



# Speech and Language Therapy Career Choice Factsheet

## Background

This study forms part of a wider project between Health Education England and the University of Winchester exploring Allied Health Professions (AHP) career choices.

An online questionnaire was disseminated to current AHP students in England (undergraduate and pre-registration postgraduate) for four weeks between February and March 2021. The aim was to explore and understand key motivations, sources of influence and barriers to choosing their specific profession.

The information and findings from the questionnaire will be shared via profession specific factsheets to help shape targeted careers information and guidance. This factsheet focuses on speech and language therapy (SLT) as a career of choice.

## Speech and Language Therapy Student Population in England

In 2020/2021 there were approximately 2,645 students active on speech and language therapy courses in England. In 2020/21 1060 students started on an SLT course in England;

## Survey sample

- 122 speech and language therapy students completed the questionnaire. It should be acknowledged that this represents only 4.6% of the student population in 2020/2021.
- 94.3% of participants (n = 115) were female and 5.7% (n = 7) were male.
- This finding is similar to the number of speech and language therapy students in 2019/20 in the UK where female students accounted for 96% and male students, 4% (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021).

## Ethnicity

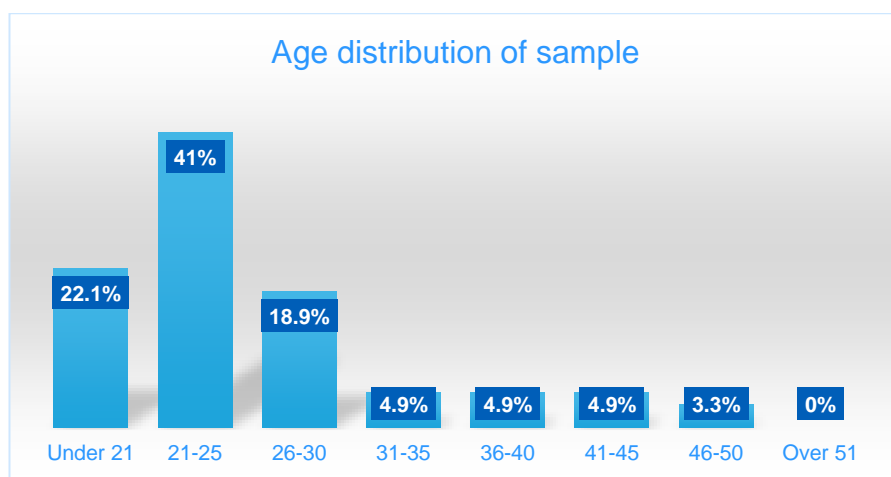
Ethnicity (Source: gov.uk)	Percentage of sample
White background	78.7% (n = 96)
Asian background	9.9% (n = 12)
Black, African and Caribbean background	4.9% (n = 6)
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	4.9% (n = 6)
Other	1.6% (n = 2)
Arab background	0%

## Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet

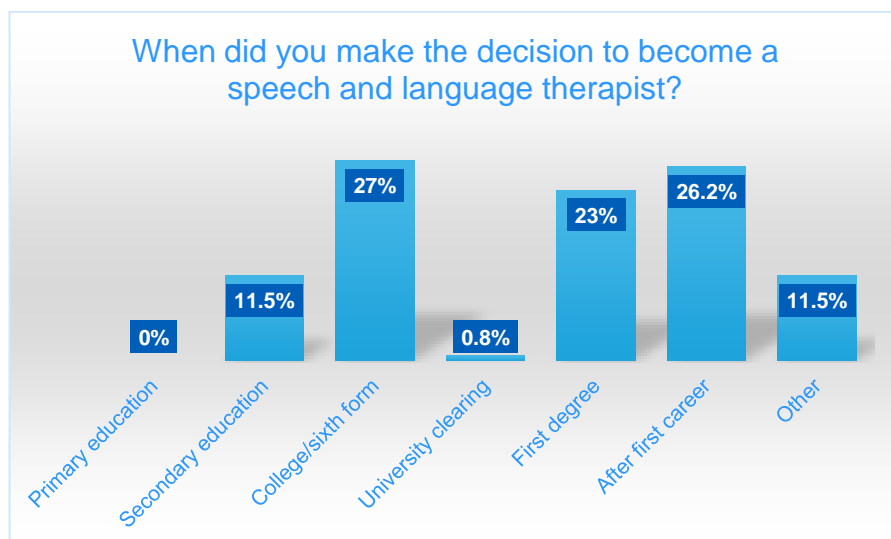
- Ethnicity figures from the questionnaire are summarised in the table above. These findings are similar to the findings of the HESA for 2019/20 relating to speech and language therapy students in the UK: 75% of students had a white background and 9% had an Asian background (HESA, 2021).

