

FROM MIGRATION TO CLASSROOM: UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION AS PATHWAY TO TEACHER INTEGRATION

Claudia BERGMÜLLER-HAUPTMANN
Monica BRAVO GRANSTRÖM
Jaqueline GARCIA FERREIRA FUCHS
Violet GRÖSSL
University of Education Weingarten, DE

Email: bergmueller-hauptmann@ph-weingarten.de

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, migration has become a central feature of many societies. However, while many skilled professionals can transfer their qualifications relatively easily to new labour markets, migrated teachers often encounter substantial barriers. To re-enter the teaching profession, they are frequently required to undergo complex requalification processes and pass formal examinations. University continuing education (UCE) can serve as a flexible needs-oriented framework to complement official recognition procedures and promote the integration of migrated teachers into national education systems. This paper presents the programme "IGEL – Integration and Equity for International Teachers" at the University of Education Weingarten, Germany. It outlines the programme's structural framework, didactic approach, and evaluation-based outcomes. It illustrates how targeted UCE programmes can facilitate the re-qualification and labour market integration of migrated teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is an integral part of contemporary European societies, and international professionals contribute significantly to labour markets across sectors. However, systemic barriers often hinder a seamless transition into the host country's workforce, particularly in regulated professions such as teaching. Here, a mismatch between institutional standards, educational structures, and language requirements pose significant challenges for teachers seeking to continue their careers in a new educational system: despite formal qualifications and professional experience, migrated teachers are frequently required to complete extensive requalification procedures, including additional studies, examinations, and advanced language certification (George, 2021; Kremsner, Proyer and Biewer, 2020; Schüssler et al., 2023). This process often leads to prolonged career interruptions, underemployment, or dropout – despite a well-documented shortage of qualified teachers in Germany (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024; Dohmen, 2024, KMK, 2023).

This paper presents the bridging programme *IGEL – Integration and Equity for International Teachers* at the University of Education Weingarten, Germany. It explores the programme's structural and didactic design as well as its evidence-based outcomes. IGEL serves as a case study of how University Continuing Education (UCE) within University Lifelong Learning (ULL) can complement formal recognition procedures and support the labour market integration of migrated teachers. Through this lens, the paper identifies key mechanisms for inclusive professional development, highlights transferable practices for European contexts, and advocates for systemic innovations within teacher education policy that strengthen resilient lifelong learning ecosystems.

RECOGNITION PROCESSES FOR INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS IN GERMANY

In Germany, teaching is a regulated profession. Full access to the profession requires official recognition of foreign teaching credentials, which is administered by the education ministries of the 16 federal states. Without this formal recognition, full-time employment as a teacher is generally not permitted. The recognition process typically involves three core requirements:

- a completed teacher education programme from the country of origin,
- a formal aptitude test (if substantial differences are identified), and
- advanced German language proficiency at CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level C2, or C1 plus an oral colloquium.

Despite the growing demand for qualified teachers in Germany, recognition remains a significant hurdle. In 2022, only 14% of around 2,000 submitted applications for recognition of foreign teaching qualifications resulted in full recognition (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024). Approximately two-thirds of applicants are required to undertake additional academic training – often in subject didactics or to acquire a second teaching subject – and must pass language exams at the highest CEFR levels (Weizsäcker & Roser, 2020).

These requirements, while designed to ensure educational quality, often fail to acknowledge the substantial professional experience that many migrated teachers bring. As a result, the process can lead to unnecessary delays, drop-outs, or diversion into unrelated fields.

During this period, many affected individuals face professional uncertainty, loss of pedagogical engagement, and financial strain. Career breaks are common, as are part-time jobs outside the education sector taken to support themselves during re-qualification. Women, who make up the majority of participants, are disproportionately disadvantaged, primarily due to their caregiving responsibilities and unequal access to childcare.

To address these challenges, several bridging initiatives have been launched across Germany. These programmes aim to ease transitions into the host country's education system by offering tailored support. They combine language development, subject-specific instruction, and socio-cultural orientation to participants to meet national standards and institutional norms. More broadly, they promote educational equity by acknowledging the potential of a diverse teaching workforce and offering structured pathways towards reintegration (Bergmüller et al., 2025; Kansteiner et al., 2022). The following section presents the IGEL programme as a case study of such an approach, illustrating how UCE can contribute to more inclusive, flexible, and responsive qualification pathways for migrated teachers.

