Setting up for Success

Supporting migrant teachers in Australian classrooms: A guide for school leaders

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Introduction

Australia's teacher shortage has been building for quite some time. The reasons affecting this include, a growing student population, declining commencements in initial teacher education (ITE), and teachers leaving the profession – either due to stressors or retirement.

This has created a complex set of workforce challenges for Australia's education sector (AITSL 2022, 2023).

COVID-19 exacerbated issues of teacher supply and retention across Australia (AITSL 2023). Although the pandemic was a marked point in time, many factors were already having a negative impact, such as a global trend of teachers leaving the profession (AITSL 2022; Williams, Hill-Jackson, Caldwell & Craig 2022). In the last 2 years there has been intensifying international competition for a shrinking pool of qualified teachers (UNESCO 2023 and 2024; Welch 2022; Westley 2022).

At the same time, there has been an increased focus on migrant teachers, related to the growing global importance of diversifying the teaching profession so it better represents the cultural and linguistic diversity of students in classrooms, and in broader society (Yip & Saito 2023; Keane, Heinz & McDaid 2023). There is also growing worldwide acknowledgement of the benefits and net gains to be had from integrating international teachers into local classrooms – '…their professional, pedagogical and linguistic potential can be highly beneficial for schools' (Schussler, Hachmeister, Auner, D'Herdt & Holz 2023, p. 7).

Skilled migration is one of several visa pathways available to qualified overseas teachers wanting to teach in Australia. It is important to note though, that migrants with teaching skills and experience may arrive through a variety of pathways. Whatever the path, research and anecdotal evidence says that, for their journey to be successful, a supportive environment must be created where migrant teachers can thrive, and receiving schools can prosper from the value they bring.

This resource aims to address key aspects of adjusting to life and work in Australia. It outlines findings from research and consultation about supporting migrant teachers at the school level, and includes practical tips and advice from school leaders for school leaders to help them set up their school for success when they welcome a new migrant teacher.

This document was also informed by migrant teachers who shared stories of their transition into teaching and leading in Australian classrooms, and into Australian society and communities more broadly. They told stories of triumph and success in their teaching. Importantly, they also described difficulties and aspects of social and professional displacement that they had to resolve to succeed.

We learned that as the receiving culture, society and employment sector, Australia needs to increase the supports it provides. Migrant teachers described 3 distinct phases, with commonly experienced challenges that needed to be navigated, once they secured a teaching appointment in Australia:

- initial entry into the school community
- transition into Australian classrooms
- progressing their careers.

To understand these phases and actions to address them, AITSL reviewed available research and consulted with stakeholders.

AITSL sincerely thanks the migrant teachers and school leaders who so graciously gave of their time and experiences throughout our consultations. We acknowledge the immense value of their stories and the wisdom they provided, deepening our understanding of the migrant teacher experience.

As the gazetted skills assessing authority for teacher occupations, AITSL is passionate about ensuring that Australia has a teaching workforce in every school that is highly respected and valued by the profession, students, families and the broader community. Australia's 4 million school students, their parents and carers, and our educators, all want a quality teacher standing in front of every classroom, every day.

Initial entry into the school community

A recent Committee for Economic Development of Australia report (2024) highlighted that, although Australia deeply values the strength of its multicultural society, more should be done to realise greater outcomes from the skilled migration experience. In the case of migrant teachers, those greater outcomes include leveraging their cultural capacity in pedagogical approaches, professional knowledge and linguistic and language application, as well as bringing diversity in world views. This has advantages for children and young people, the school and its community, and wider society (Yip & Saito 2023; Daniels 2022; Rice, Garner & Graham 2023).

Facing a difference in culture, communication and living conditions – without prior knowledge of either the 'basics' or the customs and conventions of an Australian way of life – can make adjusting to a new job and settling into a new community overwhelming. Differences between the environment migrant teachers are coming from, and the location of their teaching appointment, can be dislocating. The loss of 'social capital' – connections and networks that play an important role in their life and career – makes an already trying time harder. This creates potential for high degrees of culture shock (Collins & Reid 2012). During consultation, migrant teachers said culture shock can be much greater in regional and remote locations than in a major city.

