations remain implicit.

A case: Looking for “authenticity”? – Different ways of expressing motivation



A woman with a background in IT from India applies for several positions in Denmark.

In her applications, she focuses on her qualifications, technical skills, and ability to perform the tasks required. She describes how she has contributed to projects, supported her team, and ensured that work was delivered on time. She emphasizes that she is reliable, adaptable, and ready to contribute where needed.

She does not go into detail about why she is specifically interested in each company or role, and she does not highlight her personal motivation or preferences. Instead, she focuses on showing that she can do the job and add value to the organization. From her previous experience, this feels like the most relevant and professional way to present herself.

She is invited to a few interviews. During these, she answers the questions carefully and waits for the interviewer to guide the conversation. She focuses on responding clearly and does not actively steer the dialogue, ask many questions, or expand much beyond what is asked.

After several processes, she notices that she is not progressing to final stages. She is unsure why. From her perspective, she has shown that she can do the job and contribute to the team.

Over time, through conversations with others and reflecting on her experience, she begins to notice that candidates are often expected to take a more active role in the interaction—by asking questions, expressing personal interest, and speaking more directly about their motivation for a specific role and organization. She also becomes aware that highlighting individual contributions more explicitly is often expected.

This was not something she had emphasized in her previous experience with recruitment processes, as it had not felt integral to demonstrating her ability to do the job well.



The questions below are designed as a **practical reflection tool** for recruitment processes. They can be used individually, within hiring teams, or as part of broader HR practices. The aim is to make visible where interpretations, expectations, and evaluations may be shaped by **familiarity, implicit norms, or inconsistency** – and where approaches can be made more structured and transparent to support fairer and more deliberate decision-making.

If you are a hiring manager or member of the hiring committee:

Bias rarely comes from intention. It arises in how we interpret what we see – especially when expectations are implicit and based on familiarity. **Where does interpretation shape your decisions?**

Consider patterns in evaluations and decisions

- Which communication styles do you associate with competence?
- When does familiarity (education, companies, style) become a proxy for quality?
- Are you evaluating competence or alignment with existing norms?
- What are the essential competencies for this role and what is “nice to have”?
- How are these competencies expressed as observable behavior?
- Are you assessing candidates consistently or adapting criteria along the way?
- Consider the patterns that shape your evaluations and decisions – who is shortlisted and who is not?

Structure your evaluation

- Conduct a team analysis:
 - What perspectives, ways of working, or experiences are already dominant?
 - What is currently missing – or could strengthen your practice?
- Clarify and weight competencies – and make them transparent to candidates where possible
- Use interview guides linked to defined competencies
- Ensure assessments are written down before discussion to reduce the influence of group dynamics, e.g. “group think” and seniority
- Base evaluations on documented competency – not overall impressions
- Ensure that requirements (e.g. Danish language proficiency) are defined upfront and not introduced or reinterpreted later

Interrupt familiarity and “fit”

- When do you experience “good chemistry” – and what does it consist of?
- Who feels “easy to understand” – and why?
- What might be overlooked when someone communicates or presents themselves differently?

Revisit assumptions and “red flags”

- What are you reacting to – lack of competence or unfamiliar patterns?
- Could career gaps or short employments reflect:
 - relocation
 - visa or residency permit processes
 - sector transitions
 - language learning
- What did the candidate gain during this period?

If you are in HR or People & Culture:

Support profile clarification

- How are job profiles developed?
- Where can you facilitate or encourage team analysis of what is already dominant skills and perspectives – and what is missing?
- Are requirements necessary – or based on previous profiles?
- Are competencies clearly described with awareness of loaded language and, where relevant, weighted?

Improving transparency

- How is the recruitment process communicated to candidates (e.g. who participates in interviews, number of stages, use of cases)?
- How are decisions communicated?
- Is it possible to describe what was prioritized in the selected candidate?
- Can this be shared meaningfully with rejected candidates?

Concretize efforts on inclusion

- Are expectations around flexibility, onboarding, or support (e.g. language learning) clearly described?
- Are current efforts on inclusion and diversity communicated – and clearly linked to organizational values?

