

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Designing and Rating Options for Special School Expertise to Support Mainstream Educational Inclusion<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

The Victorian Government, Australia, committed to deliver recommendations from a review of the Program for Students with Disabilities. We report on the implementation of Recommendation 7: to explore options for how special schools could become ‘centres of expertise’ to support inclusion in mainstream schools. Informed by evidence reviews of inclusive education practices and interviews of special and mainstream staff and parents, stakeholders were engaged in a forum to develop a range of options. A larger sample of stakeholders then completed a survey to evaluate them. Forum attendees were parents, education staff, and allied health professionals from special and mainstream schools. They worked in small groups to develop options, which were later grouped into 5 categories. These options were entered into an online survey for distribution to a wider group of stakeholders. Survey respondents were 142 stakeholders from special (71%) and mainstream primary and secondary schools (parents, education staff, and allied health professionals). They rated each option, such that 8 with high ratings for feasibility and acceptability were recommended to support inclusive mainstream education through utilisation of special school expertise. The final list of options focused on collaboration, development, and coordination of networks of special and mainstream schools, and building capacity and leadership to support mainstream schools to meet diverse student need.

**Keywords:** special education; inclusion; mainstream schools; policy

Special schools have played a significant role in the education of students with disabilities since deinstitutionalisation (Strogilos, Lacey, Xanthacou, & Kaila, 2011). As greater attention has been paid to inclusive education in mainstream schools, the role of special schools as part of a continuum of education options for children with disabilities has come under scrutiny (Shaddock, MacDonald, Hook, Giorcelli, & Arthur-Kelly, 2009). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education of 1994 and signed by 92 governments, suggested a primary role for special schools as being the provision of resources and support to mainstream schools (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science, Spain, 1994). It was noted in the Salamanca Statement that these schools, as a result of their high cost and resource needs, were not viable for low-income countries, which needed to rely on strengthening mainstream schools to make reasonable adjustments to support the varied needs of students with disabilities. Still, special schools were acknowledged to have expertise in educating students with particular needs, such as the Deaf who use sign language and children with severe and/or multiple disabilities.

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Concerns have been raised in response to suggestions for fewer or reconfigured roles for special schools, particularly the potential loss of expertise in these schools (Winter & O’Raw, 2010). Further, contributions to inclusive education through universal design for learning, response to intervention, and positive behaviour supports that have been developed in special education and adopted in mainstream settings have been acknowledged (Mitchell, 2015; Sailor, 2015). Debate about the role of special education has included an argument that students experience poorer outcomes if educated with mainstream peers, but there is disagreement about whether evidence relating to student outcomes is sufficient to support either segregated or inclusive education (Cologon, 2013; Lindsay, 2007; Mitchell, 2015). Differences in how and the extent to which inclusion is implemented, both within and across countries, poor attitudes and preparation of teachers, limited or ad hoc classroom supports, varying involvement and collaboration with families, and lack of an agreed measure of inclusion have hampered attempts to compare student outcomes across settings (Lindsay, 2007; Mitchell, 2015).

The issue of education setting is arguably moot if the primary concern shifts to how to teach students with disability, rather than the place in which it occurs (Sailor, 2015). It has been suggested that tiered supports can be delivered largely within mainstream settings through application of universal curriculum to overcome the need for segregation of students for learning, with the exception of students with the most significant disabilities who require intensive and individualised instruction (Sailor, 2015; Shaddock, Packer, & Roy, 2015). According to Sailor (2015), even specialised supports can be provided in any setting, again refocusing the debate on how rather than where supports are delivered.

