

# **Culture Oriented Migration Empowerment (COME):**

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**A Theoretical and Practical Framework for the  
Integration of Expats in Germany**

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## Abstract

*Germany faces a growing demand for international students and professionals due to demographic changes, labor shortages, and its positioning in the global education and job market. However, integration of these individuals remains a critical challenge. The Culture-Oriented Migration Empowerment (COME) method, developed by the Inside Culture Academy (ICA), provides a theoretically grounded and practically applicable model that addresses current gaps in integration programs. Combining theories of transcultural pedagogy, intercultural competence, multidimensional integration, and empowerment, COME is structured into four dynamic phases: Understand, Reflect, Apply, and Belong. This paper elaborates on the theoretical underpinnings, the pedagogical rationale, and the practical implementation of COME, with a special focus on its application in university and occupational settings. The paper also positions COME in the context of national and international initiatives, proposing it as a best-practice framework for the integration of international students and professionals.*

*Keywords: Integration, intercultural competence, empowerment, Germany*

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## 1. Introduction

Germany has evolved into one of the most attractive destinations for international students and professionals, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. This is attributed to its robust economy, tuition-free public universities, globally recognized degrees, and strong industry-academia collaboration (DAAD, 2023; OECD, 2023). As of 2023, more than 350,000 international students were enrolled in German higher education institutions, a number that continues to grow steadily each year (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Alongside students, Germany has also witnessed a significant rise in skilled immigration through blue-card holders (BAMF, 2024; Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2024) and bilateral agreements with countries like India, Brazil, and Egypt (Auswärtiges Amt, 2022; IAB (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung), 2024).

Despite these developments, systemic barriers continue to hinder the long-term integration of international students and professionals. Challenges include not only navigating German bureaucracy and mastering the language but also deeper issues related to social isolation, cultural adjustment, workplace inclusion, and emotional well-being. Multiple surveys and policy reports indicate that many international students and employees struggle with a lack of meaningful social connections, uncertainty about career progression, limited access to intercultural mentoring or mental health support, and uncertainty regarding their long-term stay (DAAD, 2023; IAB, 2024b; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). Moreover, the integration measures currently in place, such as federal BAMF language and orientation courses or university-led welcome initiatives, often emphasize formal aspects like visa regulations or language acquisition. While these are undoubtedly essential, they seldom address the more complex,

affective, and identity-related dimensions of integration, such as building intercultural confidence, navigating cultural ambiguity, or fostering a genuine sense of belonging.

The **Culture-Oriented Migration Empowerment (COME)** method was developed by the Inside Culture Academy to bridge precisely these gaps. It represents a shift from traditional, one-size-fits-all integration approaches to a dynamic, learner-centred framework that is theoretically informed, practically grounded, and digitally scalable. Unlike most top-down courses that treat migrants as passive recipients of knowledge, COME positions them as active agents capable of shaping their own integration journey. Drawing from interdisciplinary theories of intercultural competence, empowerment pedagogy, and multidimensional integration, the method is structured into four phases: **Understand, Reflect, Apply, and Belong**. This paper presents the theoretical rationale behind COME, its alignment with current academic and policy frameworks, and its practical implementation in university and occupational settings.

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## 2. Theoretical Foundations

### 2.1. Intercultural Competence Model (Deardorff, 2006)

The COME model rests its foundation on Deardorff's (2006) pyramid model of intercultural competence. The five core components of the model are *intercultural attitudes* such as respect, openness, and curiosity; *intercultural knowledge*, which includes both cultural self-awareness and knowledge of the host culture; *intercultural skills* such as observation, interpretation, and relational adaptability; and finally, the two outcomes of these, the *internal outcomes* including flexibility, empathy, and an ethno-relative mindset; and the *external outcomes* seen through effective and appropriate behavior in intercultural contexts. The COME model tries to embody a sequential process that would reflect this development in the migrants, ensuring that learners progress from awareness to application and finally to belonging.

### 2.2. Multidimensional Integration Frameworks

Just as intercultural competence is a process, COME recognizes integration as a multidimensional process as well. In this, two interdisciplinary theories are crucial – the psychological model of John Berry (1997, 2006) and the social integration model of Hartmut Esser (2001) that is developed specifically for Germany.