Promote consistency in evaluations

- How are competencies translated into practice?
 - Are they operationalized into interview guides and questions?
 - Are hiring teams supported in assessing based on concrete examples?
- How is evaluation structured?
 - Are individual assessments documented before discussion in the hiring committee?
 - Are decisions grounded in defined competencies rather than overall impressions?

Onboarding and Daily Collaboration

How contribution is enabled and recognized

Being hired is only the first step. Whether employees are able to contribute, collaborate, and feel included depends on how workplace norms are communicated – and how behavior is interpreted.

In many Danish workplaces, expectations around communication, initiative, and collaboration are **informal and rarely made explicit**.

As a result, small differences in how employees:

- participate in meetings
- ask for support
- give and receive feedback
- take initiative

Which can have consequences for:

- who is seen as engaged and competent
- who gains access to opportunities and development
- who experiences well-being and a sense of belonging in the workplace

What studies show



Existing research indicates that the barriers faced by international talent are largely systemic and are linked to both labor market structures and company practices.

Employees who are minoritized based on ethnicity – and often also in relation to factors such as religion, culture, or racialization – **face unequal conditions in the workplace**.

68%

have experienced discriminatory behavior at work

59%

feel they must exert more effort than colleagues to be evaluated equally

75%

report that this negatively affects their well-being^x

The ongoing pressure related to differentiation, stigmatization, and discrimination – both within and outside the workplace – can contribute to what is described as **ethnic minority stress**.

This may involve:

- heightened attention to how one is perceived
- pressure to adapt to dominant norms
- and a need to continuously prove competence

Importantly, these are **not only individual experiences**. They reflect **structural conditions** that shape how employees are able to participate, be recognized, and feel a sense of belonging in the workplace.

At the same time, a lack of clarity around expectations, feedback, and development pathways increases uncertainty and reduces employees' ability to contribute and progress.

Long-term impact on health and participation

Prolonged exposure to exclusion, uncertainty, and the need to continuously adapt can contribute to what is described as **weathering** – the cumulative physiological impact of chronic stress over time.

Repeated exposure to stressors activates the body's stress-response systems, leading to wear and tear that can affect health, energy, and **long-term capacity to participate in working life**.

This also connects to how working life is structured across borders. For example, differences in expectations around career length, parenthood, retirement, elder care, and even own life expectancy shape how sustainable participation in the labor market is experienced.

Inclusion and belonging are not only questions of culture or well-being. They are connected to health, sustainability, and long-term participation in the labor market.

When employees experience **a high sense of belonging**:

75%
take fewer
sick days

56%
show higher job
performances

50%
have a lower
turnover rate^{xi}

Typical barriers in the workplace



Similar patterns emerge in how everyday workplace practices shape participation, collaboration, and recognition. These include:

Unclear expectations around independence and initiative

Expectations are often implicit, creating uncertainty about how much responsibility to take and when to act independently.

Learning “unwritten rules”

Workplace norms are often not made explicit, creating pressure to “figure things out” without access to the same contextual knowledge (e.g., expectations around availability, communication outside working hours, or remote work practices).

Participation linked to speaking up quickly and spontaneously

Contribution is often equated with immediate verbal participation, which can make it harder to navigate when and how to contribute in meetings.

Feedback based on implicit norms

Feedback often assumes shared expectations for tone, directness, and timing, which can create uncertainty about how to interpret and respond.

Informal spaces shaping access to information and belonging

Informal interactions (e.g., humor, small talk, language switching) can influence access to information, inclusion in conversations, and participation in decision-making.

Language use affecting participation

Differences between required language proficiency and the language used in practice can shape who is able to participate fully in both formal and informal settings.

Lacking clarity on boundaries and appropriate behavior

Uncertainty around what is considered appropriate in everyday interaction (e.g., humor, tone, or feedback), and where to turn in situations involving discomfort, conflict, or inappropriate behavior.

Limited introduction to workplace systems and rights

Access to information about workplace structures, such as A-kasse, unions, pension schemes, insurance, and employee benefits, is not always provided, making it harder to navigate rights and opportunities.

Unequal conditions for demonstrating competence

Some experience a need to overperform or continuously demonstrate competence in order to be recognized on equal terms.

