

Special report: careers and diversity

As the RCSLT launches a new programme of work aimed at diversifying the profession and raising awareness of speech and language therapy as a career choice, *Bulletin* caught up with some of those who took part in the recent diversity workshop at RCSLT HQ



Marian McCormick, principal lecturer, Canterbury Christ Church University and University of Greenwich; keynote speaker at the workshop

The themes of recruitment and diversity have been central topics for research, action and debate within the profession for more than 10 years. The RCSLT's workshop on diversifying the profession, which took place in June, was an important next step, with representatives attending from across the profession to collectively address the challenge of how to raise awareness of speech and language therapy as a career choice for young people, and to explore the reasons why the profession does not reflect the diversity of the populations it serves. The importance of these issues was reflected in the volume of requests to attend the event and contribute towards finding solutions.

Background

In my own career, I have been involved in the selection, recruitment and teaching on speech and language therapy pre-registration programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels for more than 12 years. Wider access to speech and language therapy as a career is something that I feel very passionate

about. As part of a team, I have welcomed applicants from diverse backgrounds onto our programmes at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Greenwich and helped to support them through their pre-registration education, practice placements and transition to work, but there have often been challenges to overcome. Happily, most of the students have achieved their goal of qualification, and the narratives and experiences they have drawn on from meeting those challenges have also served to inform and enrich the learning experience for the wider student body, as well as the staff.

At the workshop, my role was to explore some of the reasons why speech and language therapy is little known as a profession among young people, and to stimulate discussion around how we might increase recognition and understanding of speech and language therapy as a career choice.

Understanding

When it comes to understanding the changing needs and expectations of the younger population who are set to become our students and colleagues, the most established areas of research can be drawn from the marketing and business worlds. Three themes that emerged from this



literature provided a context for discussions on the day and opened up alternative ways of thinking about specific actions we could take to enhance perception and increase understanding of our profession among the young. The first was to move away from the



“ As one of only five male students on the MSc Speech and Language therapy course at City, University of London, I was keen to explore why so few men join the profession. The diversity workshop not only gave me a chance to share my own experiences, but allowed us to discuss strategies aimed at improving awareness of the scientific and medical underpinnings of our role as healthcare professionals, enabling others to recognise speech and language therapy as a viable and rewarding profession, no matter what their gender, ethnic identity or social class. I'm proud to have been a part of the day and look forward to seeing the positive influence this has on future generations of SLTs. **”**

James Smithson, MSc student
@SLTSmithson



to ask ourselves:

- What is the message or image we want to present about our profession?
- What is the most effective way of getting this message across to wider, more diverse groups of people for whom speech and language therapy may provide an exciting and fulfilling career choice?

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**Berenice Napier,
RCSLT policy adviser**

What a day! From its outset, the RCSLT's London office was positively buzzing with conversation, debate, challenges and questions. Those who attended came along with the aim of helping to improve diversity within the profession and increase the appeal of speech and language therapy as a career choice to the next generation, and their passion was palpable.

Helping to frame our discussions was an introductory keynote from Marian McCormick (see opposite), who spoke about the most effective ways to promote the profession to those born between 1995 and 2010, otherwise known as Generation Z (spoiler: shorter attention spans means you have about eight seconds to hook them in, meaning we need to be smarter in how we promote the profession as a career choice to potential students).

The RCSLT also shared its understanding of the make-up of the current student SLT population, which is slightly more diverse than in the profession as a whole, but at the margins only and not in line with that of the wider student population (you can find gender, ethnicity and socio-economic data in our presentation from the day at:

bit.ly/rcslttowardsadiverseprofession)

Workshop participants responded with openness and honesty, sharing their understanding, expertise and experiences. The incidences of unconscious bias that some members cited were saddening to hear, but more than that, it raised the question as to whether the profession needs to reflect more on how its own culture is experienced by SLTs and service users alike. For example, there was consensus around the need for a more diverse range of images to reflect the profession, rather than the standard 'young white woman with a child' stereotype served up by image banks.