### Age and stage at which participants made the decision to become a speech and language therapist

- In our sample, 36.9% of students (n = 45) were over 25 years of age at the time of the survey.
- This finding is similar to that of the Office for Students (2019) who found that in 2016-17, 33% of new speech and language therapy undergraduate students in England were aged over 25.



- Of the sample, 26.2% chose to become speech and language therapists after their first career. 38.5% (n = 47) of the sample had chosen speech and language therapy during their school/college education.
- It was noticeable that 23% of participants chose to become speech and language therapists during their first degree.

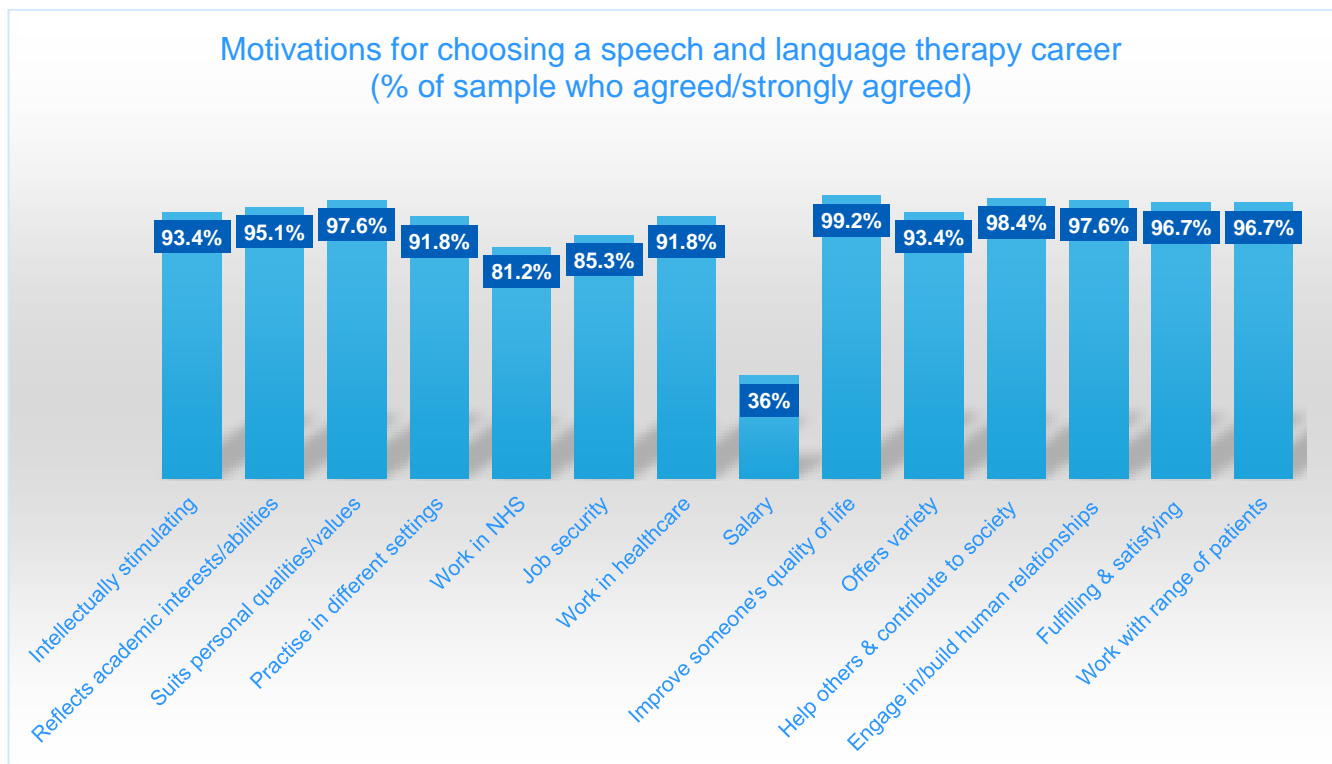


# Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet

## Motivations

Participants were asked to what extent different motivations impacted their speech and language therapy career choice.

- Choosing a career 'where I can use my skills to improve the quality of life for a patient/service user' was the most popular motivation for choosing speech and language therapy (99.2% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with this statement).
- Most commonly identified motivations are shown in the graph below.
- Across 35 motivations listed in the questionnaire, based on a scoping review and focus groups findings, only eight had less than 50% agreeing/strongly agreeing with the importance of the motivation. Twelve had more than 90% agreeing/strongly agreeing.