Voices from international candidates



There were times when my supervisor would question what I had written, saying that 'this is not a word in English'. Like, for example, the word apt. And I was trying to tell her, 'no no, it is a genuine word in English' [...] I have an Indian accent, but it doesn't mean that I don't know the language [...] I have to be very careful about how I speak and what I say"

- Healthcare professional from India



We work more in India, but it's also a big team. The difference is that here you manage everything yourself. In India, I still had a lot of coordination with management and the entire team. I missed that here. Being an international, it's always confusing how much you need to do. Or maybe it is like that in general, if your tasks are not defined."

- Biochemist from India

Danish culture on a spectrum



Drawing on frameworks for **cultural mapping**, this section highlights how differences in norms shape expectations – and how contribution is interpreted in everyday collaboration.

Danish workplace contexts are often characterized by:

- a high degree of autonomy and self-management
- a strong orientation toward tasks and progress in collaboration
- an emphasis on individual initiative and responsibility
- relatively high comfort with uncertainty and independent decision-making^{xii}

Cultural differences can be approached as variations along key dimensions that shape expectations in specific contexts. These norms, values, traditions, and beliefs shape how contribution is expected – **and how it is interpreted in everyday work.**

Understanding of and approach to risk and mistakes



How messages are communicated in interaction



How relationships and trust are built in collaboration



The spectrum figures illustrate an **indicative placement of Denmark** based on visual interpretation of cultural mapping frameworks, including Signe Ørum's work^{xiii}. While these cultural orientations are often perceived as neutral, Danish workplace contexts are, on many of these spectrums, positioned relatively far toward one end.

How this shapes expectations in daily work

In many Danish workplace contexts, **employees are expected to:**

- take initiative without detailed instruction
- act on tasks without waiting for explicit direction
- contribute actively and spontaneously in meetings
- focus on progress and problem-solving in collaboration

For example, silence or lack of objection may be interpreted as agreement – reflecting an expectation that individuals voice disagreement explicitly.

Employees with **experience from other cultural contexts** may instead:

- seek clearer direction or alignment before acting
- involve managers more closely in decision-making
- communicate more indirectly
- prioritize relationship-building or shared understanding before moving to action

While trust in some cultural contexts is built through relationships before tasks, trust in Danish workplace contexts is often established through working on tasks together.

How differences are interpreted

These differences may be interpreted as:

- lack of initiative or ownership
- low engagement or participation
- uncertainty or lack of confidence

However, these interpretations **do not necessarily reflect differences in competence**, but differences in how contribution is expressed and understood across contexts.

When expectations remain implicit, there is a risk that differences in behavior are interpreted as differences in capability or motivation.

Recognizing difference

In many Danish workplaces, being respectful is often associated with **avoiding topics that are considered sensitive or too personal** – and treating everyone the same. However, this approach to respect can also risk invisibilizing differences.

Conversations about difference can be difficult to navigate – especially when they relate to **systemic inequities**.

These conversations can evoke discomfort, defensiveness, or concern about saying the wrong thing, making it harder to engage openly with questions of bias, privilege, and unequal access. At the same time, strong Danish norms around equality, fairness, and sameness can reinforce the idea that everyone should be treated alike – **making differences harder to acknowledge and discuss**.

As a result, difference may be handled in ways that:

- avoid conversations about difference altogether
- focus on individual behavior rather than structural patterns
- interpret differences as personal traits rather than contextual responses

A balance to navigate

You may choose not to ask a colleague about their cultural background, religion, or personal life to avoid “othering” or drawing unnecessary attention to difference.

At the same time, this **hesitation can also create distance**. By avoiding these topics altogether, you may miss insight into what shapes your colleague’s experiences and perspectives – and your colleague may experience a lack of interest or recognition.

In practice, this creates **a tension**:

Not engaging with difference can lead to **invisibility**.

Engaging with difference in narrow, repetitive, or intrusive ways can lead to overstepping boundaries or **reducing** someone to a single aspect of who they are.

This applies across multiple dimensions – not only cultural background, but also other social positions that may be minoritized in the workplace, such as neurodiversity, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

For example, showing curiosity about a colleague's faith or traditions can lead to **recognition and inclusion** in everyday interactions and collaboration. At the same time, it can become intrusive if the person is repeatedly expected to explain or represent a broader group.