In the Australian context, many migrant teachers can be attracted to regional and remote positions through generous benefits, secure employment and housing offers, and opportunities for sponsored working visas (Datta Roy & Lavery 2017). Once they arrive however, migrant teachers need ongoing support to be successful (Reid, Collins & Singh 2010; Yan 2021; Yip 2023). Stories of loneliness, stress and isolation in country teaching appointments are common (Reid et al. 2010).

The reviewed research highlighted a consistent theme; confusion caused by lack of information. To help lessen culture shock, newly arrived migrant teachers need advice on transitioning into life in a new school and community. This should cover work-role questions but also the full suite of factors that affect everyday life; like where to live, health care, transport, food costs and phone services (Manik 2007).

To establish their professional identity in a new environment, alongside professional respect, a collegial welcome and inclusion in day-to-day activities at their new school (Yip & Saito 2024) migrant teachers need knowledge, information and guidance on all aspects of becoming and being a teacher in Australia.

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Welcome and support newly arrived migrant teachers

- Principals should be mindful of culture shock and not underestimate the anxiety and disconnection experienced by newly arrived migrant teachers.

- Offer a personable, warm reception to help minimise culture shock in a strange environment. Consultation confirmed that being welcomed into the school and community figured highly in creating migrant teachers' first positive impression.

- To encourage inclusion, introduce the school community to aspects of a new migrant teacher's culture, language and accent before they arrive, and let the school community know if the teacher's children will be students there.

- Provide upfront information on the 'how-to' of the specific community the migrant teacher is joining, to help them settle in. This includes:

  - banking
  - renting or buying a home
  - furniture and home appliance shopping
  - grocery and clothing shopping
  - setting up utilities, including costs
  - catching public transport
  - buying and/or driving a car
  - calling an ambulance, police or taxi
  - finding employment for partners.

- Specifically explain the place they are living in, including its biographic and demographic make-up. Based on location, include things like:

  - whether the community has previously welcomed migrant teachers
  - the climate
  - how accessible necessities are, such as health care, child care, groceries and water supply
  - how to prepare for and drive long distances on country roads.

- Offer information and support for new migrant teachers to access and participate in community life and events, to promote building new roots in an unfamiliar community.

Committee for Economic Development of Australia 2004.

Yip & Saito 2023; Daniels 2022; Rice, Garner & Graham 2023.

Collins & Reid 2012.

Datta Roy & Lavery 2017.

Reid, Collins & Singh 2010.

Yan 2021.

Yip 2023.

Reid et al. 2010.

Manik 2007.

Yip & Saito 2024.

Transition into Australian classrooms

A new migrant teacher is often welcomed into a classroom during a wider staff shortage. There may be numerous urgent priorities in the school at this time and these can negatively impact the new staff member's transition into the school.

Australia's successful multiculturism is built on the belief that cultural diversity is a great asset. It is strengthened through considered, positive practices of inclusion. In a professional setting, it extends to matters of professional identity – managing issues that provoke, create tension, induce frustration, cause discomfort and generate unease when different experiences and modes and types of professional expertise, confront each other for the first time.

Supporting a new migrant teacher requires both a practical induction in a settling-in period, and a planned approach to introducing the idea that their new school may have a different ethno-cultural style and capacity than they are used to. Research reveals that many migrant teachers have issues adjusting to a new culture, such as 'challenges related to adopting or adapting to different values and norms of the dominant society' (Ennerberg & Economou 2021, p. 587).

Migrant teachers may experience a disconnect between their values and those of their new country and education system. They need to adjust to how things are done (Miller 2018a). Measures to help migrant teachers transition well into Australian classrooms and build a culturally safe environment for them requires 'shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening' (Williams 2008, in ACECQA 2022, p. 65).

Migrant teachers may experience a disconnect between their values and those of their new country and education system. They need to adjust to how things are done.

Connecting with colleagues and developing positive relationships within the community, to build social capital, are important to new migrant teachers' professional success. All stakeholders agreed that those who grew roots in the community were more likely to stay in their jobs and towns. Consultation revealed that the receiving school was the most likely place for migrant teachers to build connections, with schools proactively creating opportunities where they are introduced to others to help foster personal and professional relationships.