IGEL – A BRIDGING PROGRAMME

Programme Origins

Launched in 2019 at the University of Education Weingarten, the IGEL programme was initially developed in response to the increasing number of refugee teachers from countries such as e. g. Syria, Algeria, Turkey, and meanwhile also Ukraine in Germany. Situated within the university's Academy for Continuing Education, IGEL was conceived as part of a broader University Lifelong Learning (ULL) strategy.

The original concept followed a three-stage model:

- a. preparation for requalification studies,
- b. support during requalification, and
- c. guidance through the transition into employment.

Since 2024, the programme has been broadened to support all internationally trained teachers, not just those with a refugee background. It continues to evolve based on ongoing evaluation and participant feedback. IGEL's integration within the Academy of Continuing Education enables hybrid structure that bridges pre-service teacher education and continuing education. This institutional positioning fosters a collaborative university-led ecosystem that connects individual learners, recognition authorities, schools, and higher education institutions across the federal state of Baden-Württemberg.

The programme is designed to address the linguistic, didactic, and institutional challenges through a practice-oriented, action-based approach. The goal is to enable long-term, situated learning that empowers participants to re-enter the profession with confidence and competence.

Programme Structure

In its current form, IGEL is implemented through four interlinked components (see figure 1) that operationalize the original three-stage framework:

1. *Individual Guidance*: Personal consultations assess prior qualifications, recognition status, and living conditions to determine programme suitability and tailor individual learning paths.
2. *Three-Month Preparatory Programme*: Courses in academic German, school-related language, and the German education system provide sound knowledge for further studies. A language lab supports preparation for C1/C2 proficiency exams preparation.
3. *Accompanying Short Courses*: These include didactics, digital pedagogy, and strategies for multilingual classrooms. A buddy programme with university students offers academic and social support.
4. *Practical Integration*: Participants undertake school placements with tandem partners and receive professional supervision. Reflection sessions focus on classroom management, parent communication and navigating the school environment.

Preparatory Programme

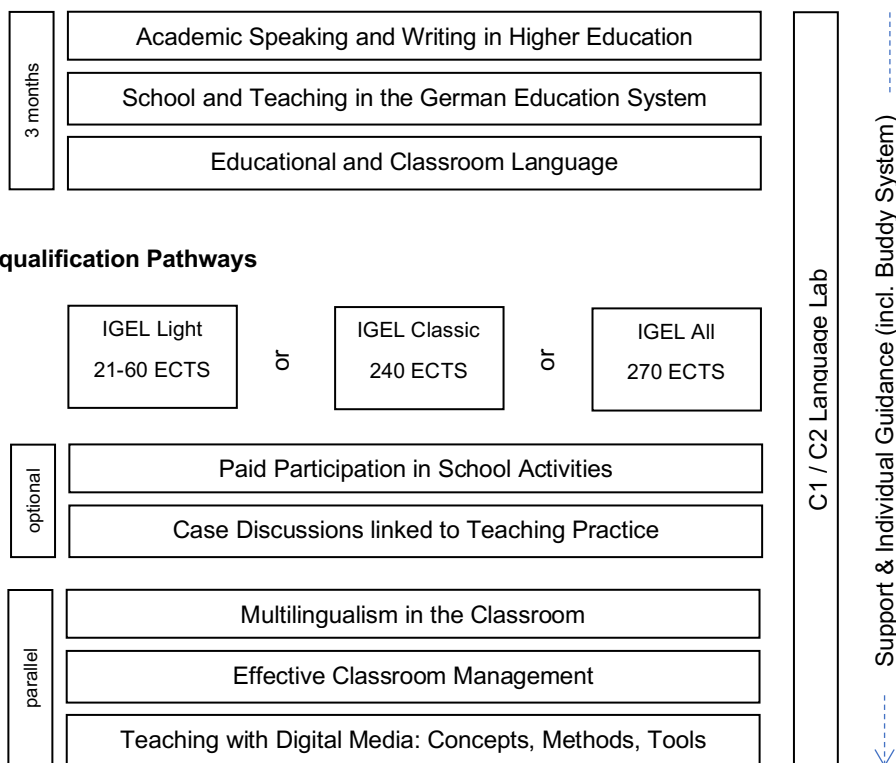


Figure 1: Overview of the IGEL programme

Together, these four components provide a structured, needs-based progression that corresponds to both individual and institutional requirements. By combining personalised guidance, academic preparation, and school-based experience, IGEL enables participants to navigate the requalification process more effectively.

