

## ▲ The Recruitment and Retention of Speech and Language Therapists:

### What Do University Students Find Important?

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Education of health professionals is costly to the general community and more specifically the educational sector. The increasing need for speech and language therapy (SLT) services, coupled with poor employment retention rates, poses serious cost-benefit considerations. The poor job retention rates among speech and language therapists are associated with high levels of job dissatisfaction. One factor known to influence job satisfaction is the congruence between one's career motivation and actual career experience. The current study sought to explore (1) why students choose to embark on an SLT degree, (2) what factors are important to maintain their long-term employment in SLT, and (3) how long they predicted they would remain in the workforce practicing in SLT. Students from two tertiary SLT courses, one in Australia (n = 67) and one in the United Kingdom (n = 84), completed an online questionnaire targeting these issues. Students' responses were consistent across cohorts, so they were combined into one data set. Three categories of responses emerged, relating to altruism (i.e., helping others), intellectual interest (i.e., interested in disease and disability), and professional issues (e.g., salary, desire for a professional career). There was good agreement in responses to questions focusing on why participants chose to study SLT and what they foresaw as important for their future career. Students who were motivated to enter SLT for professional reasons tended to report that they would remain in the profession for a shorter time than those students who chose the career with a primarily humanistic or intellectual motivation. The implications of these findings for educators and professional bodies are discussed. *J Allied Health* 2007; 36:131-136.

ming that the average speech and language therapist spent only 3 to 5 yrs as a practitioner.<sup>1</sup> This report was the first to highlight the trend impacting on the speech and language therapy (SLT) profession, that is, the difficulty retaining trained and experienced clinicians within the profession. The reduction of SLT expertise leads to a corresponding loss of economic resources within the allied health community,<sup>2</sup> which can have a detrimental influence on service provision. The future of the profession relies on an established professional cohort that is responsible for mentoring new graduates, creating a research culture, and consolidating the position of the profession in the community to ensure that critical services are available to those who need them. Unsurprisingly, the SLT profession has shown a growing interest in determining the reason(s) why clinicians abandon an SLT career so soon after entry and how this problem can be addressed.

Canvassing the views of people who trained as a speech and language therapist but have since left the profession is one method through which researchers have sought to explain the poor retention levels of trained therapists. A significant percentage of these individuals (ranging from 30% to 60%) indicate that they were dissatisfied with their jobs.<sup>2-5</sup> In particular, ex-clinicians emphasize professional dissatisfaction stemming from poor pay,<sup>4</sup> lack of career progression,<sup>2,4</sup> and high levels of work-related stress.<sup>3</sup> In a large-scale survey of speech and language therapists, Lass et al.<sup>6</sup> found that more than half of the respondents would have chosen a different profession if faced with a career choice again. Furthermore, the elevated risk of professional burnout among speech and language therapists<sup>7,8</sup> indicates that there is a substantial proportion of practicing speech and language therapists who are not satisfied with their jobs.

Job dissatisfaction among speech and language therapists has been attributed to a number of sources, including low pay, lack of respect from colleagues, and increasing bureaucracy.<sup>9</sup> One factor that is known to be related to levels of job satisfaction but has received considerably less attention is the relationship between employment experience and career motivation. Research has emphasized the relationship between career motivation and future career decisions.<sup>10-12</sup> Employees are more likely to be satisfied with their position (and hence remain in their employ-

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MORE THAN THREE DECADES AGO, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists published a report esti-

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TABLE 1. Participant Details Among Speech and Language Therapy Programs

	City University of University (London)	Curtin University of Technology (Perth)	Total
Total	84 (male, 3)	67 (male, 0)	151 (male, 3)
Stage of degree			
First-year undergraduate	10	12	22
Second-year undergraduate	9	16	25
Third-year undergraduate	6	25	31
Fourth-year undergraduate	7	12	19
First-year postgraduate	34	0	34
Second-year postgraduate	18	2	20
Age (yr)			
17-21	12	52	64
22-30	48	8	56
31-40	17	6	23
41-50	6	1	7
50+	1	0	1

ment) if there is congruence between the motivation for entering the profession and the actual experience upon commencement of employment. From this perspective, poor levels of job retention among speech and language therapists may be related to a mismatch between career expectations and actual career experiences. An important first step in investigating this proposition is to gain an understanding of why speech and language therapists choose to enter the profession.