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Encourage new migrant teachers to be part of social and professional communities

- Help ease the transition through a social event like a barbecue or other gathering, which the school could host. Encouraging relationships to form within the community, can assist migrant teachers to get used to local values and norms, and take on Australian culture.

- Provide opportunities for the migrant teacher to meet other local migrants and migrant organisations. Talking about their shared experience of migration, can help people get used to their new life. These events could be hosted by the local council or chamber of commerce.

- Expose the school community to the migrant teacher's culture, language and accent to encourage diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism. This enables cross-transfer of knowledge and building of cultural capacity.

- Present welcome packs with resources or links to digital resources on:

- Australian history and geography

- the political system and Constitution

- current affairs

- Australia's social make-up and major historical phases of immigration

- cultural foci like sports, to offer valuable social knowledge.

- Provide a resource that outlines Australian colloquialisms and slang, including conventions of when and where to use it appropriately. This is a useful and a friendly gesture of inclusion. Consultation highlighted that understanding swearing in different contexts was fundamental to getting used to a new home in Australia.

ⓘ Did you know?

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Ennerberg & Economou 2021, p. 587.

Miller 2018a.

Williams 2008, in ACECQA 2022, p. 65.

Building professional relationships

Migrant teachers reported that a mentor teacher made an incredible positive difference to their professional progress.

It provided high levels of inclusive workplace collegiality and the support they needed – being able to share their experiences of difficulty and difference, both in teaching and in the teaching environment. With a mentor's help and direction, they could bridge gaps in their understanding and receive encouragement for their practice.

In mentorship, it was useful for the focus to be on pedagogy and the educational context, rather than specific curriculum. Migrant teachers also wanted to observe mentor teachers, to understand Australian ways of teaching in practice.

Consistent, multi-layered induction and orientation – including at system or sector, school and division or area levels – is very important, so the migrant teacher learns about potential professional networks. It can help them feel less isolated, especially in regional and remote postings.

Research revealed that some migrant teachers feel marginalised in schools because they are a migrant and experience racism from students, parents/carers, and colleagues (Basit & Santoro 2011; Virta 2015). Racism often surprised them as it did not match their image of Australia.

Migrant teachers also wanted to observe mentor teachers, to understand Australian ways of teaching in practice.

Employers must guard against discrimination in all areas of work life, to comply with legislation. Educators are urged to move beyond compliance, avoiding the deficit model of difference. Diversity is better understood as an asset and source of opportunities (Miller 2018b; OECD 2020).

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Build the bridge to professional inclusion

- Appoint and formalise arrangements between new migrant teachers and willing mentor teachers with strong multicultural competency and understanding of diversity. This is a positive approach to establishing professional practice and collegial bonds.

- Be aware some teachers would not appreciate a mentorship. This helps avoid frustrations.

- Introduce migrant teachers to professional networks and networking opportunities. Consider setting one up if none exist. Be mindful to also connect migrant teachers with colleagues from the wider school community; for example their local network of schools. Subject-specific professional teaching communities can be very useful in secondary education.

- Promote high levels of inclusive collegiality in the receiving school, to improve the migrant teacher's environment.

- Provide information and support to migrant teachers so they access teaching resources and reputable evidence sources for their teaching, to promote successful practice.

- Provide diversity and inclusion training for staff to establish positive standards of behaviour and build collegiality.

ⓘ **Did you know?**

Employers must guard against discrimination in all areas of work life, to comply with legislation.

Basit & Santoro 2011.

Virta 2015.

Miller 2018b; OECD 2020.

Building relationships with students, parents and carers

Consultation revealed that the dynamic of the student–parent/carer–school relationship in Australian schools created difficulties for new migrant teachers, especially attitudes toward scholastic and academic effort. For the first time, many were working where teachers and school leaders are seen as equals – the opposite of the dynamic in their own country.

Migrant teachers face difficulties adjusting to new ways of teaching and disciplining students, and in managing classroom behaviours and parent/carer–teacher interactions. Research highlighted that many teachers mention being challenged by different expectations and strategies around student behaviour between their home and new country (Miller 2018a).

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Lay the foundations for successful student, parent/carer, school dynamics

- Explain the environment around schooling and cultural attitudes towards education in Australia to help ground the migrant teacher in their new role.