In practice, this is less about whether to ask or not – but about **how, when, and why difference is engaged**. Consider what is relevant in the situation and whether you're ready to show understanding and recognition – even when perspectives or experiences differ from your own.

Same behavior, different interpretations

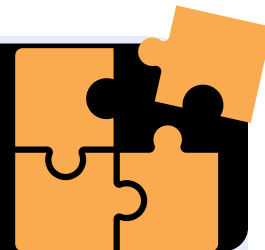
Different backgrounds and contexts shape how behavior is understood.

- Directness may be experienced as clarity – or as harshness
- Silence or restraint may be experienced as respect – or as disengagement
- Showing interest may be experienced as inclusion – or as singling someone out

Recognizing difference involves **being attentive to how norms and context shape both behavior and interpretation** – and adjusting how we engage with others accordingly.

In practice, this can involve pausing before drawing conclusions, making expectations more explicit, and remaining open to different ways of contributing and communicating in everyday interactions.

A case: Career progression – who receives development opportunities?



A woman from Indonesia joins a Danish company.

After some time, she notices that several colleagues are offered courses and new development opportunities. She hears them talk about upcoming trainings and projects they have been invited to join.

Curious, she asks one of her colleagues how these opportunities are decided. They explain that they had discussed this with their manager during a one-on-one conversation.

She continues to focus on delivering her work well and supporting her team. She assumes that her efforts and results will be noticed without needing to communicate them explicitly.

Over time, she notices that colleagues who more actively share their ambitions and ask for opportunities are more often considered for new responsibilities and progression.

She realizes that she has not done this herself. In her previous experience, conversations about development and progression were typically initiated by the manager, and opportunities were often based on being recognized for your work over time.



The questions below are designed as a practical reflection tool. They can be used individually, in teams, or as part of onboarding or development conversations. The goal is to prompt reflections on where expectations may be unclear, inconsistently applied, or differently understood – and **where small adjustments can make a meaningful difference**.

If you have people management responsibility

In onboarding: Make expectations visible

- What expectations might remain implicit for a new colleague?
- How is “taking initiative” understood in this team?
- How are decisions made – and who is expected to be involved?
- What does good performance look like in the first months?
- What might a new colleague be expected to “figure out” – without being told?

In feedback and development: Make expectations actionable

- How is feedback given – and what is expected in response?
- What is interpreted as initiative, clarity, or engagement?
- How are expectations for development and progression communicated?
- How do employees learn what is required to take on more responsibility?
- Are you evaluating contribution – or how it is expressed?

In everyday collaboration: Enable contribution

- How are tasks and responsibilities distributed?
- Who gets access to work that is noticed, understood and linked to value?
- Where is important information shared:
 - formally
 - informally
 - in which language
- Who may lack access to context, coordination, or early-stage decisions?

If you are an employee in a multinational team

In meetings and collaboration:

Participation and interpretation

- Who speaks and who does not?
- How is participation understood (e.g. speaking quickly, challenging ideas, building on others)?
- Who may participate less, not due to lack of competence, but due to different norms around communication or hierarchy?

In collaboration: Interpreting behavior

- What is interpreted as engagement, initiative, or clarity?
- When might behavior reflect:
 - caution
 - respect for hierarchy
 - different communication norms rather than lack of competence?
- Are you responding to what is said – or how it is said?

In everyday interaction: Inclusion and belonging

- How does language use (e.g. switching between Danish and English) affect participation?
- Who is included or excluded in informal spaces?
- How do humour, tone, and communication styles shape who feels comfortable contributing?

In shared work: Access and visibility

- Who is invited into tasks, discussions, or decisions?
- Who is kept informed – and who is not?
- How might small patterns in collaboration shape who becomes visible and recognized over time?

Final reflections

This guide has highlighted that **small, often unspoken practices** shape **who is able to contribute, who feels included, and whose competencies are recognized** in recruitment processes and everyday work. By making expectations more explicit, reflecting on how contributions are interpreted, and paying attention to access and participation, workplaces can reduce unintended barriers and create better conditions for collaboration across differences. The aim is to support the development of **cultural competency in practice** and to strengthen access, inclusion, and participation for international employees.

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