Intriguingly, although there have been investigations of the career motivation of students studying for a degree in a number of other allied health professions,<sup>13,14</sup> there has been limited research investigating students studying for an SLT qualification. Smart<sup>15</sup> conducted one study that examined career choice in students from a number of allied health professions. SLT students reported that the desire to work in a professional environment and opportunities to further their career were the most important influencing factor in their career choice. However, the sample of SLT students in this study was limited in scope; only 31 participants took part in this research, all of whom were studying in the same geographic region (southwest of England). As such, it is difficult to extrapolate conclusions from the data. Other researchers have suggested that altruistic reasons (i.e., to help others) are a major career motivation for many speech and language therapists.<sup>9,16</sup> This career motivation is not unique to speech and language therapists. Pellegrino and Thomasama,<sup>17</sup> for example, claim that medical and allied health professions are inherently altruistic in that the foundation of these occupations is to serve the interests and values of clients/patients.

The current study investigated the career choice of a large number of SLT students. In particular, we sought to determine why students chose to undertake an SLT degree

and what they saw as being important factors for their continued practice as a speech and language therapist. Undergraduate (a four-year program) and postgraduate (a two-year program) students from two SLT tertiary programs, one in the United Kingdom and one in Australia, were invited to complete a questionnaire designed to garner information about their career choice.

On the basis of past research, we made two predictions:

1. Although students would report a variety of reasons for their choice of SLT as a career, high-ranking responses would include the desire to work in a professional environment,<sup>15</sup> opportunities to further their career,<sup>15</sup> and the desire to help others.<sup>9,16</sup>
2. Students' career motivation would be related to what they saw as being the most important factor for their future career.

Students were also asked how long they believed they would remain in the profession and furthermore, if they could predict any reason why they would leave the profession. We made no predictions concerning these two questions.

## Methods

### PARTICIPANTS

The participant pool was composed of students who were enrolled in an SLT tertiary degree (undergraduate or postgraduate) at either one of two universities: City University (CUL; London, England) and Curtin University of Technology (CUT; Perth, Australia). The invitation to participate in the study on a purely voluntary basis was advertised to students via e-mail and lectures. Participant details are presented in Table 1.

A total of 151 participants took part in this study (84 students from CUL and 67 students from CUT). Three male students (1%) completed the survey. This is representative of the proportion of male students enrolled in both courses. There were more postgraduate than undergraduate participants in the CUL sample (undergraduate, 32 students; postgraduate, 52 students), while the reverse was true for the CUT sample (undergraduate, 65 students; postgraduate, two students). A  $\chi^2$  analysis confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 55.42$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The participant samples were representative of the structure of each university course; the CUL course had about 300 postgraduate students, whereas the CUT course had approximately 20 postgraduate students. The age of the participants was positively skewed, with 42.4% of the participants aged 17-21 years, compared with 4.6% of participants aged 41-50 years.

### DATA COLLECTION

Participants were invited to complete an Internet-based questionnaire. Consent was assumed if they undertook the

task. An initial page on the Web site provided an explanation of the aims of the study and why they had been chosen as participants. Students were then asked a number of questions pertaining to their choice of SLT as a career and their views on their future career. Data from four questions were selected for this report. These questions were as follows.

1. What is the main reason for you choosing a career in speech and language therapy? (This question was based on a questionnaire item used by Craik and Wyatt-Rollason<sup>18</sup> in their investigation of career choice of students undertaking an occupational therapy degree.)
2. What reason do you foresee being the most important when choosing whether or not to stay in the speech and language therapy profession?
3. How long do you see yourself practicing as a speech and language therapist?
4. Is there any reason that you foresee prompting you to leave the profession? If so, please detail this.

The remaining questions completed by participants were not included in this report because they were unrelated to the topic under investigation.

## Results

### DATA ANALYSIS

Participant responses were tallied for each question. Response differences between the two participant sets (i.e., students from the two universities) were investigated with the use of  $\chi^2$  analyses. No differences emerged ( $p > 0.1$  on all questions). Response differences between undergraduate and postgraduate participants were also investigated.  $\chi^2$  analyses revealed no differences ( $p > 0.1$  on all questions). As such, the two participant sets were treated as one sample for the subsequent analyses. The analyses concentrated on (1) participant responses to individual questions and (2) relationships between the various questions.