- Explain socio-economic difference and the diversity of student backgrounds to help new migrant teachers establish their professional presence in the classroom.

- Explain differences in strictness and discipline in the Australian classroom so new migrant teachers can adapt and modify their professional practice. Provide information on the school's policies and processes about areas such as behaviour management, special education and engagement with parents, carers and the wider school community.

- Guide new migrant teachers about managing the teacher–parent/carer relationship to support their engagement. Where possible, allow them to observe and initially interact with the parent/carer community in a scaffolded, supported manner so they can build confidence.

- Inform new migrant teachers about resources they can use to learn about, and prepare themselves for, this aspect of teaching.

Professional practice

During consultation, new migrant teachers said it was hard to understand parts of professional practice in Australia that were either not featured in their home country or operated differently there. Those now in leadership roles, and assisting new migrant teachers, said it was important to very clearly spell out and explain current pedagogical practice. Research also notes a need for context-specific, personalised, initial and ongoing mentorship, tailored to each migrant teacher
(Yan 2021).

Migrant teachers said formal professional development was critical to successfully establishing new roles. Classroom or behaviour management was seen as the most useful professional development. Strategies for instruction, assessment and lesson planning also rated highly (Caravatti, Lederer, Lupico & Meter 2014).

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Embed understanding so new migrant teachers can excel

- Explain the system or sector's schooling context to ground new migrant teachers' understanding of their wider teaching environment. The Internet is not a reliable place to get a working knowledge.

- Encourage migrant teachers to adopt a growth mindset and embrace the fact that Australian schooling systems are not the same as what they are used to. This will encourage them to build on their professional practice and expertise.

- Provide very clear, specific instruction and include opportunities to observe mentor teachers and be coached. Have the mentor explain current Australian pedagogical practices including differentiation, contemporary classroom management, curriculum programming and integrating technology into lessons. This supports and encourages new migrant teachers.

- Explain 'out-of-field teaching' and other educational terms that are used widely within the school context. This gives new migrant teachers the foundational knowledge they need to inform their performance.

- Inform migrant teachers of employment benefits, such as access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist with strategies for managing workload stress and overwhelm, and as a touchpoint to help settle in.

Did you know?

Migrant teachers now in leadership roles, and assisting new migrant teachers, said it was important to very clearly spell out and explain current pedagogical practice.

Yan 2021.

Caravatti, Lederer.

Lupico & Meter 2014.

Career progression

Both new and experienced migrant teachers believe that their international experience will have a positive effect on their career. The reality, however, quite regularly struggles to meet expectations. Skilled migrants, including teachers, often find themselves underemployed or in casual positions. Their qualifications, skill and experience and specialised area knowledge are either not recognised or diminished through skills-to-job mismatch (Tan & Cebulla 2022).

The ability to grow within a chosen profession and realise career gains through development is a critical factor to attracting and retaining a skilled workforce.

There is evidence suggesting that being trained overseas may negatively influence a teacher's career promotion and progression in the Australian education sector. Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) from 2022 shows that a smaller proportion of teachers with an overseas ITE qualification were in senior leadership positions (6%) than those with an Australian one (10%) (ATWD 2022).

It is important to note that cultural differences can cause difficulties in a career path. During consultation, a recurring discussion point for migrant teachers was how hard they found self-promotion and being direct about their professional aspirations and development needs.

Migrant teachers from countries with more hierarchical professional environments were uneasy when first entering Australian classrooms. They described the effort it took to overcome the habits and expectations of their home professional culture – often with a strict hierarchy of communication and in some, a taboo on asking questions of superiors. Some said, in their home country, people were 'hand-picked' for promotion. Migrant teachers may need support to develop in self-promotion and managing career growth.

Other migrant teachers described problems having their professional experience and leadership practice acknowledged and respected in Australia. Research revealed that, in some cases, migrant teachers were seen as just passing through and 'discounted from moving into advanced positions due to (mis)conceptions of teachers' cultural or professional knowledge' (Finefter-Rosenbluh 2022).

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Enable and support career growth

- Encourage migrant teachers to embrace the difference in teaching culture and be part of growth opportunities. This helps them realise they can advance their careers.