- Altruistic reasons had the highest percentages of responses.
- Choosing a profession that is 'intellectually stimulating' and 'reflecting academic interests/abilities' was important for 93.4% and 95.1% of the sample. This finding highlights the importance of career advisors (explored below) having knowledge of speech and language therapy to encourage school/college students to take this career path. In addition, choosing a profession which 'suits my personal qualities/values' (97.6%) means that career advisors should also focus on this aspect of career choice.
- Participants were asked about the influence of the opportunity to work in the public and private sector. The public sector scored noticeably higher: 71.3% to 36.1%. It was also noteworthy that the motivation to work in the NHS was higher than the motivation to work in the 'public sector' more generally: 81.2% to 71.3%. This perhaps is a consequence of the NHS being a better known entity.
- Motivations which emphasise the variety of work involved in speech and language therapy were important for a high number of participants: the 'opportunity to practise in

## Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet

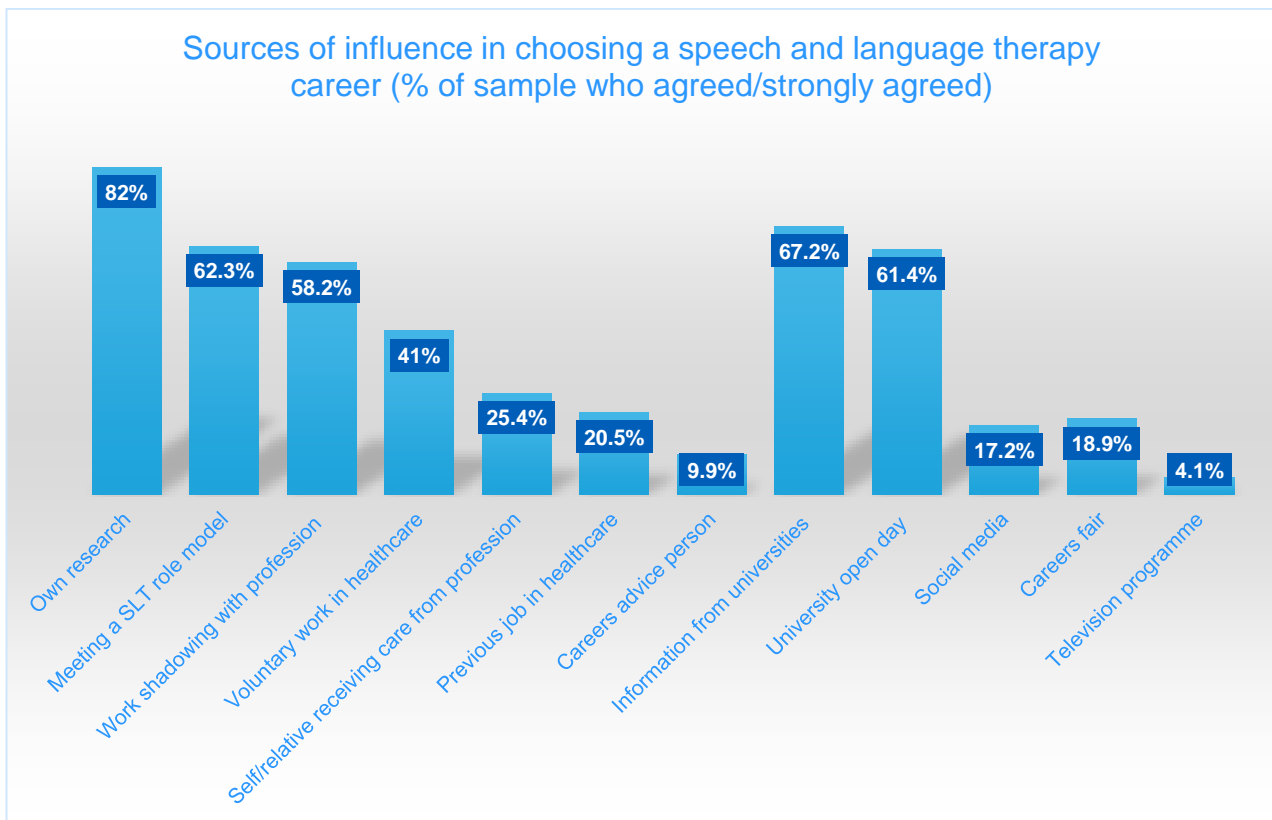
different settings' (91.8%), 'work with a range of patients' (96.7%) and the profession 'offers variety' (93.4%).

