

Where have we been and where are we going?

A major goal in establishing InSpEd was to ensure the ongoing availability of specialist education support for all individuals with disabilities/delays and learning and behavioural difficulties, at all stages of life - infancy and early childhood, school and post school. A key way of achieving this was to ensure that all specialist educators were qualified to provide that support, not only having gained a specialist qualification but having completed a course that included the knowledge of interventions identified as efficacious by research and demonstrated to work in practice, and the skills to implement those interventions.

Panel of Experts

The first step was the establishment of a Panel of Experts in special education and affiliated research to guide the InSpEd Board. The Expert Panel <https://www.insped.org.au/expert-panel-members/> includes eminent researchers and specialist practitioners. Expert Panel members have guided the establishment of the InSpEd standards and have supported the organisation in the assessment of membership applications and recommended practice presentations, and the endorsement of professional learning courses.

Membership

Certified Membership

Certified membership was established whereby practitioners could submit their qualifications, including testamurs, and transcripts detailing the content covered in the courses undertaken. Applications for membership are reviewed by two members of the Expert Panel, using a set of standards based on research into effective practice in special education. These are standards that have been endorsed by the Expert Panel. We were guided in this endeavour by the work of Australian allied health professionals, specifically speech and language pathologists and occupational therapists, who had established professional associations with the aim of maintaining professional standards. Part of their remit was to assess courses preparing practitioners to work in the field and to accept members who had completed courses deemed to have met the association's standards. This has been successful because government departments will only employ allied professionals who are members of their professional associations.

Unfortunately, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) does not recognise the additional skills and knowledge possessed by those with special education qualifications. AITSL does not have a set of standards for special educators working in the field and education departments across Australia do not require special education teachers to be qualified to take up specialist support roles. There has been little incentive for qualified special educators to become members of InSpEd, as recognition of their qualifications is not necessary for employment in the field either for school education or pre- or post-school specialist roles. It seems that we overestimated the regard for specialist education support in this country.

Courses in Special/Inclusive Education

Although a 2025 NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) update of the content and knowledge requirements for undergraduate courses in education has included special education as a specialisation, it remains to be seen how universities will include the specialised content while preserving the content currently included in an initial teacher education program. An additional consideration is the need for those who assess such courses to have qualifications and experience in special/inclusive education.

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A recent Western Australian training initiative, the Disability and Inclusion Professional Learning Hub, is to be funded by the WA government to “equip principals, teachers and education assistants with the tools, training and support to better assist students with disability and complex needs”. It is unclear what the content will be and who will be providing it. <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/media-statements/Cook%20Labor%20Government/New-training-hub-to-shape-future-of-public-education-in-WA-20260528>,

State departments of education do provide scholarships to teachers enrolling in postgraduate degrees in special/inclusive education; however, given that there are few qualified special educators working in the head offices of departments of education (Kemp, 2024; O’Neil & Stephenson, 2010), the courses to which scholarships are provided do not necessarily include the content required to prepare graduates to provide quality support to teachers and to students with disability in primary and secondary schools in Australia.

InSpEd does have a set of standards used to assess the content of Australian courses in special/inclusive education. The content of courses has been assessed online, with few courses addressing all InSpEd standards (Stephenson et al. 2022). Of concern, also, is the lack of a substantial practicum or internship supervised by a specialist teacher qualified to mentor a student special educator (Stephenson et al., 2025).

Other Membership Categories

Associate membership was established to allow family members, community members and other professionals wanting to support the aims of the organisation to become members of InSpEd. In addition, we now have an honorary affiliate membership for individuals who have contributed to InSpEd by way of advocacy, membership of research teams or newsletter contributions.

Teacher/Specialist Support

Freely Available Resources

The InSpEd newsletter contains research reports and summaries of research articles and summaries of submissions to government departments and other organisations. In addition to the newsletter, we also have resources on the public page, including brief research reports, articles published in the newsletter, summaries of InSpEd submissions, professional learning opportunities that have been endorsed by InSpEd and a list of special/inclusive education courses that InSpEd has provisionally endorsed.

Member Resources

All members have access to the member page, which has links to relevant sites and articles, research summaries and briefs, InSpEd submissions, past Insights newsletters, recommended practice presentations, and a member forum. Members can seek information or discuss ideas within forum topics and can make suggestions to the Board.

Research

InSpEd has established several research teams investigating interventions purported to improve outcomes for individuals with disability, primarily intellectual disability and autism, developmental delays and learning difficulties. Some of that research has involved us working with practitioners from organisations supporting individuals needing specialist support. Other research has investigated service provision including the quality of courses preparing graduates to work in the field. The results of the research have been published in peer reviewed journals and have been presented at national and international conferences.

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Advocacy

One way of working towards our goal of supporting individuals with disability or other special needs is to make submissions, either alone or in collaboration with like-minded organisations, to inquiries relating to the educational needs of this population. These submissions will include research evidence that supports our recommendations.

Professional Learning and Consultancy

From time to time InSpEd is approached to provide inservice courses and consultancies. Inservice has included presentations on inclusion, behaviour management and approaches to providing evidence-based interventions to a range of students with additional needs. We have also provided consultancy to several government and non-government organisations. For example, InSpEd worked with MultiLit to produce a set of seven practice guides for the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). These are guides for teachers who are supporting students with diverse learning needs. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resource-collections/supporting-diverse-needs-students>.

Future Plans

Voting Members

Until this point in time, InSpEd Board members have managed the organisation and have been its sole voting members. At the March 2026 meeting of the Board, a motion was passed to extend voting rights to members of the Expert Panel, Honorary Affiliates and Certified Members, in accordance with the InSpEd constitution. This will mean that these members can nominate others or stand for Board membership. Voting members will be invited to attend InSpEd's annual general meeting in September/October. Information, including the date and time of the AGM, a Board report, meeting agenda, Board positions available, and a Board nomination form will be sent out well before the meeting date.

Organisational Membership

Following an enquiry at a conference in 2025, the Board has decided to offer membership to organisations interested in supporting the work of InSpEd. Organisational membership will be available to schools and organisations supporting individuals with disabilities and learning and behavioural difficulties and their families. <https://www.insped.org.au/apply-for-organisational-membership/>.

References

- Kemp, C. (2024). Qualifications required for Australian special education roles. *InSpEd Insights*, March 2024. <https://www.insped.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Qualifications-Required-for-Australian-Special-Education-Roles.pdf>
- O'Neill, S., & Stephenson, J. (2010). The use of functional behavioural assessment for students with challenging behaviours: Current patterns and experiences of Australian practitioners. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology*, 10, 65-82. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2014v39n4.4>
- Stephenson, J., Ganguly, R., Kemp, C., Sarandrea, A. M., & Salisbury, C. (2025). Provision of practicum in Australian postgraduate courses preparing special/inclusive educators. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 49(1) 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2025.1>
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