

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Preparation of Special Educators in Australia: University Staff Characteristics<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

In this study, we draw on an analysis of publicly available information from university websites and Google Scholar to explore the qualifications, relevant experience, and scholarship of academics involved in postgraduate special/inclusive education courses in Australian universities. Overall, we found information on 148 academics employed at 23 universities, of whom 124 were teaching a unit or units with content relevant to the education of students with disability. Of these, 23% were described as having a qualification in special or inclusive education, 20% were described as having experience in a setting relevant to people with disability, and 51% had evidence of scholarship in special or inclusive education. These results are a cause for some concern and suggest staffing of special/inclusive education courses is not always ideal, with many academics apparently teaching out of their area of expertise.

**Keywords:** special educators; university staff; teacher education

The need for well-qualified special educators is well recognised in Australia and overseas (Dempsey & Dally, 2014; New South Wales Legislative Council, 2017) to meet the learning needs of students with disability who are placed in specialised or regular classrooms. There is general agreement on the competencies required by qualified special educators, with the formal standards to guide special education teacher education programs exemplified by those developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; Berlinghoff & McLaughlin, 2022), which are widely recognised and utilised in the US. These competencies include knowledge of, and skills in, evidence-based practices — practices that have been shown through several high-quality experimental research studies to improve outcomes for students with disability (Cook & Cook, 2013). In Australia, in the absence of national professional standards for specialist teachers, researchers have identified desirable competencies for special educators (Dally & Dempsey, 2015; Dally et al., 2019; Dempsey & Dally, 2014; Institute of Special Educators [InSpEd], 2019; Keeffe & De George-Walker, 2010; Stephenson et al., 2022). The competencies identified through Australian research reflect the CEC competencies and other literature on high-impact teaching (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Several Australian universities offer master's level courses for qualified teachers in special/inclusive education. Using the summary of essential content for postgraduate courses preparing special educators that we developed based on Australian research and the CEC competencies (Stephenson et al., 2022), we

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found in previous analyses that although some content areas (evaluating and using research, research methods, individual programming, collaborative planning, providing support to regular educators) were covered in a majority of courses, they appeared to be lacking in some. Other content was more likely to appear to be absent. Of the 28 courses analysed, data-based decision-making was included in only 19 courses and the more specific curriculum-based assessment in only 14; explicit instruction was included in only 13, research-based instruction in literacy in only 10, and research-based instruction in numeracy in only six. Generic content on inclusion was present in most courses, but more specific content essential for inclusive instruction such as differentiation and Universal Design for Learning appeared in less than half the courses. Positive behaviour support and functional assessment were core in just over half the courses, but the theoretical underpinning of applied behaviour analysis, which also underpins elements of explicit instruction and instruction for students with high support needs, was apparent in only 14 courses and core in only nine.

In a further study, using the Cook and Cook (2013) definition, we evaluated claims that course content was evidence-based (Stephenson *et al.*, 2023). We found that although 16 of the 21 universities that offered master's courses included units that claimed evidence-based content, many of those claims appeared to be unsupported, and in only four universities were all claims about evidence-based content supported. For both studies (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022, 2023) it must be acknowledged that the conclusions were drawn on the basis of material publicly available on university websites, and for a few universities this information was limited.

Given the findings briefly described above, questions must be asked about why important content, especially content on established evidence-based practices, is not more prominent in courses preparing special educators. If this content is absent, graduates from possibly half the courses analysed would not have all the desired skills and competencies needed to be a fully skilled special educator. As a parallel, it is generally recognised that teacher quality is one important contributor to student outcomes in schools, and that one factor influencing school teacher quality is the quality of teacher education preparation courses (Brownell *et al.*, 2020). Although there has been considerable discussion of the competencies and attributes of effective teachers, there has been much less discussion of the competencies and attributes of teacher educators themselves as contributing to effective teacher preparation courses and ultimately to student outcomes. Ellis *et al.* (2012) noted the limited research on the work of teacher educators in initial teacher education, and Goodwin *et al.* (2014) noted the 'silence' (p. 284) regarding the quality of teacher educators. The silence seems to be even more pronounced in the area of special education, where there has been very little research on special education programs and the academics who teach in them (Robb *et al.*, 2012).