- Stress the importance of making connections for students between the concepts or skills being taught and their real-world relevance. This develops migrant teachers' professional practice and assists in growing their career.

- Help new migrant teachers understand that being relatable to their students in the classroom and adopting the more egalitarian Australian mindset, will help them adapt to the Australian context.

- Talk to migrant teachers about their career aspirations and find out why they changed their career path to teaching in Australia. Build an understanding of how to support them, and establish where they need to develop so they can achieve their career goals.

- Support migrant teachers to move from provisional to full teacher registration and direct them to the AITSL website and/or their local teacher regulatory authority for information on doing this. Full registration encourages career development.

- Encourage migrant teachers to ask questions and actively seek professional development. Pointing out online and in-person opportunities, helps maintain their motivation to develop their career.

- Support migrant teachers to re-engage with career development by helping them embrace professional flexibility and proactively build professional relationships. This provides positive reinforcement of collegiality and inclusiveness.

- Advise migrant teachers to research the difference in curriculum delivery across systems and sectors to help position themselves and their career goals in the Australian context. This will demonstrate the breadth of opportunity that exists for them.

ⓘ Did you know?

During consultation, a recurring discussion point for migrant teachers was how hard they found self-promotion and being direct about their professional aspirations and development needs.

Tan & Cebulla 2022.

ATWD 2022.

Finefter-Rosenbluh 2022.

Acknowledging cultural capacity

Migrant teachers are mostly considered to fill workforce shortages. However, with growing global academic and societal interest, student diversity due to patterns of migration, has come into acute focus. Calls for a responsive move to diversify teacher representation in classrooms are gaining momentum (Rice et al. 2023; Acton & Hennessy 2023).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations (UN) migration agency, says the number of international migrants has increased over the past five decades. In 2020, an estimated 281 million people lived in a country they were not born in. This was 128 million more than in 1990, and over three times the estimated number for 1970 (IOM, 2021, World Migration Report 2022, para. 3).

It is becoming the norm for classrooms to be culturally diverse, reflecting contemporary Australian society (Rice et al., 2023). In a world of global interconnectedness, exposure to languages and cultures outside Australian English language and culture benefits students and communities.

It is becoming the norm for classrooms to be culturally diverse, reflecting contemporary Australian society

Migrant teachers bring the benefits of cultural exchange. They can act as role models and assist migrant students in feeling less isolated, as well as teaching Australian-born students about the world. Providing support for talented migrant teachers to excel and positively influence professional practice can help sustain the workforce and improve student outcomes.

Advice *from* school leaders *for* school leaders:

Benefit from the value-add of cultural capacity

- Actively promote understanding of diversity and inclusive practice amongst colleagues, peers and the wider school community. This benefits all.

- Demonstrate respect within the school community for migrant teachers' professional experience and standing. This establishes a positive collegiate and teaching and learning environment.

- Enable and encourage migrant teachers to manage their own professional practice. This respects their autonomy.

- Create space for active sharing of international professional experience and promote collegiality. This multiplies the positive benefits of migrant teachers' cultural capacity.

- Encourage migrant teachers to take opportunities in middle and senior leadership roles, leveraging their cultural and professional competencies for the benefit of the school and community.

- Identify, leverage and support specialist capabilities and experience, allowing migrant teachers to participate and enrich capacity within their schools.

- Provide opportunities for migrant teachers to speak about their migrant journey from both a professional and personal perspective. This creates an inclusive environment, allowing them to see themselves belonging in the fabric and life of the school and community.

(i) **Did you know?**

Migrant teachers bring the benefits of cultural exchange. They can act as role models and assist migrant students in feeling less isolated, as well as teaching Australian-born students about the world.

Rice et al. 2023; Acton & Hennessy 2023

IOM, 2021, World Migration Report 2022, para. 3

Rice et al., 2023

Conclusion

Today's world dynamics make us more interconnected than ever; with the internet, mobile technology, cloud computing and generative artificial intelligence (AI) further shaping these dynamics. Coupled with the largest movements in skilled and refugee migration the world has ever seen, cultural capacity is fast becoming the currency of modern life.

The education sector and teachers are at the forefront of living this movement in their professional lives – through the students they teach and the classrooms they lead. Migrant teachers have much to contribute to successful student outcomes.

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