### Sources of Influence

Participants were asked about the sources that influenced their career choice.

- The most influential factor was 'conducting my own research' into the profession (82% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed).
- Of the 25 sources of influence, only six scored higher than 50%. All media sources were influential for less than 20% of the sample.
- Selected sources of influence are shown in the graph below. These were selected as they were either the most cited sources or sources which would be utilised better for future recruitment of students.
- Only 25.4% of the sample were influenced by themselves or a relative experiencing care from a speech and language therapist. This highlights the necessity of ensuring the influences of other sources so that there is not a reliance on a chance encounter.
- The low impact of career advisors was noticeable: only 9.9% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with their influence. 38.5% of our sample were choosing speech and language therapy during their school education and 23% during their first university degree. This suggests that students are relying on other sources of influence to learn about the profession.
- The reliance on 'own research' (82%), 'information from universities' (67.2%) and 'university open day' (61.4%) emphasises the importance of these sources of information in promoting the profession and presenting accurate representations of what the role involves.
- Social media being influential for only 17.2% of the sample highlights that there is still a reliance on other sources of influence for learning about a profession. It also suggests an opportunity to promote the profession more through this platform.

## Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet



### Barriers to entering speech and language therapy

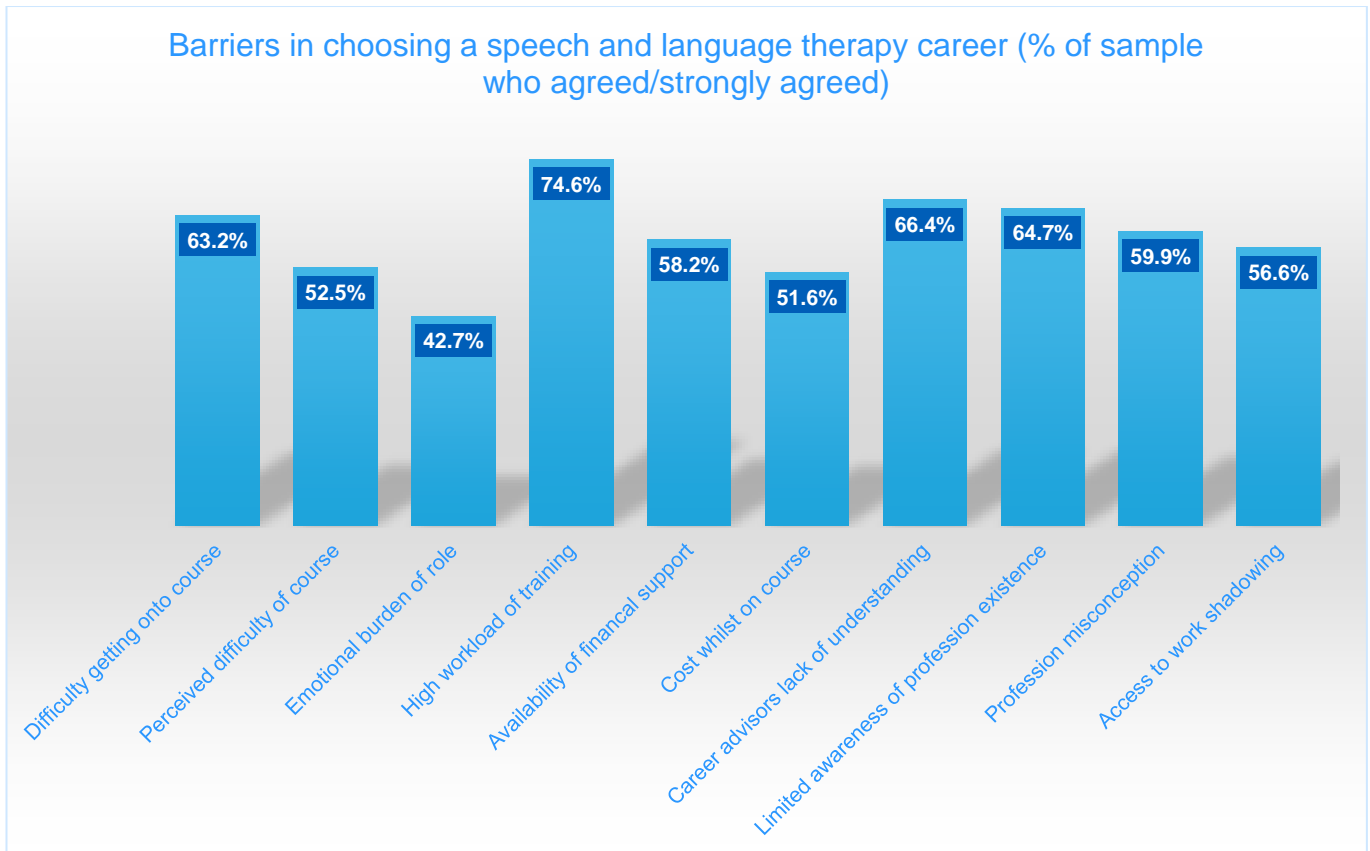