### CAREER MOTIVATION

From 11 options, participants were asked to select the main reason they chose SLT as their future career. Data were missing for six participants. Table 2 provides the details of participants' responses.

About one third of students (29.6%) reported that "helping others" was the main reason for their choice of SLT as a career. Other high-ranking responses included having an interest in people (17.2%), having a desire for a professional career (14.5%), having an interest in the study of disease or disability (12.4%), having an interest in being of service to the community (11%), and having an interest in a specific topic area (9%).

TABLE 2. Career Motivation of Speech and Language Therapy Students

Reason	City University (London)	Curtin University of Technology (Perth)	Total
To help others	21	22	43
Interest in people	16	9	25
Desire for a professional career	16	5	21
Interest in the study of disease or disability	8	10	18
Interest in being of service to the community	10	6	16
Career prospects	1	3	4
Failure to gain admission to course of first choice	1	1	2
Job availability	2	0	2
Community work	1	0	1
It was what my parents wanted	0	0	0
Other			
Interest in specific area (e.g., voice/cognition/children/linguistics)	8	5	13
Total (no. of participants)	84	61	145

### FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER CONTINUATION

Participants were asked to select, from a list of seven options, what they believe would be the most important factor for their longevity as a practicing speech and language therapist. Data were missing for four participants. More than one third of participants (36%) believed that the continued ability to help others would be the most important factor in deciding their longevity in the SLT profession. Another dominant response was the opportunity for career progression (32%). Further prevalent responses included the ability to earn a comfortable income (11.6%) and the chance to learn more about disease or disorder (8.2%). Table 3 details participants' responses.

### FORESEEING LONGEVITY IN THE PROFESSION

Participants were asked how long they foresaw themselves practicing as a speech and language therapist. There were three options: short term (between 1 and 10 yrs), medium term (between 11 and 20 yrs), and long-term (21+ yrs). The vast majority of participants believed that they would remain in the profession for either the medium term (42.4%) or long term (52.3%). Only 5.3% of participants believed that they would remain in the profession for less than 5 yrs.  $\chi^2$  analysis confirmed these differences as statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 59.93$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### LEAVING THE PROFESSION

Participants were asked if they foresaw any reasons that may prompt them to leave the profession. Participants' written

TABLE 3. Factors Affecting Career Continuation

The ability to . . .	Curtin		Total
	City University (London)	University of Technology (Perth)	
Help others	25	28	53
Progress your career	24	20	44
Earn a comfortable income	12	5	17
Learn more about disease or disorder	10	5	15
Gain respect from colleagues	3	0	3
Gain respect from family and/or friends	0	0	0
Other (please specify)			
Be happy	5	4	9
Control stress levels	2	1	3
Maintain interest	1	2	3
Balance work and family life	1	0	1
The ability to combine research and clinical practice	0	1	1
Total (no. of participants)	81	66	147

answers were categorized into topics by two independent raters (AJOW and a rater not directly involved with this project). Raters achieved a high level of agreement (91%). Where there were discrepancies, the raters discussed the participants' responses until agreement was made. Table 4 provides the participants' responses.

Of the participants who foresaw a reason ( $n = 84$ ), 20% believed that they might leave the profession to commence a family, while another 20% thought that the poor state of the public health system might limit their longevity in the profession. Other reasons that the students thought may prompt them leaving the profession included financial reasons (16.7%) and lack of career progression and a loss of interest in the profession (9.5%).

#### CAREER MOTIVATION AND FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER CONTINUATION

We then sought to determine if there was a relationship between career motivation and factors affecting future career choice. Participants' key responses to these two questions could be collapsed into three broad categories relating to (1) altruism (e.g., an interest in helping others), (2) intellectual interest (e.g., an interest in disease or disability), and (3) professional reasons (an interest relating to the professional aspects of SLT, e.g., financial remuneration, career prospects, and so on). These three categories accounted for the substantial majority of participant responses to the two questions: career motivation (97.9%) and factors affecting career continuation (87.7%). Participants' responses relating to the three broad categories are summarized in Table 5.