**Berry's model of acculturation:** Whether voluntary or forced, short-term or long-term, migration forces people to consider their ties to their heritage culture and the host society. First, do I preserve my heritage, culture, and identity? Second, do I adopt the majority culture? Berry (1997) states that these questions yield four acculturation methods. Integration, the positive answer to both questions, seems to benefit the individual most (Zagefka & Brown, 2002). Assimilation is when someone abandons their heritage to fit in with the new culture. Separation is when someone maintains strong ties to their home culture without participating in the host community. Finally, a person who rejects host and home cultures refusing to participate in

social activities is said to be marginalized (Berry, 1997). However, to facilitate this psychological process of integration, such that people retain both host and home culture, sociologist Hartmut Esser (2001) elaborates on migrants' social and economic adaptation in the host nation, in addition to their subjective preferences

**Esser's model of social integration:** Esser (2001) defines integration as the cohesion of individual pieces into a whole. He informs that for an object to merge with any system, four dimensions are needed: 1) **Cultural integration**, which encompasses cultural knowledge and linguistic competencies required for interacting in the host society. This begins the socialization process in society. 2) **Economic integration or placement** refers to a person's position in society and the privileges that come with it, whether through citizenship, academic, or employment status. 3) **Social integration or interaction** refers to the formation and maintenance of social ties in everyday life. 4) Finally, **emotional integration or identification** refers to the migrant's emotional link with society, a subjective sense of belonging. These factors can be used to measure an individual's or group's social integration level.

The COME method recognizes that successful long-term integration requires migrants to maintain a connection with their cultural roots while simultaneously developing a meaningful identification with the host society. For this host-cultural identity to evolve sustainably, all four dimensions of integration – structural, cultural, social, and identificatory must be addressed in a sequential and interrelated manner.

### 2.3. Empowerment Theory

Empowerment, as conceived in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), involves equipping marginalized individuals with the tools and agency to transform their realities. In migration contexts, this means enabling newcomers to become proactive participants in their integration rather than passive recipients of state-led support. The COME method aligns with empowerment theory by emphasizing learner autonomy, participatory learning, and real-life application. This means not merely teaching participants how to behave or what to expect, but guiding them to develop their own strategies for navigating cultural, social, and professional landscapes.

### 2.4 The didactical background to the COME Model

The goal of the COME method is to enhance intercultural competence as outlined by Darla Deardorff (2006) and empower migrants toward holistic integration, addressing its social, economic, cultural, and structural dimensions. The underlying **didactic concept** draws on **Transcultural Pedagogy**, which emphasizes that cultures are not static or homogenous, but rather fluid, interconnected, and constantly evolving (Welsch, 1999). This approach moves beyond binary notions of "us vs. them" and encourages learners to see diversity as a norm rather than an exception.

While the COME method adopts transcultural pedagogy as its foundation, a mere cognitive understanding of cultural fluidity is not sufficient. As Jack Mezirow (1991) argues in his **Transformative Learning Theory**, intercultural learning requires critical reflection on one's own background, values, and assumptions. Such reflection, especially when triggered by

disorienting experiences (e.g., culture shock), leads to a shift in perspective which is a core requirement for deeper intercultural growth.

To enable this transformation, the COME method integrates David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* (1984), which posits that learning is most effective when it follows a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation. This allows learners to not only reflect on past experiences but also apply their insights in real-world settings, fostering both cognitive and behavioral change.

Lastly, COME incorporates Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice model* (Wenger, 1998), recognizing that learning is a social process. When migrants interact in shared spaces (e.g., moderated forums or peer learning groups), they co-construct knowledge, share coping strategies, and develop a sense of belonging, a critical but often overlooked dimension of integration.

Together, these theories support the COME method's four learning phases, understand, reflect, apply, and belong, and ensure that learning is personalized, participatory, and practical, ultimately promoting long-term intercultural competence and integration success.