Mainstream schoolteachers who lack skill or experience in delivering curriculum to children with disabilities are likely to feel ill-equipped to provide the supports needed (Iacono, Keeffe, Kenny, & McKinstry, 2017). Previous models in which supports are provided through collaborations and support from special to mainstream schools have been evident internationally. In the United Kingdom, for example, a pilot study included cases of mainstream and one or more special schools entering into federations (with varying levels of legal formality; Lindsay et al., 2007). These federations had inclusion as a key goal, but evaluation was largely anecdotal rather than empirical. Another international example was in Armenia: beginning in the 1990s, three special schools provided supports to five mainstream schools (Lapham & Papikyan, 2012). In Australia, from 2012 to 2014, a Commonwealth-funded initiative called More Supports for Students with Disabilities (MSSD) resulted in demonstration projects, some of which featured special school supports to mainstream schools (PhillipsKPA, 2015). In Victoria, principals of special schools were supported through a leadership program to assist colleagues in neighbourhood schools (PhillipsKPA, 2015). In NSW, special schools were deemed centres of expertise within local networks that linked mainstream and special schools to enable sharing of knowledge and providing peer support and collaboration (PhillipsKPA, 2015).

The Victorian Government, Australia, initiated a review of its Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) as part of its agenda for inclusive education for all students with disabilities and additional needs (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016a). The PSD is the mechanism by which funding is provided to individual students and to specialised settings, and for programs that support the education of students with disability. The review was a response to national and state reforms to increase inclusion of people with disability in society and, specifically, in education (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016a). Also acknowledged were failures of schools to follow inclusive practices (see Iacono, Keeffe, Kenny, & McKinstry, 2019). The state government committed to recommendations arising from the review (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016a), including Recommendation 7: to explore options for how special schools could become ‘centres of expertise’ that would support inclusive education in mainstream schools (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016b).

Recommendation 7 of the PSD review reflected previous models under the MSSD initiative, which addressed the potential to harness the expertise of special schools in building the capacity of mainstream schools to meet the needs of students with disability. In particular, teachers with special education qualifications and experience in teaching students with varying types and levels of disability

appear well placed to provide professional development, consultation, and peer supports to their mainstream peers (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016b). Here we report on processes followed to realise this recommendation.

The aim of the current project was to engage special and mainstream school stakeholders in developing options for how special schools could best support mainstream inclusive education for the Victorian State Government's consideration. This aim was addressed in a multi-stage project in which each stage informed the next (see Iacono et al., 2017). The first stage was a review of the published and grey literature regarding models of inclusive practices, the second involved surveying special school principals about current practices in supporting mainstream inclusion, and the third was analysis of interviews of 32 stakeholders involved in mainstream school inclusion about current practices and needs and the supports required. These stages have been reported elsewhere, including in a complete report of the project (Iacono et al., 2017). The focus here is the final two stages that culminated in a list of options that was recommended to the government. These stages comprised (a) development of a list of options during a forum attended by stakeholders from special and mainstream schools; and (b) evaluation of these options through a survey about the feasibility, acceptability, and resource requirements by a wider group of stakeholders.

## Methods

### *Ethical Considerations*

The larger study was approved by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval to conduct the study with government school staff was obtained from the Department of Education and Training Victoria. Written informed consent was obtained from participants in interviews and the forum, and consent was implied for survey participants.

### *Stakeholder Engagement Strategy*

To maximise stakeholder input, a strategy was developed, which reflected a framework and toolkit developed by the Victoria State Government (2018). Seven steps for successful stakeholder engagement were followed where possible, given the limited time frame of the project (6 months), which was stipulated in a funding agreement. Table 1 includes the steps and how they were broadly implemented in the project, and more specifically for the stages of the forum and survey.

### *Stakeholder Forum*

A one-day forum was held with stakeholders from throughout Victoria. In keeping with Recommendation 7 of the PSD review, the aim was for stakeholders to develop a range of options for how special schools could act as centres of expertise to support inclusive education in mainstream schools. Stakeholders were identified according to their direct involvement in mainstream education and support provided through special schools (see Table 1). Participants were recruited largely through a list of Victorian special schools sourced from the Principals' Association of Specialist Schools. Principals who indicated an interest in having members of their schools participate were also asked to recommend mainstream schools in their area for the researchers to contact. In addition, mainstream schools from across regional, rural, and metropolitan locations were randomly selected from a Department of Education and Training internet listing. People from mainstream schools who agreed to participate were also asked to share information about the study with parents of students with disability. This combination of a snowballing strategy, direct telephone contact with nine mainstream schools, and word of mouth resulted in 35 stakeholders indicating an interest in attending the forum. In light of the number of attendees who could be accommodated within the forum venue, recruitment ceased when consent was received from 35 stakeholders. On the day, 33 stakeholders attended: 14 principals or assistant principals from special or mainstream schools, nine teachers from special