Although there is little sound research to guide the preparation of special educators (Lignugaris/Kraft *et al.*, 2014), deBettencourt *et al.* (2016) presented some ideals regarding the characteristics of university staff preparing special educators, with the assumption that such staff would hold a doctorate in special education. They argued that special education academics must, at least, be able to carry out and publish research and develop and deliver coursework with the probability that they might also be expected to provide research supervision, supervise field placements, and serve on university committees. They emphasised the importance of special educators having the skills to select and use evidence-based practices, work collaboratively with others, and to make data-based decisions about student learning. They argued that teacher educators need a specific doctoral qualification that ensures they not only possess these skills but also can prepare special educators to use them. It should be noted that doctoral programs in the US preparing teacher educators for special education have a curriculum that includes relevant content on policy and evidence-based practices and internships in teacher education as well as research activities. They may, for example, receive specific training in teacher education (course design and delivery and evaluation; deBettencourt, 2014).

In the US, Brownell *et al.* (2020) reviewed all articles on teacher education in the US that appeared in the journal *Teacher Education and Special Education* since 2010. They found no evidence of a coherent program of research in special education teacher preparation, nor any research relating to academic staff characteristics. This replicated the findings of an earlier review on special education teacher

education (Brownell et al., 2005) that also failed to locate studies that explicitly addressed staff attributes. There appears to be no existing research on the attributes of special/inclusive education academics in Australia, but some desirable staff attributes may be inferred from other sources. Broadly speaking, across disciplines, there is a belief that one component of effective teaching in Australian universities is discipline knowledge and the ability to infuse active research knowledge into curriculum (Australian Government, 2008). The Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (Australian Government, 2022) emphasised the need for a proportion of academic staff in initial teacher education to have recent practical experience, and this would seem to be just as important for specialist teacher programs. In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) provides the Higher Education Standards (HES) Framework that sets out minimal and generic standards for university academics (Australian Government, 2021). Section 3.2 of the HES Framework addresses staffing and the requirements of staff involved in a tertiary course. Based on these requirements, a special/inclusive education course at master's level, at the least, should be planned and overseen by academics with a qualification in special/inclusive education or a related field, and if this qualification is not at doctoral level, their work should be overseen by someone with a doctoral qualification. They should have 'knowledge of contemporary developments in the discipline or field, which is informed by continuing scholarship or research or advances in practice' (Australian Government, 2021, p. 9). Such scholarship would normally be, at least in part, evident through publications in refereed journals.

The aim of the research reported here was to provide a preliminary overview of the attributes of Australian academics involved in special/inclusive education courses in Australian universities. Specifically, we asked, what are the qualifications, relevant experience, and scholarship (as evidenced by research publications and research grants over the past 5 years) of academics involved in special/inclusive postgraduate education courses in Australian universities?

## Method

Data collection involved a number of steps, some of which were part of earlier research. First, universities offering master's level courses in special and/or inclusive education were identified. Second, once universities were identified, sources that could provide information about university staff were located and downloaded. At the third stage, relevant staff who convened or taught units with content relating to students with disability, learning difficulties, and/or challenging behaviour were identified. Fourth, data on staff characteristics, including qualifications, experience and research activity, were extracted. Finally, Google Scholar was searched to collect each identified staff member's h-index and to identify relevant research publications.

We first identified universities that offered master's level courses in special and/or inclusive education in 2023. In this paper, we use the term 'course' to mean a program of study comprising a number of different units or subjects. Courses were located using Google searches for university courses in Australia, with search terms including special education, inclusion, and inclusive education, and a list of courses identified in previous research (Stephenson et al., 2022). Courses were included if they were a dedicated master of special or inclusive education or if they were master's courses with a specialisation or minor in special or inclusive education.