Programme Outcomes

To date, more than 100 migrant teachers have participated in the IGEL programme. From the first cohort onwards, we have analysed their subsequent pathways via project statistics, as well as through ongoing quantitative and qualitative evaluations using questionnaires and interviews. By summer 2024, 68 participants had successfully completed the preparatory programme.

The statistical analyses show that among these participants:

- 69.2% continued their re-qualification studies at the University of Education Weingarten,
- 10.3% enrolled at other institutions,
- 8.8% entered teaching-related roles in preparatory or language support classes,
- 1.5% entered direct recognition procedures without additional studies,
- 7.3% transitioned into other professional fields, and
- 2.9% remained as guest students awaiting study admission.

Among those who began re-qualification studies between 2019 and 2021, the completion rates are encouraging:

- 77.8% of 2019 entrants have completed their programmes,
- 71.4% of those from 2020, and
- currently already 42.7% of the 2021 cohort (the rest was still involved in their studies at that time).

These figures highlight not only the programme's effectiveness but also illustrate the systemic challenges posed by lengthy recognition procedures and individuals' life circumstances.

The questionnaires and interview data confirm that flexible, targeted continuing education programmes like IGEL significantly enhance the chances of professional reintegration for internationally educated teachers. Participants in our programme as well as in comparable programmes throughout Germany report increased confidence, improved language proficiency, stronger professional identity, and a clearer understanding of institutional expectations (cf. e. g. Schüssler et al., 2023).

The modular design of IGEL, combined with its responsiveness to participant needs, makes it a transferable model for other regional and national contexts. It demonstrates how university continuing education can function as an enabling mechanism in the integration of a diverse, multilingual teaching workforce – particularly in times of teacher shortages and increasing cultural diversity in schools.

LESSONS LEARNT

The IGEL programme provides valuable insights into how UCE can effectively support the professional reintegration of internationally trained teachers. Several key success factors have emerged from its implementation and ongoing evaluation:

- *Diversity-sensitive guidance*: Tailored advising that considers prior professional experience, migration histories, legal status, and individual aspirations is essential for building trust and supporting informed decision-making.
- *Flexible formats*: A blended learning approach - combining online, hybrid, and in-person formats – accommodates diverse life situations including caregiving responsibilities, part-time employment, and mobility restrictions.
- *Bridging socialisation gaps*: Successful integration into the German school system requires more than language proficiency. It also involves pedagogical alignment, familiarity with institutional norms, and the (re)development of a professional teacher identity.
- *Practice-oriented components as catalysts*: Supervised school placements and structured reflection sessions enhance participants' professional confidence, classroom readiness and employability.

While the programme's impact is evident, persistent challenges remain – particularly in the areas of financial resources, sustainable funding, and systemic recognition of prior learning. These barriers often limit the scalability of such initiatives and hinder equal participation.

IGEL also highlights the importance of reflexive diversity management within universities. Moving beyond formal commitments to inclusion requires structural adjustments, critical institutional reflection, and a commitment to developing inclusive practices at all levels.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

UCE has the potential to act as a transformative instrument in the professional development of migrated teachers. Bridging programmes such as IGEL demonstrate how scientifically grounded, context-sensitive continuing education can complement formal recognition processes and create inclusive, responsive qualification pathways.

IGEL functions as more than just a re-qualification initiative – it serves as a laboratory for inclusive teacher education, linking higher education institutions, schools, and policy stakeholders. Through its modular, adaptable structure, the programme offers a transferable model for continuing professional development (CPD) in increasingly diverse education systems.

Moreover, by recognising migrated teachers as a strategic target group in CPD planning, programmes such as IGEL advocate the development of adaptive learning ecosystems. This contributes not only to systemic capacity development, but also to a more equitable and representative teaching workforce.

Key elements such as mentoring, job shadowing, and case-based reflections play a crucial role in fostering professional identity and sustainable integration. These mechanisms support not only skills acquisition but also the long-term socialisation of teachers into new educational contexts.

Ultimately, IGEL exemplifies how University Continuing Education (UCE) can respond dynamically to societal change, reduce structural barriers, and unlock the potential of a diverse, multilingual teaching workforce. This diversity enhances educational capacity and promotes a school environment that better reflects the multilingual realities of its pupils. As such, IGEL provides a compelling model for universities across Europe aiming to strengthen lifelong learning ecosystems and ensure equitable access and advance inclusive access to the teaching profession.

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