We made a prediction that students' career motivation would be related to what they foresaw as being the most important factor for their future career. A  $\chi^2$  analysis was

used to examine this prediction. Thirty-two participants were excluded from this analysis because they had missing data for either the question relating to career motivation or the question relating to factors influencing future career choice. Confirming our prediction, there was significant congruence between the reasons why students chose to become a speech and language therapist and what they foresaw as being important for continuing an SLT career ( $\chi^2 = 17.77$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; see Table 6). Of the 70 participants whose career motivation was driven by humanism, 52.9% believed a humanistic reason would be the most important factor influencing their future career choice. Similarly, one third of the 27 participants whose career choice was driven by an intellectual interest reported that maintaining an intellectual interest was vital for future career decisions. Finally, of the 22 participants who reported a career motivation pertaining to professional issues, 63.6% also foresaw a professional issue being the most important factor influencing their future career choice.

#### CAREER MOTIVATION AND LONGEVITY IN THE PROFESSION

We then sought to determine if there was a relationship between why students enter the profession and how long they predicted they would remain in the workforce practicing as a speech and language therapist.  $\chi^2$  analysis identified a significant relationship ( $\chi^2 = 12.97$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). A small number of participants in all three groups (humanism, intellectual interest, and professional issues) forecast remaining in the profession less than 5 yrs. A greater proportion of students who entered the profession for either an altruistic or intellectual interest believed that they would remain in the profession for the long term (altruistic, 58.5%; intellectual, 53.33%) relative to the medium term

TABLE 4. Reasons That Speech and Language Therapy Students Believed May Prompt Them to Leave the Profession

Reason	Curtin		Total
	City University (London)	University of Technology (Perth)	
Starting a family	9	8	17
Poor state of the health system	13	4	17
Financial reasons	9	5	14
Lack of career progression	6	2	8
Loss of interest	2	6	8
Not being able to work in the desired area	6	1	7
Stress/burnout	2	2	4
Pursuing research interests/ further study	2	2	4
Just wanting a change	0	3	3
Retirement	2	0	2
Total (no. of participants)	51	43	84

TABLE 5. How Participants' Responses to the Questions Pertaining to Career Motivation and Factors Affecting Career Continuation Relate to the Three Broad Categories

Category	Question	
	Career Motivation	Factors Affecting Career Continuation
Altruistic	To help others Interest in people Interest in being of service to the community	Help others
Intellectual	Interest in the study of disease or disability Interest in a specific area	Learn more about disease
Professional	Desire for a professional career Career prospects Job availability	Progress career Earn a comfortable income

(altruistic, 40.24%; intellectual, 43.33%). These proportions were reversed for those who had a career motivation relating to a professional interest (long term, 30.77%; medium term, 53.85%).

### Discussion

The poor level of job retention among speech and language therapists has been linked to high levels of job dissatisfaction.<sup>6,9</sup> One factor known to contribute to job satisfaction is career motivation, in particular, the congruence between one's motivation for entering the profession and their actual experience upon commencement of employment.<sup>11</sup> Little is known about the career motivation of speech and language therapists and the current study sought to fill this research gap by investigating career choice in a large sample of SLT students. Participants (n = 151) came from both the United Kingdom and Australia and were spread across the various years of undergraduate and postgraduate study, thus providing a cross section of students studying for an SLT degree.

Participants reported a wide range of motivations for choosing to become a speech and language therapist. "Helping others" was the most prominent reason students chose to become a speech and language therapist. This finding corroborates suggestions that altruism is a prominent career motivation for individuals who choose SLT as a career.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, however, people are also attracted to SLT due to the unique set of interests encompassed by the profession. Prominent responses included an interest in people, interest in disease/disability, and interest in a specific clinical/subject

area (e.g., voice, cognition, children, linguistics, and so on). Replicating the findings of the smaller study by Smart,<sup>15</sup> a significant percentage of participants in this study (14.5%) reported that the desire for a professional career was important for their choice of pursuing a career in SLT.