Once courses were identified, course and unit materials that could identify the staff involved were downloaded by one author and reviewed by at least one other author. In this paper, the term 'unit' is used to refer to single units of study or subjects within a course or program. Materials included course and unit descriptions, unit guides or outlines, course or unit timetables, and general course or unit information. Staff were included if they taught a unit relevant to the education of students with disability, learning difficulties, or challenging behaviour in a dedicated special or inclusive education course, or if they taught a unit within a specialisation or minor in special or inclusive education, or if they were identified as a course convenor of a postgraduate special or inclusive education degree course, or specialisation or minor in 2023.

We included staff teaching research units in 2023 that included content on quantitative research methods. These units were included as group quantitative and single case research designs are research methods commonly used in special education to establish the effects of interventions. We excluded research project units where students were allocated a supervisor relevant to their project area, as these individual supervisors could not be identified. Staff teaching units on qualitative research methods were not included as qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, does not allow cause/effect conclusions to be reached in identifying effective practices, and there are no methodologies commonly used in special education research. We did not include staff who taught units where the unit materials did not mention content on students with disability, learning difficulties, or students with challenging behaviour. Such units included generic education units, units addressing gifted students, units related to inclusive education that covered such issues as those relating to gender, poverty, or cultural background, and units concerned with trauma-informed practice. Units to be excluded were identified by at least two of the authors independently or through discussion among all authors.

Staff meeting the inclusion criteria were identified by two authors independently reviewing course and unit materials. The results were then compared, as were disagreements on the subsequent data extraction, and any disagreements were resolved by re-reading and discussing the source material until a consensus was reached. Information relating to identified staff was downloaded from university websites, and this included staff profiles and listings of research activity such as publications and grants. We also used public Google Scholar profiles to locate research papers if the university website did not contain this information.

Once lists of staff for each university were produced, two authors independently extracted data on staff from the materials downloaded. Data extracted included job title (e.g., lecturer in special education); role in the unit (e.g., convenor, coordinator, tutor; for these classifications, we used the terminology of the university); the unit(s) taught and whether they were core (for a course or a specialisation); whether the staff member was described as having a qualification in special or inclusive education (e.g., a master's in special education); whether the staff member was described as having relevant direct experience with people with disability, learning difficulties, or challenging behaviour in an education or disability setting; whether the staff member had carried out relevant research in special or inclusive education in the last 5 years, as evidenced by publications in refereed journals or grants to carry out research.

In addition, each staff member was searched using Google Scholar to record their h-index for the last 5 years. We recognise that measures of research quantity and quality are controversial (Koltun & Hafner, 2021), but Giangreco et al. (2023) argued, in an analysis of Google Scholar profiles of US special education academics, that Google Scholar 'more comprehensively reflects the contributions of special education scholars' (p. 171). Google Scholar indexes sources not included in World of Science or Scopus and thus gives a better measure of research impact for special education academics (Giangreco et al., 2023). The h-index is useful because it is a measure of productivity (number of papers) and of impact (number of citations) but does have limitations in that it does not account for self-citation, sole or joint authorship, or the length of an academic's career (Giangreco et al., 2023).

## Results

### *Universities, Courses, and Staff*

We located 25 universities that offered one or more relevant courses, with 33 courses identified. Six universities offered a named master's in inclusive/special education, 15 offered a master's degree with one or more specialisations in special/inclusive education, and three offered both dedicated master's and a master's degree with a specialisation. Two universities offered a master's level qualification related to autism spectrum disorder and one offered a master's in applied behaviour analysis. We were able to collect staff data for 168 core units and 46 elective units. Where a university offered more than one relevant course, staff data were pooled, so the results reflect staffing of special education/inclusion units with content relating to students with disability, learning difficulties, or challenging behaviour and quantitative research units at individual universities. There were two universities where no staff

information was available and two where only the course convenor could be identified. There were five where some staff were identified but convenors of all units could not be identified. For two universities, this was because some electives were only offered every second year and thus were not available in 2023.

### **Academics**

There were 148 academics located across the 23 universities where at least some staff could be identified. Where all staff were identified, the maximum number involved was 14 (at one university), followed by 11 at four universities, with four the minimum at four universities (apart from those where only a coordinator could be identified). Most academics (125) were involved as unit convenors, coordinators, or examiners (the terminology is that of the universities).