**Table 1.** Stakeholder Engagement Strategy Employed for the Project

Step	Project application
1. Define the purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall – develop options for special schools to support mainstream inclusive education</li> <li>• Forum – develop stakeholder informed options</li> <li>• Survey – evaluate feasibility, acceptability, and resource requirements of options developed by forum participants</li> <li>• Limitations arising from project period (non-negotiable) and availability of stakeholders</li> </ul>
2. Identify stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Special school staff (principals and others in leadership roles or specialist roles, teachers)</li> <li>• Mainstream school staff (principals and others in leadership or specialist roles, teachers, education support staff)</li> <li>• Allied health professionals and specialists from schools</li> <li>• Parents of children with disability in mainstream or special schools</li> <li>• Stakeholders' inclusion in the forum supported by limiting reading material to manageable summaries, reimbursement of travel costs, catering for the forum, and choice of a location with good transport options</li> <li>• Limitations in the number of potential stakeholders who could be contacted because dissemination of invitations to the forum and to complete the survey (distributed and completed online) was reliant on schools passing on the information, and the number who could attend the forum was limited by the size of the venue</li> </ul>
3. Level of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of pre-reading material and forum presentations to inform stakeholders</li> <li>• Consultation and involvement through attendance at the full-day forum, with varied activities to enable a balance between being informed, synthesising group discussions, and sharing information from small groups with all participants</li> <li>• Collaborate by involving stakeholders at multiple stages of the project</li> <li>• Empower by seeking ratings via a survey as a means to determine the final options to recommend to government</li> </ul>
4. Engagement plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about the forum and survey disseminated to all special schools in Victoria (<math>n = 84</math>)</li> <li>• Snowballing strategy for identifying mainstream schools and parents to invite to prior stages of the project, forum, and survey</li> <li>• Invitations disseminated to a sample systematically selected from all government primary and secondary mainstream schools (<math>n = 61</math>, 20%)</li> <li>• Project report to participants prepared, comprising a synopsis, executive summary, complete report (background, methods, results and discussion, detailing how stakeholder engagement activities had informed each stage of the project), and recommendations</li> </ul>
5. Implement and monitor engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project lead (first author) as the main contact for all stakeholders</li> <li>• All communication conducted by telephone and email</li> <li>• All participants had direct telephone, email, and mail contact details of the project lead provided in participant information and at each point of contact</li> </ul>
6. Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project report distributed to all schools and individuals involved or who had received invitations to various stages of the project</li> </ul>
7. Evaluate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project plan evaluated by the funding organisation, a human research ethics committee, and the Department of Education and Training Research Committee</li> <li>• Project outcomes evaluated by the project team through examination of the data from each stage, and reporting of key limitations in the final report and publications arising from the project</li> </ul>

schools, five consultant or specialist support teachers, which included one from a mainstream school, two allied health professionals from special schools, and three parents. Two of the parents had children in mainstream schools; the other parent had one child in a special school and another in a mainstream school.

As part of informing participating stakeholders, they were sent a package of materials two weeks prior to the forum. Included in the package were evidence briefs of practices found to support inclusive education. These were developed from a rapid review of the literature, conducted as part of the larger project (Iacono et al., 2017). The evidence briefs were kept to one to two page summaries to minimise the amount of reading required of participants. They were prepared for each of the following practices: (a) collaborative consultation whereby a consultant works with the classroom teacher both inside and outside the classroom (Strogilos et al., 2011); (b) co-teaching, mostly involving a regular and special education teacher taking on varied roles (Tremblay, 2013); (c) use of peers to support students with disability (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattery, & Raley, 2016); (d) engaging teacher assistants in various roles (Punch, 2015); and (e) involving parents (Kourkoutas, Eleftherakis, Vitalaki, & Hart, 2015). These reviews can be found in Iacono et al. (2017).