There was also large variance in what participants foresaw as being important for their longevity in the profession. The most prominent response by the participants was the continued ability to help others. In line with the findings from studies of ex-clinicians,<sup>4</sup> SLT students also believed that the ability to earn a comfortable income and the opportunity for career progression would be important factors in continuing in the SLT profession. About 10% of participants believed that learning more about disease or disorder was the most important factor.

The most prominent answers to both questions could be combined to form three broad categories relating to altruism, intellectual interests, and professional issues. Drawing on the extensive literature on the relationship between career motivation and job satisfaction,<sup>11</sup> we made a prediction that the career choice of SLT students would have an influence on their future career-related decisions (i.e., deciding whether or not to continue a career as a clinician). In keeping with this prediction, there was a significant relationship between the main reason why students chose to become a speech and language therapist and their belief of what they foresaw as being important in continuing their future SLT career.

There was also an intriguing relationship between career motivation and forecast longevity within the profession.

TABLE 6. Matrix Showing the Congruence between Career Motivation and Factors Influencing Future Career Choice

Career Motivation	Factors Influence Future Career Choice			
	Humanistic	Intellectual	Professional	Total
Humanistic	37 (31.1)	5 (4.2)	28 (23.5)	70 (58.8)
Intellectual	8 (6.7)	9 (7.6)	10 (8.4)	27 (22.7)
Professional	7 (5.9)	1 (0.8)	14 (11.8)	22 (18.5)
Total	52 (43.7)	15 (12.6)	52 (43.7)	119 (100)

Note. Proportions of participants in each cell are shown in parentheses.

The vast majority of participants believed that they would remain in the SLT profession for more than 10 yrs. However, relative to those who had an altruistic or intellectual career motivation, students who reported wanting to become a speech and language therapist for professional reasons tended to forecast that they would remain in the profession for a shorter time. This finding is interesting within the context of what we know about the levels of job satisfaction among speech and language therapists. Poor pay and lack of career progression are often cited by ex-clinicians as reasons why they left the SLT profession.<sup>4</sup> The current data indicate that students who place increased importance on these factors envisage a shorter SLT career. We present three possibilities for this finding. First, students with a "professional" career motivation may already be aware of the professional issues of SLT (i.e., salary and opportunities for career progression) and forecast the amount of time that they would be happy working in such an environment. Second, students with a professional career motivation may be more ambitious than other students and envisage a career move to a higher-level bureaucratic position. Third, it is possible that students enter the course with a specific motivation but this may change when entering a workforce that is governed by a professional hierarchy. For many students, life-stage changes following the completion of a university degree, and they may be motivated more by their increasing levels of fiscal responsibility. These changes may go some way to account for the apparent discrepancy between the students' expectations reported here and the reality of poor job retention rates.

It is important to note that we did not find any evidence that, before beginning a career as a speech and language therapist, individuals foresaw SLT as a short-term career. Previous research has suggested that there are a significant number of therapists leaving the profession after gaining 5 to 10 yrs of experience.<sup>2</sup> The discrepancy is particularly noteworthy because it suggests that there may be some mismatch between the professional expectations of a student and the reality of what is experienced as a practitioner. This idea could be explored by future research using longitudinal analysis of career motivations and career paths. Such a study would provide important additional information about a professional cohort as it matures and develops.

The data presented here indicate that the career motivation of the significant majority of SLT students can be summarized in three broad categories relating to altruism, intellectual interests, and professional issues. These three areas are linked to what students believe are important for their future career and thus could be seen as important areas to address to increase the level of job satisfaction (and, thus, increase the rate of job retention) within the SLT profession. We propose two ways to address this. First, students could be educated about the realities of SLT work. While work experience is often necessary to gain a place on SLT courses, students may still not have a clear understanding of the realities of SLT work. Providing students with a realis-

tic job preview (especially factors relating to altruistic, intellectual, and professional interests) may prove to be a good tool in preparing students for their future clinical career.<sup>19</sup> Second, the SLT profession could make an explicit effort to reinforce students' career motivation during clinical practice. Byng et al.,<sup>9</sup> for example, believe that altruism can be promoted within the SLT profession by making values, in particular the desire to help others, an explicit focus of SLT practice. Similarly, the findings indicate a clear need for professional bodies to continue advocating for better working conditions, greater pay, and more opportunities for career progression.

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