Forty-one academics were involved in research units, with 24 of these only teaching in research units; thus, there were 124 academics involved in special education/inclusion units. Of these 124, 28 (23%) were described as having a qualification in special/inclusive education, and 25 (20%) as having had experience in a disability-related setting. Just over half (63, 51%) had a refereed publication or research grant related to special/inclusive education. Only eight academics were reported to have qualifications, experience, and recent publications; four had qualifications and experience and no recent research, and 10 had qualifications and recent research. There were 46 (37%) who appeared to have no qualifications, experience, or recent research related to special/inclusive education.

An h-index from Google Scholar was reported for all except 29 academics, with six academics who taught research units not having an h-index. The range of h-indices was 2 to 47, with five academics with an index of 30 or more and 37 with an index of 10 or less. The mean for all academics, inclusive of those teaching research units only, was 12, and this was slightly higher than the mean for those academics teaching special/inclusive education units (11.6).

For the 131 staff where a job title could be identified, there were 35 lecturers (27%), 42 senior lecturers (32%), 25 associate professors (19%), and 11 professors (8%). For those teaching research units only, there were two lecturers (10%), nine senior lecturers (45%), seven associate professors (35%), and two professors (10%). For those teaching special education/inclusion units there were 33 lecturers (36%), 33 senior lecturers (36%), 18 associate professors (19%), and nine professors (10%). Sixteen academics were identified as sessional and two were identified as tutors.

We could only identify 14 academics who appeared to oversee a course or a specialisation/minor within a course, and three of these had a qualification, experience and recent research. Of the 14, two were lecturers (14%), seven were senior lecturers (50%), three were associate professors (21%), and two were professors (14%).

### **Staffing Patterns**

Of the 23 universities identified as providing postgraduate courses preparing graduates for special education roles and for which at least some staff could be identified, five were members of the Group of Eight (Go8), research-intensive universities that might be expected to employ research-active staff. In one university, none of the relevant staff was described as having a qualification, experience, or evidence of recent research. Of the remaining 22, three did not list qualifications in special/inclusive education for any relevant staff member, with one of the three being a research-intensive university. No relevant staff member was described as having experience with people with disability in four of the 22 universities, and no staff member in two universities had recent research. Thus, there were 10 universities, including one research-intensive university, where there would appear to be a less than ideal staffing profile. Seven universities, including three research intensive, had at least one staff member with qualifications, experience, and recent research. Of the six universities (two of which are research intensive) that have been assessed as offering courses that include appropriate content and have provisional accreditation from InSpEd, all had at least one staff member with a qualification, all except one had staff with experience, and all had staff with recent research.

## Discussion

These results should be interpreted with some caveats in mind, as we have relied on the limited publicly available information only. Qualifications and experience of staff were not always reported, and there are likely some academics with relevant qualifications and experience who have not been identified, either because there was no information available on the university website or the information was not specific. For example, the specific area of a master's degree in education or the specific discipline area of a doctorate may not be included in a staff profile. Information on sessional staff was often lacking and in some universities these staff appear to provide considerable teaching. On the other hand, if specific qualifications and experience are not included in staff information, this suggests they may not be required for employment or may not be viewed as valued or important by the university. The results are based on analysis of information collected up to August 2023, so information for units and staff involved in Semester 3 or 4 programs, or units that do not run every year, may not be included. Data on h-indices were collected over the same time frame, and h-indices do vary with time, but the variation should not be great. In addition, not all academics had a Google profile and thus no h-index could be obtained for some academics.

There are recent studies available that allow comparison of the general profile of the level of academic positions with general university statistics. Overall, one quarter of academics in 2020 were professors or associate professors (Croucher, 2023), and we have a similar figure for staff overall and for staff teaching special education/inclusion units, although there is a higher proportion for those only teaching research units (45%). Senior lecturers made up 18% of the academic workforce overall and lecturers 29% (Croucher, 2023) compared to our figures of 32% and 27% overall and 36% for both in those teaching special/inclusion education units. It would appear that the academics involved in special education postgraduate courses are more likely to be senior lecturers than would be expected based on overall academic profiles. Over time, there has been an increase in the proportion of academic staff employed as casual or contract staff. It would seem that many of these academics are not listed on university websites, or if they are, there is little or no information about them, which means that we are unable to comment on their contribution to special education courses. It does appear that in some universities where no, or only more senior, academics are named, much of the instruction is being carried out by casual staff.