The forum agenda was organised to provide further information to stakeholders about the larger project and progress, and facilitate their contributions to group discussions (details are provided in Table 2). At the beginning of the forum, the research team presented findings from an earlier stage of the project: an overview of key Australian legislation and policy relating to the education of students with disability, as well as public inquiries and reports sourced through the grey literature that have indicated policy failures (Iacono et al., 2019). The results from interviews of 32 stakeholders from special and mainstream schools, including education staff, parents, and allied health professionals, conducted in a previous stage of the larger project (Iacono et al., 2017) were then presented. Qualitative analysis of the interviews had provided stakeholder perspectives that converged on three overarching themes: (a) scan of the current situations, which included examples of both concerns (e.g., differences and gaps in funding across students with disability and limited parent involvement and choice) and positive practices and experiences (e.g., developing strong relationships across mainstream and special school staff through prolonged engagement); (b) what is happening, in terms of the roles played by allied health, specialist teachers, and education support staff, and opportunities that existed for interactions between special and mainstream schools; and (c) what is possible, which encompassed how supports from special schools could be made more accessible and generalised across students, increased opportunities for professional development for mainstream staff, including education support staff, and tailored approaches and leadership characteristics required to ensure commitment across a whole school (Iacono et al., 2017).

After the information session, stakeholders were allocated to five small groups, each comprising varied roles (special and mainstream educators, including education support staff, allied health professionals, and, as far as possible, parents) and a facilitator (research team member). Data collection was through written summaries from each group prepared for reporting back to the larger forum and facilitator notes (see Table 2). All notes were transcribed and then analysed by a researcher through grouping responses into categories and then providing descriptions for each category. These categories were then grouped within larger descriptive categories. This process was discussed and checked with other members of the research team.

### **Stakeholder Survey**

Stakeholder input into determining those options that would be recommended to government on the bases of feasibility, acceptability, and resource needs was sought through a survey (see Table 1). The options developed from the forum were incorporated into an online survey using the QualtricsXM platform. The online medium was chosen to maximise the potential for wide dissemination within the limited time frame. A convenience sample of survey recipients was obtained by selecting every fifth school on a list of 307 Victorian State Government schools that was publicly available from the Department of Education and Training Victoria website (<https://www.education.vic.gov.au>); distribution was to 61 schools. An email was sent to the school principals with a request to distribute participant information to school staff and parents, and to allied health professionals who were

**Table 2.** Forum Activities

Session	Aim	Content
1. Background presentation	Provide participants with the context for the project and details of the tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall project aims</li> <li>• Example options developed for objectives not related to the current focus</li> <li>• Timeline of inclusive policy and legislation in Australia and Victoria</li> <li>• The options design process</li> </ul>
2. Group discussion	Participants to get to know others in their working groups (sitting at the same table)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brief unstructured discussion</li> </ul>
3. Evidence presentation	Provide participants with an overview of how the evidence summaries were developed and content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing or previous models of special schools providing expertise of resources for school inclusion</li> <li>• Promising practices in               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Consultation</li> <li>○ Co-teaching</li> <li>○ Roles given to education support staff/teacher assistants</li> <li>○ Enhancers for inclusion</li> <li>○ Involvement of families</li> <li>○ Peers providing supports</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
4. Group work	Discuss and identify implications of evidence for options to be developed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each group assigned an evidence summary</li> <li>• Identify 3 main points to be carried into their options</li> </ul>
5. Reporting back	Share the outcome of each group's discussions with all participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A spokesperson from each group reported back to the whole group</li> </ul>
6. Interview presentation	Provide participants with the results of the stakeholder interview analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three overarching themes from a framework focused on supporting students in mainstream:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Current situation</li> <li>○ What's happening</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
7. Group work	Consider results relating to 2 themes to carry into the development of options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants read the summaries for the remaining themes and identified 3 points for their options:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What's possible</li> <li>○ What's needed</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
8. Developing the options presentation	Provide instructions and guidance for groups to develop the options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups were tasked with developing 1 option:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What it would look like?</li> <li>○ What would be the key ingredients?</li> <li>○ Recorded on butcher's paper</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Identify evidence and stakeholder interview issues the designed option would address</li> </ul>
9. Reporting back	Share each group's option with all participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Options presented on butcher's paper as clear statements</li> </ul>