Participants were asked how their career choice had been affected by potential barriers to entering a speech and language therapy career. The participants had recognised barriers and overcame them to choose speech and language therapy as their career.

- The greatest barrier was a perception, before beginning the course, of 'High workload and pressure of training' (74.6% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with this statement).
- Most commonly identified barriers are shown in the graph below.
- There was a wide range in the percentage of the sample agreeing/strongly agreeing with potential barriers: this ranged from 74.6% to 11.5%.
- Barriers such as 'high workload/pressure of training' (74.6%), 'emotional burden of the role' (42.7%) and 'perception of course difficulty' (52.5%) suggests promotion of support available for students undertaking their speech and language therapy course would be beneficial.
- Financial challenges were seen as a barrier to choosing speech and language therapy for over 50% of the sample: 'availability of financial support' (58.2%) and 'Cost of training whilst undertaking the course (e.g. costs of placements)' (51.6%). This suggests that communication surrounding financial support available for speech and language therapy students needs to be strengthened.
- Barriers relating to gaining knowledge of the profession were seen as important by the sample. For example, 'Lack of understanding about the profession from careers advisors

## Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet

at school/college' was seen as a barrier by 66.4% of the sample and 'access to work shadowing' was seen as a barrier by 56.6%.

- Misconceptions around the profession (59.9%) and 'limited awareness of the existence of the profession' (64.7%) suggests that work is still needed to not only promote the profession but also an accurate representation of the role.