## Concerns

The relatively limited number of academics identified with qualifications and/or experience and/or research is, on face value, of concern. Few comparative data are available, but Meeks and Stephenson (2020) provided information about the coordinators of units addressing early reading instruction. For those unit coordinators for whom information was available, 31% had a qualification relating to early literacy (this included doctoral research areas, which was not included in our analysis) and 43.2% had publications relating to literacy. We found a smaller proportion with qualifications (although we did not include doctoral research) and a slightly greater proportion with recent research (although we did not specify the area of research other than special/inclusive education). Meeks and Stephenson expressed concern about the proportion of staff who appeared less than ideally qualified, and we would express the same concerns regarding special education units taught by academics without qualifications, experience, or recent research, particularly as 37% of the staff we identified were described as being without a qualification, experience, or recent research. There are some limited figures from the US for a comparison. Alnahdi and Anastasiou (2020) reported that of 124 academic staff in the top 11 special education graduate programs as ranked by the *U.S. News & World Report* in 2015, 60% had a doctoral qualification in special education, 33% in psychology, and 13% in other fields. Twombly *et al.* (2006), in a more general analysis of teacher educators (including those preparing special educators), reported that a terminal degree (usually a doctorate) was required for 84% of positions, but the specific discipline area was not reported.

Also of concern is that only about half the academics had evidence of recent research in special/inclusive education. Since we reviewed both university-provided information on research publications and Google Scholar records, this figure is likely to be accurate for identified staff. It is also plausible that



where staff could not be identified, they were likely to be casual or sessional staff who may be less likely to have a research track record. Since scholarship in a specific discipline is a strong indicator of relevant expertise and is required by the TEQSA standards (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017), it seems many academics may be teaching out of area and may not be appropriately qualified. The TEQSA standards require staff to have contemporary knowledge in the discipline they are teaching and that they should not be underqualified, particularly if they are responsible for course content. They must also have the capacity to support students to meet the course learning outcomes (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017). There is a considerable body of literature in teaching out of field in school education, but remarkably little on teaching out of field in universities (OOFTAS Collective, 2016). The number of academics with no evidence of scholarship in the form of publications relevant to special/inclusive education may be a contributing factor to the omission of important content in some courses.

### ***Desirable Staff Characteristics***

The need for well-qualified academics to prepare future special educators has been well recognised overseas (deBettencourt et al., 2016). In the context of the US, special/inclusive education academics are expected to blend research, teaching, and service in their professional lives, and there are emerging expectations that they will increase published outputs, become conversant with the use of technology in teaching and research, and apply for and use grants (deBettencourt et al., 2016). Academics preparing special educators need to be able to teach the application of effective evidence-based practices in school settings (deBettencourt et al., 2016). Montrosse and Young (2012) noted the importance of special education academics in providing a link between research and practice because they 'are the producers of new knowledge in which evidence-based practices are derived. They also serve as a bridge between academic and practical worlds by translating research for use in K-12 classrooms' (p. 150). More specifically, Francis et al. (2021) noted that preparation of special education teachers to develop partnerships with families depended on academics who had sufficient expertise to deliver the content. If courses are staffed and units taught by academics who do not have the necessary content knowledge and the ability to interpret research and link research to practice, the special educators they prepare cannot be well qualified for the roles they will take up in schools.

Although there are no Australian standards for special educators, expectations for initial teacher education are relevant. The Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (Australian Government, 2022) emphasised the need for a proportion of academic staff in initial teacher education to have recent practical experience, and this would seem to be just as important for specialist teacher programs. The review also strongly endorsed content relating to best practice and to evidence-based approaches and the importance of the link between theory and practice. Taken together, the US experience and expectations for initial teacher education underline the importance of qualifications, experience, and research as characteristics of academics preparing special educators.