associated with the school. The email also included a link to the Qualtrics survey. The content of the survey included each of the options developed from analysis of the stakeholder forum data followed by a 5-point Likert scale for each of acceptability, feasibility, and resource intensity, with *Not at all* assigned a rating of 1 and *Highly* assigned 5. Respondents were also asked to indicate which three key resources — budget, time allocation, or access to technology and equipment — would be required for successful implementation of each option.

**Table 3.** Options Presented by Each Group

Group	Options
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To ensure that all schools are inclusive and supported to make inclusion explicit in FISO (Framework for Improving Student Outcomes) policies and processes</li> <li>• Redefine quality/flexible learning outcomes for ALL students</li> <li>• To develop and fund a structured process to network skills and abilities in inclusive practice</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of collaborations/networks between special schools and mainstream schools to support general teachers to upskill in teaching students with a disability and special schoolteachers spending time in mainstream schools. Use face-to-face coaching, experiential learning, not online, that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ covers all disabilities and other contributing issues (e.g., trauma)</li> <li>▪ is culturally sensitive</li> <li>▪ focuses on early intervention – to include kinder and primary school</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop an inclusive model that recognises and supports the diverse needs of students and schools and builds a collaborative partnership with schools in existing networks based on location/region</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop capacity within each mainstream school through mandatory changes to become fully included</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish collaborative exchange NETWORKS. The network will include specialist schools, special developmental schools and mainstream schools</li> </ul>

## Findings

### Options Developed From the Forum

The options developed by forum participants are presented in Table 3, from which it is evident that they varied in detail and focus. However, each group described components and considerations that they felt should be accounted for within their suggested options. For example, Group 3, whose option focused on a collaborative partnership across schools in existing networks, noted the need for a staff member from each school in the network to be designated as a coordinator, whose role was to identify needs and resources and share expertise with other staff. These additional notes, as well as those from the facilitators, were used to develop overarching options and their related sub-options. Five option categories emerged from this process. They comprised four options for configuring the relationship between mainstream and special schools, three for coordinating demands and matching needs to expertise, three for ensuring necessary skills and leadership abilities, eight for building mainstream capacity, and four for ensuring transparency of and recognition for achieving inclusive practices that address the needs of all students with disability (see Table 4). In summary, the forum data yielded 22 sub-options organised within the five descriptive option categories (as presented in Table 4). These were then included in the survey for the next phase of the study.

### Option Ratings

Responses were from 142 participants, comprising five parents, 49 principals or assistant principals, 44 teachers, 10 education support staff, and 33 allied health professionals or specialist staff (one respondent did not indicate a role). It was not possible to determine a response rate because the number of individuals sent an invitation to participate through schools contacted was unknown. Most respondents (68%) were employed in special schools, and one parent reported having a child in a special school; 27% were employed in or had a child attend a mainstream school (5% did not respond to this item). Most respondents (60%) were employed in or their children were attending combined primary/secondary schools, with 29% from primary-only schools and 8% from secondary-only schools (3% did not respond to this item). The location breakdown was 71% from metropolitan schools, 18% from regional schools, and 9% from rural areas (2% did not respond to this item).



