

Retaining professional identity

Skilled migrant teachers can face challenges when migrating to Australia with finding and settling into a teaching role, sometimes these challenges affect their professional identity. However, there are strategies they can employ to retain their existing professional identity. Research confirms that teachers with a strong professional identity are more effective in their teaching and have enhanced job satisfaction.

To work in Australia as a teacher, migrant teachers must register with the Teacher Registration Authority of the specific state or territory they intend to work in. At this stage, migrant teachers will be asked for a range of documents including their qualifications. These documents will also be requested as part of the recruitment process. Each employer will have their own qualification criteria and process for recognising seniority, as well as having their own job-related requirements. The process of qualification recognition enables migrant teachers to meet local employment requirements and standards which is essential for maintaining their professional identity and securing teaching positions.

Building local knowledge and experience

“I was teaching at a school with many first-generation Vietnamese students...I remember disciplining these boys at the boys’ school where I was teaching. They had their heads down the whole time while I was disciplining them. I was young, around 24 years old, and I remember saying, ‘You need to look at me while I’m talking to you.’ I went into the staff room at some point, and one of the older staff members said, ‘Oh, no, Lisa, in Vietnamese culture when you’re in trouble, you put your head down.’ It was an amazing lesson for me to learn at 24 years old that it was a sign of respect, not disrespect. I learned my lesson, and even now with kids, if they’ve got their heads down, I never ask them to put their heads up.”

Lead Teacher - Secondary

Adapting to the local education context is key for migrant teachers to maintain their professional identity. This includes understanding the Australian curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and classroom management practices. A focus on bridging the knowledge gap between different educational systems and cultures, helps migrant teachers to align their teaching practices with local expectations while preserving their unique perspectives and experiences. Formal mentorship to guide a migrant teacher’s professional development can be particularly valuable to assist this transition.

Establishing and growing professional relationships with colleagues and seeking advice to grow local knowledge is important for migrant teachers. A good start is to build relationships with colleagues in school leadership roles who can provide direction on ways to expand professional sources and resources. Importantly, proactive engagement with colleagues and leadership in schools is beneficial to deepening professional knowledge and applied approaches to their practice. Collaborating with colleagues creates opportunities of engaging in and learning through discussions where ideas are shared about every day teaching issues. Building a professional network is another vital strategy for migrant teachers. Engaging with local teaching communities, joining professional associations, and participating in educational forums can provide valuable support and resources. These networks can offer opportunities for professional development, informal mentorship, and collaboration which are crucial for career progression. Additionally, being part of a professional community helps migrant teachers stay updated with the latest educational

practices and policies in Australia, broadening their professional knowledge and further reinforcing their professional identity.

“Working with your colleagues is the biggest thing that will help improve your growth as a teacher. Learning new content is crucial too. I come from the United Kingdom where we didn’t teach investigation tasks and as a maths teacher, I had to set Year 12 investigations straight away. I hadn’t marked investigations for about 10 years and setting them without knowing the context made working with colleagues crucial as I had my ideas but needed others’ input. Evaluating criteria and running it by colleagues was very important. It also benefited my colleagues because I questioned if we could improve or change the investigation approach, leading to better collaboration.”

Lead Teacher – Primary & Secondary

Professional growth and reflective practice

For teachers in Australia, advancing in their careers involves broadening and deepening their knowledge and skills and applying them to achieve better outcomes for students. Maintaining a reflective practice approach is essential for teachers to continuously improve and adapt their teaching methods. Teachers should regularly evaluate their teaching experiences, seek feedback from colleagues, and set professional goals.

This ongoing process not only enhances their teaching effectiveness but also supports their professional growth and identity. By staying committed to lifelong learning and professional development migrant teachers can successfully navigate the challenges of migration and achieve career progression in the Australian education system.

Research confirms that a teacher’s skill and expertise is greatly enhanced through continuous professional learning and development. This includes engaging in constructive conversations with peers about their teaching practice as an opportunity for growth and improvement. Engaging professionally with peers, supports and strengthens practice but also provides a valuable web of support amid a busy working life. By embracing these connections, migrant teachers can create a path for professional growth in Australia and plan career progression while maintaining the unique set of talents, skills and experience they bring.

“Being open to receiving and acting on feedback is crucial during reflection. It’s daunting to have someone watch you teach, especially when you’re new to a school. Having an open mind and a positive mindset about receiving constructive feedback is essential for professional growth. As teachers, we never stop learning, just like our students.”

Highly Accomplished Teacher - Primary

In Practice

- **Engage in professional development:** Participate in workshops, courses, and seminars that focus on local educational practices and cultural contexts. This can help you understand the local curriculum, teaching methods, and student expectations.
- **Network with colleagues:** Building relationships with teacher colleagues can provide valuable insights and support. Join local teacher associations, attend school events, and seek out mentorship opportunities to learn from experienced colleagues.
- **Immerse yourself in the community:** Get involved in community activities and events to better understand the cultural and social dynamics of your students’ lives. Volunteering, attending local festivals, and visiting community centres can help you build connections and gain a deeper appreciation of the local culture.

Further reading

Yip, SY, Saito, E & Diamond, ZM 2024, ‘Professional identity and agency in immigrant teachers’ professional transition to work in Australia’, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, vol. 51, pp. 213-230.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00600-w>,