There may be barriers for universities seeking to employ qualified and experienced staff. There is a recognised shortage of qualified special educators in Australia (Peverett & Stephenson, 2023), and this is the pool that would be drawn upon for doctoral students and later for academic staff. Qualified special educators in senior positions in schools or education systems may be unwilling to relocate or to accept a reduced income if they moved from the school system to a junior academic position. If universities cannot attract appropriately qualified staff, they may widen their recruitment criteria (Twombly et al., 2006) and this may result in staff teaching in areas where they do not have sufficient expertise.

### ***Need for Course Accreditation and Appropriately Qualified Staff***

Other professions where practitioners might be involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions for students with disability have systems for accrediting university courses that specify content and academic staff capabilities. The Australian Psychology Accreditation Council standards for courses preparing registered psychologists (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2019) set out

the competencies to be acquired and require that staff are ‘appropriately qualified, experienced and supported by the HEP [higher education provider] to deliver the components of the program they teach’ (p. 9). In addition, the *Evidence Guide* (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2023) requires that providers demonstrate that ‘all teaching staff for programs of study at all levels have the appropriate knowledge and expertise for the content they deliver’ (p. 4). Speech Pathology Australia accredits programs preparing speech pathologists, and in addition to meeting the TEQSA standards, the head of program and/or leadership team must have ‘demonstrated expertise in the field of speech pathology’ (Speech Pathology Australia, 2019, p. 10) and additional detailed criteria relating to content must be met. The course accreditation standards for Australian occupational therapy require that ‘the academic team is suitably qualified and experienced to deliver the components of the program it teaches and assesses’ (Occupational Therapy Council of Australia, 2019, p. 16), and again course content is specifically described in a set of competency standards (Occupational Therapy Board of Australia, 2018). Australian courses preparing occupational therapists must be accredited by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists. When the necessary content of programs is spelled out in some detail and there is a requirement that staff have the qualifications and expertise to teach that content, there is a clear obligation on course providers to ensure courses are taught by those with relevant qualifications and evidence of scholarship in specific content areas. There is a need for more specific and detailed standards for special/inclusive teacher education course accreditation as in other professions to ensure that essential course content is taught by appropriately qualified academics.

### **Recommendations**

We believe this analysis provides further evidence for the need for specific standards for the accreditation of special educators, such as those developed by InSpEd (2019), to be introduced in the university sector. Such standards would address not only content but also the need for content to be developed and delivered by suitably qualified and experienced academic staff. It is already established that where professional standards are applied to university courses, graduates are likely to exit with designated competencies, as is illustrated by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership standards.

### **Future Research**

This analysis has provided a relatively broad approach to an examination of the characteristics of academic staff teaching special/inclusive education units, with the limitation that it is drawn only from publicly available sources. There is scope for much more research on academic staff in special education courses. Future research could explore in more detail teaching areas (units taught) against specific areas of scholarship of staff teaching those units, including the area of their doctoral research, recent research publications, and grants. Perspectives of academics themselves on their perceived capabilities to teach in specific areas could be explored through surveys and qualitative research. As it appears that at least some academics are teaching in areas where they do not have evidence of scholarship, research on out-of-area teaching could be extended into the university setting.

### **Conclusion**

As in our previous research (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022, 2023), this analysis raises concerns about the quality of some special/inclusive education courses preparing special educators. Given the relatively low proportion of teachers in special/inclusive education positions who are appropriately qualified (Peverett & Stephenson, 2023), there is a clear need for quality courses to prepare teachers for specialist roles. Clear and specific accreditation standards for such courses would allow universities to identify appropriately qualified staff to be involved in preparing and teaching units in such courses and would discourage out-of-area teaching.



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## Competing interests

Jennifer Stephenson and Coral Kemp are board members of InSpEd, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to improve the quality of special education in Australia in preschool, school, and postschool settings. Although they are honorary members of the School of Education at Macquarie University, neither is involved in course teaching or administration. Catherine Salisbury is the member support officer for InSpEd and Anne Marie Sarandrea is an affiliate member of InSpEd. Work done by InSpEd is cited in this manuscript. Dr Ganguly is coordinator of special education programs at Charles Sturt University. Coding regarding staff from this university was completed independently by two other authors.

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