**Table 4.** Options Developed From the Forum and Their Survey Ratings

Options	Survey ratings <sup>a</sup>		
	Acceptability	Feasibility	Resource intensity
<i>A. Options for configuring the relationship between mainstream and specialist schools</i>			
1. Collaborative networks are formed comprising 1 special school that provides expertise to a number of local mainstream schools.	3.93 36%	3.72 30%	4.24 51%
<b>2. Collaborative networks are formed based on location, comprising 1 or more special schools that share and exchange expertise and resources with a number of mainstream schools.</b>	<b>4.18 53%</b>	<b>3.83 32%</b>	<b>4.23 48%</b>
3. A special school is allocated to one or more mainstream schools to provide expertise based on need.	3.90 44%	3.77 35%	4.14 47%
4. Collaborative exchange networks are developed with special schools as the hub for the purpose of providing supports to a number of local mainstream schools.	3.26 29%	3.27 24%	4.16 47%
<i>B. Options for coordinating demands and matching needs to expertise</i>			
1. Coordination occurs at the regional level, where requests from mainstream schools are triaged and expertise of individuals within special schools are matched to need.	3.26 29%	3.27 24%	3.96 43%
2. Each mainstream school has a dedicated coordinator position, the role of which is to identify the needs and resources required, which they request from a special school.	3.76 38%	3.54 28%	3.97 39%
<b>3. Each participating special school has a dedicated coordinator position, the role of which is to liaise with mainstream schools; each participating mainstream school has a dedicated 'connector' position, the role of which is to link the school with the special school.</b>	<b>4.12 53%</b>	<b>3.86 38%</b>	<b>4.18 47%</b>
<i>C. Options for ensuring necessary skills and leadership abilities</i>			
<b>1. Special schoolteachers providing expert support to mainstream schools have completed professional development in particular areas of expertise, have experience, and have been supported (e.g., mentoring) to develop the leadership and other skills needed to provide the following supports: face-to-face coaching, support for experiential learning, the provision of in-class intensive supports to assist teachers of students with complex issues, and communicating with senior school staff.</b>	<b>4.4 69%</b>	<b>4.16 51%</b>	<b>4.4 60%</b>
2. Allied health practitioners employed by the Department of Education and Training provide professional development and direct support to special schoolteachers to enable them to implement recommendations from student assessments.	3.81 42%	3.59 31%	4.19 54%
3. Special schoolteachers have access to a program of teacher exchange with a mainstream school for a negotiated period of time.	3.70 36%	3.43 27%	3.92 42%
<i>D. Options for building mainstream capacity</i>			
1. Special schools provide intensive supports to a limited number of mainstream schools for negotiated periods, then move these intensive supports to other schools; over time, the expertise of mainstream schools developed through this process is made available to other schools within a network or partnership group.	3.40 26%	3.17 15%	4.11 47%
2. Allied health practitioners employed by the Department of Education and Training provide professional development and direct support to mainstream schoolteachers to enable them to implement recommendations from student assessments.	3.94 46%	3.70 34%	4.06 50%



Table 4. (Continued)

Options	Survey ratings <sup>a</sup>		
	Acceptability	Feasibility	Resource intensity
<b>3. All mainstream schoolteachers within a network or partnership meet a condition of employment of having completed a placement within a specialist setting as a preservice teacher.</b>	<b>4.00</b> 54%	<b>3.58</b> 38%	<b>3.62</b> 34%
4. Mainstream teachers have access to a program of teacher exchange with a special school for a negotiated period of time.	3.68 36%	3.37 24%	4.02 44%
<b>5. Each mainstream school employs a special education teacher with time allocation to visit and receive supports from a special school.</b>	<b>4.06</b> 53%	<b>3.66</b> 33%	<b>4.18</b> 53%
6. All teachers in mainstream schools meet minimum professional development requirements that relate to the needs of any student with disability in the school.	4.21 58%	3.85 44%	4.12 52%
<b>7. Education support staff<sup>b</sup> are given full access to capacity building opportunities, including professional development, observing practice in special schools and in-classroom consultations with special school staff.</b>	<b>4.15</b> 59%	<b>3.98</b> 45%	<b>3.97</b> 44%
<b>8. Professional development is developed and delivered in flexible and varied modes that incorporate both online and face-to-face components.</b>	<b>4.05</b> 49%	<b>4.02</b> 42%	<b>3.85</b> 36%
<i>E. Options for achieving the transparency of and recognition for achieving inclusive practices that address the needs of all students with disability</i>			
1. Special schools support mainstream schools to meet mandatory inclusion standards that include those articulated in the Disability Standards for Education 2005, with specific additional requirements developed by the Department of Education and Training through consultation with parents, principals, teachers, and education support staff.	3.71 36%	3.39 19%	4.16 46%
2. Special schools support mainstream schools to articulate commitment to inclusion practices in their strategic plans, formalised and made explicit through their Framework for Improving Student Outcomes, policies, and processes.	3.67 35%	3.44 22%	3.91 39%
<b>3. Special schools work collaboratively with mainstream schools to develop flexible learning outcomes for students.</b>	<b>4.09</b> 50%	<b>3.74</b> 30%	<b>4.14</b> 46%
4. Special schools support mainstream schools to measure progress towards meeting inclusion standards through the identification and application of an index of inclusion.	3.42 24%	3.23 15%	3.96 42%

