

## Research Summary

Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., Sarandrea, A. M., & Salisbury, C. (2025). Preparation of special educators in Australia: University staff characteristics. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2025.5>

Although there are no national professional standards for specialist teachers in Australia as there are in other countries, Australian researchers have identified desirable competencies for special educators that reflect the standards developed by the Council for Exceptional Children in the United States and other literature on high impact teaching. Recent research into the content included in Australian postgraduate special/inclusive education university courses, has revealed that less than half the courses reviewed included specific content essential for inclusive instruction and few courses included all of the recommended content. Teacher quality is important for student outcomes and teacher quality can be linked to the quality of teacher education preparation courses. Unfortunately, there has been little research into the work of teacher educators and even less for educators in special/inclusive education courses.

In the current study, the qualifications, relevant experience and academic scholarship of academics involved in postgraduate special/inclusive education courses in Australian courses were examined.

### Method

Content was downloaded from the websites of Australian universities offering courses in special/inclusive education at masters level. Staff convening or teaching course subjects with content related to disability, learning difficulties or challenging behaviour and staff teaching quantitative research methods subjects were identified from course materials, and information on their qualifications, experience and research activity located. Google scholar was also searched for staff members' h-index and relevant publications over the past five years.

Data were then extracted from the downloaded material. Of interest, was whether the staff member had: a qualification in special/inclusive education; direct experience in working with individuals with disability, learning difficulties or challenging behaviour; relevant research experience in the last five years as evidenced by publications, and research grants related to special/inclusive education.

### Results

Twenty-five universities offering 33 relevant courses were identified. Staff data were collected for 168 core subjects and 46 electives. Of the 23 universities for whom some staff were identified, information was accessed for 148 academics. Of the 124 academics involved in special/inclusive education subjects, 28 (23%) were reported to have a qualification in special education, 25 (20%) as having had experience in a disability related setting and 63 (51%) had a relevant peer refereed publication or a research grant. Only eight of the academics were reported as having a relevant qualification, experience and publications, with four having a relevant qualification and experience with no relevant publications and ten having a relevant qualification and publications but no relevant experience. Forty-six of the academics (37%) had no relevant qualifications, experience or publications. Of the 131 staff whose job title could be identified, 16 were reported to be sessional staff and two were reported to be tutors.

### Discussion

The researchers had to rely on publicly available information and the qualifications and experience of the academic staff were not always reported. This is likely to have been the case for sessional staff in particular. Unfortunately, the fact that qualifications and experience were not reported may well indicate

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that these may not be required or valued. Of concern, was the percentage of academics, teaching on postgraduate special/inclusive education university courses, who did not have a special education qualification, relevant experience in the field and relevant publications or research grants. Further, only about half of the academics appeared to have participated in recent research in special/inclusive education.

The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, which has established minimum standards for academics, requires academics to have contemporary knowledge in the area in which they are teaching as well as a strong record of scholarship. The data collected as part of the current research indicates that many of the academics teaching on special/inclusive education courses in Australia may be teaching 'out of area'. This is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of these courses.