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### 3. The COME Model: Phased Framework for Holistic Integration

Built on the foundation of developing intercultural competence, the COME model helps migrants stay connected to their cultural roots while building strong ties to the host culture. By addressing the different dimensions of integration in a structured way, COME empowers migrants through four sequential phases designed to support their journey toward meaningful inclusion.

#### a: Phase 1: Understand

The Understand phase lays the cognitive foundation for integration. Participants engage with content structured in an online course titled '*Hidden rules of German Culture*', which covers German cultural norms, workplace expectations, academic etiquette, and everyday life logistics. Examples include cultural differences in communication where Germany tends on the direct side, structured norms, especially seen in time, appointment culture, and bureaucratic processes, etc.

The scientific foundation of Phase 1 lies in the understanding that **cultural knowledge** is essential for successful interaction. Intercultural competence models emphasize the importance of understanding both one's own culture and that of the host country to interpret behaviors and expectations accurately. A lack of awareness of cultural "rules of the game" often leads to misunderstandings and uncertainty, especially in bureaucratic or social contexts. Studies show that with clear and structured information, systems like German bureaucracy become more navigable for newcomers (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

To address this, Phase 1 of the COME model offers a centralized knowledge pool covering essential topics like housing, healthcare, workplace norms, and cultural values. This approach aligns with modern integration trends, such as digital portals used in cities like Cluj (Romania), which simplify access for migrants (URBACT, 2022). Beyond factual knowledge, this phase emphasizes understanding unwritten cultural norms and values. Through transcultural pedagogy, participants learn to identify both differences and shared human experiences. For example, they explore why punctuality or directness is valued in Germany without ranking cultural practices as superior or inferior. By the end of this phase, participants are equipped with a foundational understanding to help prevent early culture shock and confidently navigate everyday life.

## **b: Phase 2: Reflect**

Reflect centers on examining one's own cultural assumptions, expectations, and emotional responses. After gaining foundational knowledge in Phase 1, participants are encouraged to contextualize this input by reflecting on their personal experiences. Tools such as storytelling, reflection prompts, and interactive exercises help them compare their cultural background with what they encounter in Germany, for example, differing norms around communication styles.

This phase is rooted in the reflective dimension of intercultural competence, where critical self-awareness fosters perspective-taking and empathy (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). By identifying their “cultural autopilot”, automatic behaviors or assumptions, participants learn to reassess and adapt their responses. As Mezirow (1991) argues, transformative learning begins when individuals encounter disorienting experiences or information that challenge their existing assumptions, it prompts critical reflection that can lead to a profound shift in perspective. COME supports this through non-graded self-tests that prompt reflection on biases or insecurities.

Empowerment theory is also embedded here: reflection raises awareness of internalized beliefs and offers strategies to address challenges such as cultural distance or perceived discrimination. Discussing these experiences in a structured, supportive environment builds cultural confidence and resilience. Studies show that such reflection, especially when supported by local mentors or peer networks, makes social and bureaucratic barriers feel less overwhelming.

Phase 2 helps participants move from knowledge to insight. By fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and linking learning to personal identity, Reflect prepares participants for confident action in Phase 3.

## **c: Phase 3: Apply**

Apply focuses on translating knowledge and reflection into practical action. Integration becomes real through everyday behaviors, at university, in the workplace, and in social life. COME supports this with hands-on tools such as step-by-step guides, checklists, and simulated exercises across various domains: a career portal (job applications, workplace culture), an everyday portal (navigating healthcare, authorities), and a network portal (social integration tips). This phase is rooted in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and competence development, where lasting skills are built through action. Participants learn not only what to do, but also



how to do it effectively in the German context – for example, how to write professional emails or request support appropriately in German.

COME bridges cultural and vocational learning, enhancing structural integration (e.g., access to jobs, housing, healthcare) and social integration (e.g., roleplays for workplace communication). Importantly, participants start in a protected environment through online simulations and then apply their skills in real life. For instance, a student who learns in earlier phases that German professors value initiative is then asked to simulate such interaction before doing it for real, thus lowering the barrier to action. Research supports this: practical experience and early support improve international students' success in the job market (DAAD, 2023).

In summary, Phase 3 equips participants with a real-world integration toolkit. By practicing key tasks, from job interviews to community engagement, they build self-efficacy and take confident steps toward independence in their new environment.