Note. Boldface indicates the options included as the final list of recommended options within each category.

<sup>a</sup>Data are mean ratings and percentage of respondents rating the option as highly acceptable or feasible.

<sup>b</sup>Education support staff is the term used by the Department of Education and Training Victoria for staff in teacher assistant roles.

Across the 22 options, the mean rating on the 5-point Likert scale for acceptability was 3.88 (range: 3.26–4.40); for feasibility, it was 3.64 (range: 3.17–4.16); for the intensity of resources required, it was 4.16 (range: 3.62–4.4). These results indicate that, overall, all options were rated as moderately to highly acceptable and feasible, but with moderate to high resource intensity (i.e., resources needed to implement the option). The percentage of respondents who rated each option highly (combining Likert scores of 4 and 5) was also calculated. Highlighted in Table 4 are the options within each category rated as the most acceptable and feasible. With a few exceptions, the highest mean scores were accompanied by the highest percentages of respondents rating the option highly. For the exceptions, there was little difference between percentages for options with the two highest mean ratings, for example,

options D6 and D7, for building mainstream capacity (see Table 4). The resource intensity ratings were not a sensitive preference indicator because all ratings were at the higher end of the scale. Further, most respondents indicated that all options would require resources in the form of budget (81–92%,  $M = 86\%$ ) or time (85–97%,  $M = 91\%$ ) allocations, or access to technology and other equipment (36–71%,  $M = 44\%$ ), or other resources (15–49%,  $M = 26\%$ ). The final number of preferred options across the five categories was reduced from 22 to eight, as indicated by the shading in Table 4.

## Discussion

Through their contributions throughout the project, stakeholders demonstrated their willingness to engage with the notion of special and mainstream schools working together to increase inclusive education of students with disability. The list of options generated by stakeholders who attended the forum reflected key features of collaboration, location-based networks, coordination, leadership, capacity building, and transparency and recognition of achievement. These features, and those in the sub-options, shared similarities with previous models, such as the local networks formed between special and mainstream schools in NSW that were part of the MSSD, and leadership development among special school principals, which was a key feature of a Victorian initiative (PhillipsKPA, 2015).

Very few of the options reflected the research evidence that had been provided prior to and discussed during the forum. This finding may indicate that the research literature and findings from an earlier stage of the project did not resonate with participants. An exception was providing education support staff with opportunities to build their capacity to support students with disabilities. Punch (2015), on the basis of a literature review, recommended that staff in the role of teaching assistant (i.e., education support staff) be provided with professional development. This recommendation was made because people in the role of teacher assistant often carry responsibility for much of the planning and implementation of support for students with disability to whom they are assigned, but lack or have limited formal training. On the other hand, the benefits of special and mainstream educators working together was evident, but at the level of schools, rather than collaboration between teachers at the level of the classroom in relation to planning and implementing learning activities for individual students (Tremblay, 2013).

An appreciation by both forum and survey participants of the expertise of special educators was evident from the options developed and their ratings. Stakeholders recognised the potential benefits of special schools sharing their expertise with mainstream schools, reflecting calls for making use of specialist knowledge that has accrued in special education over many years (Mitchell, 2015; Sailor, 2015) and echoed in stakeholder interviews reported by Iacono et al. (2017). One favoured option suggested a willingness to embed special educators within a mainstream staffing profile through direct employment, but with time allocation for nurturing a relationship with a local special school. This model would provide the basis for collaborative teaching within specific classes (Tremblay, 2013), but this approach was not articulated in any option.

