

Summary of Journal Article

Preparing Australian Special Educators: Courses and Content

Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 47(10)

Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., & Salisbury, C. (2022).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2022v47n10.4>

The role of the special educator is diverse and rapidly expanding as students presenting with a broad range of disabilities, for example, learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties, intellectual disability, sensory impairment and communication disorders, are included in an increasing range of educational settings (Dally et al., 2019). Special educators may work in specialist schools, although progressively more are working in inclusive settings within mainstream education. Indeed, in Australia two thirds of the students with disability receive their education in inclusive settings (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The role of the special educators is to provide specialist educational support to students with disability; however, within the inclusive context their roles may also include collaboration, co-teaching and in-class support. Further, increasing responsibilities may arise when special educators lead and coordinate inclusion.

The postgraduate courses in special and/or inclusive education offered at Australian universities were examined to determine what is being taught in preparation for a qualification in special education. With no national professional standards in Australia for special educators, the content analysis was based on high leverage practices that were identified as desirable in the Australian and international literature and the Expert Panel approved InSpEd standards. 28 courses from 21 universities were examined using publicly available online information from the university websites.

The study sought to determine:

- What postgraduate courses in special and/or inclusive education were offered by Australian universities?
- How were the courses structured?
- What content was included and how well did it align with recommended content?

Method

Australian university postgraduate special and/or inclusive education courses of at least 12 months duration, that were intended for Australian domestic students, were identified from publicly available material on university websites in 2021. Relevant information (general course information, course structure and course content) was compiled from handbook entries and from course and unit guides. Each unit in a course (one subject within a course) was coded as core or elective and as to whether the content elements were present. Additional generic elements, teaching strategies and assessment, were added as much of the information was too general to be coded using the original desirable content elements. Also, additional elements (i.e., inclusion philosophy, differentiation, and Universal Design for Learning) were added as they were present in several courses.

Results

What postgraduate courses in special and/or inclusive education were offered by Australian universities?

There were 28 courses from 21 Australian universities across all states offering master level degrees preparing qualified teachers for special/inclusive education. There were no courses in the ACT or Northern Territory.

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How were the courses structured?

The courses were between one- and two-year duration for full time study. 21 courses included elective units in special and/or inclusive education, four courses had no elective units and some courses included elective units unrelated to special education. For the majority of courses, core unit content comprised between 75% and 93.8% of the course. For 11 courses core unit ranged from 12.5% to 66.7% of the course.

What content was included and how well did it align with recommended content?

Generic elements were most frequently covered.

- Content related to *Teaching Strategies* was covered in all 28 courses and was core in 25.
- *Assessment* was covered in 27 courses with 24 courses including it in core units.

More specific information about assessment and teaching strategies was much less covered.

- *Positive Behaviour Support and Functional Program/Planning* was covered in 21 courses with 15 courses including it in core units.
- *Data-based decision making* was covered in 19 courses with 17 courses including it in core units.
- *Curriculum Based Assessment* was covered in 14 courses with 9 courses including it in core units.
- Content related to *Principals and Practice of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)* was covered in 14 courses, with 9 courses including it in core units.
- *Explicit Teacher Directed Instruction* was covered in 13 courses, with 11 courses including it in core units.
- *Research-based Instruction in Literacy* was covered in 10 courses, with 6 courses including it in core units.
- *Research-based Instruction in Numeracy* was covered in 6 courses, with 4 courses including it in core units.

The following content, infrequently covered, is crucial when teaching students with intellectual disability:

- Content relating to *Social Skills* was covered in 20 courses, with 14 courses including it in core units.
- Content relating to *Early Communication Skills* was covered in 19 courses, with 11 courses including it in core units.
- Content relating to *Learners with High Support Needs* was covered in 13 courses, with 7 courses including it in core units.
- *Transition Planning* was covered in 9 courses, with 6 courses including it in core units.

Main Discussion Points

The inclusion of only publicly available information was a limitation of the study, as the absence of desirable skills and knowledge from course content may not have necessarily meant that these elements were not covered in the course. Nonetheless, the findings were concerning as the content in more than half of the courses did not align well with the identified high leverage practices, indicating that many postgraduate special/inclusive education courses are not adequately preparing special education professionals to work with the full range of populations of students with disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties, in specialised or inclusive settings.

Summary provided by Catherine Salisbury, Honorary Affiliate, Member Support Officer, InSpEd

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