#### d: Phase 4: Belong

Finally, belong focuses on what is perhaps the most subtle yet essential aspect of integration: the emotional experience of feeling accepted and connected. Even with language skills, employment, and everyday competence, integration remains incomplete unless migrants feel recognized and valued by the host community. COME supports this phase by fostering identificatory integration, the sense of truly belonging. Practical tools include community-building tasks, networking opportunities, and calls to action that encourage interaction, such as “Attend a local club meeting” or “Talk to a colleague about a hobby.” The platform offers suggestions, contact points, and community feedback to reinforce engagement.

This phase is rooted in Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice model, which suggests that shared spaces are important for a sense of belonging through co-constructed knowledge and shared coping strategies. It also aligns with theories on the **four basic psychological needs of belonging** (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), including **connection** (forming meaningful interpersonal relationships), **recognition** (being seen and accepted by others), **purpose** (feeling one's presence contributes to the group), and **continuity** (experiencing stability in social ties over time).

COME promotes all four through structured digital communities, shared storytelling, and opportunities for joint activities. Whether through peer forums, volunteer initiatives, or themed events, participants gradually build trust and networks that reduce isolation and foster integration. Research confirms that a strong sense of belonging is closely tied to life satisfaction and willingness to stay in the host country (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). For many migrants, barriers like social distance or discrimination hinder this process. Conversely, mentorship and support from locals significantly ease the transition.

COME bridges this gap by providing safe spaces for authentic connection and mutual support, turning the abstract idea of “welcoming culture” into a lived experience. Emotional support, especially in the early months, is critical. Digital tools help create that supportive environment, mirroring successful models like Cluj's online integration communities (URBACT, 2022). Ultimately, this phase helps participants lay social and emotional roots. Small moments, being



invited to a celebration, making a local friend, or contributing to a neighborhood project, accumulate to a lasting sense of home. In doing so, COME not only enhances integration but also supports long-term retention of international students and professionals in Germany

Table 1: The COME Model: Phased Framework for Holistic Integration

Phase	Core Focus	Key Activities / Tools	Theoretical Foundation	Integration Dimensions Addressed
<b>1. Understand</b>	Building cognitive and cultural awareness	Topics of the Online course: <i>Hidden Rules of German Culture</i> : communication styles, time norms, bureaucracy, housing, healthcare, workplace etiquette	Transcultural Pedagogy (Welsch, 1999)	Cultural Integration (knowledge, orientation)
<b>2. Reflect</b>	Critical self-awareness and intercultural empathy	Reflection prompts, storytelling - Self-tests (e.g., identify biases or “cultural autopilot”)	- Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991) - Empowerment Theory (Freire, 1970)	Psychological & Emotional Integration (identity, empathy)
<b>3. Apply</b>	Practical skill-building and real-life readiness	- More than 250 topic portals for information about everyday life in Germany, from livelihood, to leisure, to work, to formal appointments for students to try on their own	- Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984)	Structural & Social Integration (jobs, systems, communication)
<b>4. Belong</b>	Emotional connection and community building	- Online community for Peer forums, networking, mentoring	- Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) - Belonging Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)	Identificatory Integration (sense of home, social bonding)

*To summarize*, the four phases of COME – Understand, Reflect, Apply, and Belong – create a comprehensive learning journey for immigrants, progressing from knowledge to integration. Each phase addresses key needs: orientation, self-awareness, skill-building, and social participation. Its structured yet flexible digital format sets COME apart from traditional integration programs by filling existing gaps. The following section will explore these benefits of the COME method.

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## 4. Benefits of the COME method

Despite decades of integration efforts, traditional approaches still show gaps, especially in today's global and digital world. COME was developed to address these gaps in three key areas: (1) digital, scalable integration training, (2) global applicability across diverse backgrounds, (3) client-centred learning, and (4) connecting cultural reflection with professional competence.