Encompassed in these options were the following strategies to build capacity to meet the needs of students with disability: improved preparation of education professionals through undertaking undergraduate placements within special schools, and flexible delivery of professional development to enable teachers to better meet the needs of students with disability. These suggested strategies can be found in recommendations in previous reports, including one that informed the review of the PSD (Mitchell, 2015). There also have been government attempts to enhance teacher preparation for working with students with disabilities; for example, a previous initiative was noted in the government's response to the PSD review (Department of Education and Training, 2016a), stating 'From 2016, all initial teacher education programs must also include specific learning activities about teaching students with disabilities to be accredited by the Victorian Institute of Teaching' (p. 7), in addition to a commitment to increase professional development for teachers, education support staff (teacher assistants), and school leaders. Yet the continued need for such capacity building despite these commitments, as shown

in the options and interview data from Iacono et al. (2017) suggest that better implementation strategies are in order. These may best occur through partnerships across government, universities, and schools focused on the task of building capacity of school staff during and after teacher and support staff preparation.

The failure of ratings to enable ranking of options according to resource needs suggests that stakeholders anticipated that substantial resources would be required to implement them, despite many being ranked as feasible. An indication that the Victorian Government has committed to Recommendation 7, as well as others from the review of the PSD (Department of Education and Training, 2016a), was increased funding for the purpose of making schools more inclusive in the 2019–2020 state budget (Victoria State Government, 2019). How this funding translates to implementing any of the options reported here and to government (Iacono et al., 2017), and whether the commitment will alleviate school concerns about resources, will require future evaluation. Certainly, sharing staff across mainstream and special schools, for example, would require careful consideration of how costs are shared and workloads and logistical issues managed, such as staff being available in both schools for respective administrative tasks. Survey respondents did indicate a preference for an option in which a dedicated coordinator role was created within a special school, with each mainstream school also having a connector dedicated to the collaboration with a special school (see Option B3, Table 4).

### Limitations

There were a number of limitations associated with the activities reported here, mostly arising from the short project time frame. Most evident was the unequal representation across stakeholder groups at the forum and responding to the survey. In particular, poor representation of parents and allied health staff is likely to have reduced the potential to reflect their valuable roles in inclusive education, such as ensuring collaborative planning across home and school (Kourkoutas et al., 2015), and taking advantage of specialist skills of allied health professionals (Strogilos et al., 2011). Therefore, better representation of these stakeholder groups, as well as staff from mainstream and secondary schools, may have resulted in a different set of final options and ratings.

Poor representation of all stakeholders involved in the inclusive education of students with disability was also evident for the survey. The sampling strategy resulted in a small sample overall and particularly of members of mainstream school communities, including parents. Further, the survey was specifically designed to extend stakeholder engagement to the task of reducing the number of options to recommend to government. The sample size also meant that it was insufficient for testing of validity or internal consistency. Hence, the extent to which the options selected accurately reflect feasibility and acceptability remains unknown. A recommendation for future research may be to repeat the options survey with a larger and more representative sample obtained through rigorous survey methods. However, the relevance of such research would seem questionable in light of the specific purpose of the survey used in this project.

### Conclusions

To promote inclusive education for students with disabilities within mainstream schools, it was proposed that special schools could work collaboratively with mainstream schools to provide support and resources. The range of options identified from stakeholder discussions focused on the need for collaboration and development and coordination of networks of special and mainstream schools. Further, options reflected stakeholder priorities in building leadership in special schools and capacity of mainstream schools to meet the diverse needs of students with disability, with processes made transparent and successes recognised. The ratings of acceptability and feasibility by a wider group of stakeholders provided some preliminary evaluation of how readily they would be supported should the options be adopted by education authorities. Government commitment to students with disabilities and how this translates to quality inclusive education experiences awaits evaluation in future research.

## Author note

This paper is based on a full report submitted to the funding body, the Principals' Association of Specialist Schools, and the Department of Education and Training Victoria. A copy of the report can be accessed from the La Trobe University repository at <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.9/562019>

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