### Additional findings

Participants were asked about the public perception of the speech and language therapist role. This was answered by 72% of respondents. The majority of responses to the question around public perception focused on misconceptions about the role.

Participants perceived that there was a lack of understanding about what the role of a speech and language therapist was and especially in relation to the scope of work and range of service users. For example, many participants highlighted the common perception of speech and language therapists only working with children and specifically children with stammers.

Some participants suggested that a poor understanding of the profession meant that it was viewed as less clinical and requiring less knowledge and skill than other healthcare professions.

Misconceptions about the profession included being seen as elocutionists. It was suggested that the title of 'speech and language therapist' meant that certain aspects of the role, for example participants wished to highlight other aspects of the profession including working with people with dysphagia, were not realised by the public.

Participants stated that those who had personal experience with the profession held a positive perception but generally there was seen to be a lack of understanding. This also extended to

## Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet

misunderstandings from other healthcare professionals about the scope and content of the speech and language therapist role.

Although it was suggested that the speech and language therapist role was not well represented in the media, this was seen to have improved owing to Covid-19 and this was beneficial in terms of highlighting the scope of the profession including rehabilitation.

### Key findings

- **Individuals are making the decision to become speech and language therapists at different stages in their life.**
- **Altruistic reasons were the key motivations for choosing speech and language therapy.**
- **The most important sources of influence came in different forms including personal, marketing and educational. Overall, media sources scored low in terms of influence.**
- **Perceptions of a high workload/pressure of training and understanding of the profession were identified as the key barriers to choosing speech and language therapy.**

### Recommendations

- Altruistic motivations scored exceptionally highly: for example, 99.2% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with choosing speech and language therapy as a profession 'Where I can use my skills to improve the quality of life for a patient/service user'. This shows the **importance of marketing highlighting this aspect of speech and language therapy.**
- Factors relating to the variety of work involved in speech and language therapy were seen as key motivations. However, as highlighted in the public perception of the profession, there is a view of speech and language therapy as being one dimensional. **Therefore promotion of speech and language may benefit from emphasising the scope of work, including work settings and the range of patients.**
- Findings from this study have shown the transformational influence on individuals spending time with speech and language therapists on their decision to study speech and language therapy. Interactions with speech and language therapists, either through work shadowing (58.2%) or meeting a role model of someone in the profession (62.3%) were important sources of influence. This highlights **the important role that qualified speech and language therapists can play as career ambassadors. Qualified speech and language therapists should be helped to recognise their roles as career ambassadors when meeting patients and be given time to market the profession in a work capacity.**
- The key barrier perceived to choosing speech and language therapy was a perception of a 'High workload and pressure of training'. It may therefore be beneficial **when marketing the profession to emphasise a supportive environment when undertaking training.**
- Our findings suggest that **career advisors could be utilised to a greater effect to promote the profession.** Only 9.9% of the sample identified career advisors as a source

## Speech and Language Therapy Career Choices Factsheet

of influence and a 'Lack of understanding about the profession from careers advisors at school/college' was seen as a barrier by 66.4% of the sample.

- Our sample comprised 94.3% female participants with only 5.7% male. 78.7% of the sample were from a white background. Prospective students, such as males or those from minority ethnic groups, may not see themselves represented in the existing workforce and therefore not choose the profession. These findings suggest that **there needs to be further exploration as to how to improve diversity and action taken accordingly to encourage all individuals to choose the profession. For example, through outreach work in primary, secondary schools and colleges.**

### Acknowledgements

This factsheet was produced by Dr Lucy Wallis from the University of Winchester utilising the data responses from the Motivations for choosing an Allied health Profession career questionnaire 2020. Lucy was assisted by Dr Rachel Locke, Dr Lindsey Thiel, Professor Beverley Harden and Carrie Biddle. For more details, please contact Rachel Locke:

[Rachel.Locke@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.Locke@winchester.ac.uk)

### References

Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2021). Diversity in speech and language therapy profession. <https://www.rcslt.org/members/speech-and-language-therapy/careers-promotion-and-diversity/careers-fast-facts/#section-0>.

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