### 4.1. Digital, Scalable Integration Training

Traditional integration courses, such as those funded by BAMF (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2020), are typically in-person and locally bound, limiting their reach, flexibility, and capacity. This setup often excludes skilled workers, students, and part-time learners. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for scalable digital solutions. Currently, digital integration offerings remain sparse and fragmented, with scattered websites that are hard to navigate. “One-stop-shop” portals offer a promising solution by centralizing essential services. For instance, Cluj's [welcometocluj.ro](https://www.welcometocluj.ro) provides multilingual access to housing, language courses, and more.

COME builds on this concept by offering a fully digital, interactive platform that supports large numbers of users. Its modular content – videos, quizzes, forums – is accessible anytime and easily updated. Unlike static info sites, COME emphasizes interactive learning and community support, such as live question and answers, and moderated forums. While early evidence suggests digital tools foster independence and integration, more research is needed, especially on outcomes for hard-to-reach groups. COME aims to fill this gap as a pilot project to evaluate and refine digital integration methods.

### 4.2. Global Applicability

Many traditional integration programs were designed for specific immigrant groups, such as long-term migrants from Turkey or the former Soviet Union. Today, migrant backgrounds are far more diverse, ranging from students to skilled professionals and refugees, yet programs often still follow a **"one-size-fits-all"** model. As a result, highly qualified and low-skilled migrants may end up in the same courses, despite having very different needs.

COME addresses this by aiming for global applicability, both culturally and geographically. Using intercultural competence models along with the notion of maintaining cultural plurality,

it applies universal learning principles (Understand, Reflect, Apply, Belong) while allowing for cultural comparison and personalization. For example, learners from different backgrounds can explore different rules of German Culture while reflecting on their own norms.

A question that arises concerning global applicability is the language used. COME primarily uses **English** but can be expanded to other languages. Its culturally sensitive content avoids Western bias and treats diversity as the norm. This flexibility also makes the program attractive to international funders, as it can be adapted and transferred across countries, similar to previous EU projects like MEIN – *Migration Empowerment Integration Network project* (Integra Assoc., 2000).

Research gaps remain, especially in how different educational and cultural backgrounds affect digital learning. COME addresses this by offering both structured guidance and optional deeper modules, making it adaptable for a wide range of learning styles. Global applicability, therefore, hinges more on didactic flexibility than technology alone. This flexibility is the reason for the COME method's next benefit, client-centred learning.

### 4.3. Client-centred Learning

Culture Oriented Migration Empowerment (COME) is fundamentally learner-centric, placing the individual migrant's experiences, needs, and cultural background at the heart of the learning process. Rather than delivering one-size-fits-all content, COME encourages participants to actively reflect on their own values, compare cultural norms, and apply insights to real-life situations, especially in professional and academic settings.

Its modular design allows learners to progress at their own pace, choose relevant topics, and engage with interactive formats such as quizzes, forums, and scenario-based exercises. By combining self-directed learning with optional guidance and community support, COME fosters autonomy, relevance, and personal growth, ensuring that integration is not something done *to* migrants, but developed *with* them.

### 4.4. Linking Cultural and Professional Competencies

Traditionally, integration and career support programs have been developed separately, with cultural orientation and job preparation treated as distinct areas (BAMF, 2020; OECD, 2019; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021). Yet in practice, cultural integration and professional success are closely connected. For example, a qualified engineer may struggle at work without understanding local communication norms, while cultural adaptation alone is not enough without job opportunities.

COME addresses this gap by combining cultural reflection with professional competence in a holistic way. For instance, in the *Reflect* phase, participants consider how cultural norms apply to real work scenarios, e.g., handling critical feedback or understanding workplace small talk. In the *Apply* phase, they engage in exercises based on professional situations, building intercultural soft skills essential for job success.

Companies increasingly recognize that team challenges often stem from cultural misunderstandings rather than technical skills (Spencer-Oatey, H., & Franklin, P., 2009;

Hofstede et al, 2010). Experts now view intercultural competence as a core skill, not just an add-on. To avoid overwhelming participants, COME uses a **modular design**, such as optional career modules and links to existing resources (e.g., DAAD or Chambers of Commerce), allowing users to go deeper as needed.

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## 5. Practical Implementation of the COME Method

In this final section, the paper deals with how COME can be integrated into existing programs and implemented at different institutional levels, including universities and companies.

### 5.1 Erasmus+ and EU Initiatives

Erasmus+, the EU's program for education and mobility, increasingly emphasizes inclusion and integration alongside intercultural learning. It supports preparatory courses, language training, and social integration for mobility participants. The COME method could serve as a best-practice model for how digital training can enhance mobility experiences.

Through Erasmus+ funded projects (Key Action 2: Cooperation for Innovation), COME could be adapted and piloted across countries, for example, by partnering with universities to prepare international students before departure, similar to ICA's program in Germany. EU policymakers stress that mobility success depends on integration, and COME offers a scalable tool to support this, both pre- and during mobility. It could also be applied in broader EU integration efforts, such as through the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF).

### 5.2 DAAD and Higher Education Programs

The DAAD increasingly sees international students as future skilled workers. In its 2023 policy paper, it calls for early, job-oriented integration, closer ties between universities and employers, and stronger support structures (DAAD, 2023b; 2024).

COME can support this goal by offering international students digital, modular training alongside their studies. ICA could partner with universities to integrate COME into orientation weeks or as an optional resource, standardizing support in line with DAAD recommendations. A DAAD-backed initiative could even include mandatory COME onboarding for scholarship holders. Programs like Integra (for refugee students) could also benefit through modules on academic culture and practical preparation for university life in Germany.

### 5.3 Ministries and National Programs

Federal initiatives like Integration through Qualification (IQ), funded by BMAS and BMBF, support labor market integration through intercultural training and language courses. A partnership between ICA and the IQ network could be mutually beneficial where COME content could enhance IQ training, while IQ provides regional infrastructure for the same.

The government's Skilled Worker Strategy, including the India-specific plan, highlights the need for combined cultural and professional integration programs, essentially a call for

solutions like COME. ICA could position itself as a partner here. Additionally, federal state initiatives (e.g., Bavaria's programs for foreign nurses or Berlin's welcome platforms) could use COME to complement and expand existing face-to-face offerings.

## 5.4 Companies and Educational Partnerships

Alongside public institutions, companies and chambers of commerce play a key role in integration. While many large firms offer onboarding for foreign professionals, these often focus on formalities. COME could complement these with cultural onboarding, offered as a white-label solution or corporate service – e.g., for DAX-listed companies hiring international talent.

For Small and Middle Enterprises (SMEs), regional networks like Chambers of Industry and Commerce could license COME and offer it to members. Educational partnerships (e.g., GIZ, Goethe-Institut, or bi-national exchange programs) could also use COME to prepare participants before they move abroad.

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## 6. Conclusion and implications

The COME method addresses a critical gap in Germany's integration strategy. Grounded in robust academic theory and adapted to real-world conditions, it offers a scalable, flexible, and learner-centered model for international student and professional integration. By shifting the paradigm from passive adaptation to active empowerment, COME fosters not just successful migrants but future citizens, contributors, and changemakers.

With the COME method, ICA can ultimately act as **a holistic solution provider**, operating in the education sector (universities, continuing education), the integration sector (NGOs, government agencies), and the human resources sector (companies, HR services). This broad positioning increases the resilience of the business model: The company is not dependent on one customer group but can react flexibly to changes in migration (e.g., an increase in students from country X, new skilled worker agreements with country Y, etc.). The importance of this holistic approach is demonstrated by the fact that integration, education, and skilled worker retention are increasingly viewed as being linked politically. Programs such as the adopted strategy with India combine recruitment, educational cooperation, and integration measures ([jobbatical](#), n.d.). ICA addresses precisely this interface issue.

In an era where diversity is both a challenge and a strength, COME provides a timely roadmap for how educational institutions, governments, and private actors can build bridges across borders, classrooms, and communities.

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## Online source for the COME method by the Inside Culture Academy

- Inside Culture Academy – Website. *COME by ICA™ – Your structured journey to integration. Understand – Reflect – Apply – Belong* [inside-culture-academy.com](https://inside-culture-academy.com)
- Inside Culture Academy – Website. *Global talent, regional success. Integration with COME™ – Culture Oriented Migration Empowerment* [inside-culture-academy.com](https://inside-culture-academy.com)