There was also reflection at the workshop on how the needs of diverse communities can be difficult to navigate for both students on placement and qualified SLTs, but it was felt this was something that could potentially be →



“ The RCSLT workshop on diversity was an exciting, refreshing and cathartic experience. Honest, open conversations were had about the lack of diversity in our profession at all levels. The day was full of therapists who felt compelled to exchange very intimate and personal challenges they have faced throughout their journey. Holding an event like this, which can usually make people uncomfortable, is a brave step in the right direction. It is clear that the RCSLT is motivated and keen to tackle issues faced by its members. Leaving the event I was filled with hope and strongly believe that the RCSLT is fully committed to champion change for all therapists. ”

Warda Farah, independent SLT and co-founder of Language Waves

A second theme was the importance of those contextual factors that can exert a huge influence upon potential career choices. When considering a complex topic such as diversity, it can be easy to focus on the personal or individual reasons around the decision to consider speech and language therapy as a career choice. However, the perceptions, aspirations and expectations within communities, and social and cultural groups, also have a large part to play in a young person's decision making. These may link to wider issues of collective identity, shared values, and financial considerations, which together can be powerful external motivators.

The final theme recognised that there are many individuals, communities, and social and cultural groups who have not come in contact with SLTs and know little about the scope of practice and structure of the profession. While there is a need to capitalise further on existing and traditional routes into the profession, there is also an urgent need to seek out new opportunities to work alongside socially and culturally diverse groups so that they can find out about speech and language therapy as a service, and thereby widen the appeal of our profession.

The main take-home message from the day was to do more of what we, as SLTs, are good at—that is, adapting our message to the listener's needs. In doing so, we would do well

idea of accessing the 'gatekeepers' to certain groups, and towards identifying their main 'influencers'. These are individuals who have a certain aspirational capital, or reputation with their audience, and who have built a following with which they actively and regularly engage; usually these individuals have a strong social media or cultural presence, and can both motivate change and affect opinion.

addressed in terms of community awareness initiatives to help address the gap in support that currently exists.

So what happens next? Well, we at the RCSLT need to translate all the energy and enthusiasm we witnessed on the day into driving positive change in the profession, and to do this we are going to need your help. Our plan is to set up different workstreams that will look at the detailed outputs from the day (which you can find at bit.ly/rcslftowardsadiverseprofession), work out which projects to take forward and over what timeframe, then test what works locally and think about whether those projects can work at scale. We will need to be agile in evaluating what is making a difference and what is not, for those areas where we might see a more immediate outcome and those where a longer-term view is required. In the process, the profession will need to make an honest assessment of the changes that are required (culture and perception are not easy things to shift) but I have no doubt about the profession's willingness to try.

To get involved in our diversity work, please sign up to the Basecamp group on careers and diversity by emailing hubs@rcslt.org.

While there is still some distance to go before we will be able to realise the goal of a more diverse profession, as a result of the programme of work that the event helped to inform, we can say with certainty that the collective journey towards it is at least now underway.

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**Lauren Longhurst,
RCSLT research and
development officer**

My role as facilitator at the diversity workshop was easy, thanks to the excitement and enthusiasm of those at my table. Group discussions centred around careers promotion, with all of us drawing on personal experiences. What did we know about speech and language therapy before we decided it was the career path for us? Who helped us to find out more information about it? Where might there have been opportunities to become more informed about speech and language therapy as a career option in our younger lives? All our experiences were broadly in line with research: either we knew someone that had accessed speech and language therapy, or we had family members in healthcare professions, or we had stumbled across it accidentally.

When reflecting on our choices, we were struck by how the expectations of others had

influenced us and might have easily served to put us off. For example, one group member went to a 'high achieving' school and was told they should consider something 'more academic' than speech and language therapy. Another member of the group went to a school where expectations were much lower and was told that they'd never have the skills or knowledge to become an SLT. Careers advice was almost non-existent in some instances, unhelpful in others, while a couple of people around the table were the first in their families to attend university and had to explore degree options without anyone to guide them.

Some discussions were uncomfortable to hear. The path to qualification and beyond seemed fraught with barriers for people from diverse backgrounds. A lack of awareness and support at universities, during placements, and in the workplace was highlighted, and limited routes into the profession were also cited. Existing stereotypes were deemed unhelpful and a lack of diverse role models in career promotional materials was identified as a problem.

Many at our table spent the lunch period reflecting on their own experiences of supporting students and new therapists, and felt buoyed with how they could help to improve the experiences of others in the future.

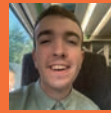
In the afternoon, we moved onto action planning, where our group had so many ideas about how to tackle some of the issues discussed that our table was buried under a sea of post-it notes. Once we began discussing, sorting and prioritising our ideas, we were able to proudly present an action plan that each person in the group felt able to contribute to in some way. Priorities included making speech and language therapy more visible as a profession and improving access to quality careers advice.

One thing that kept coming up again and again was the requirement for the profession to step into the digital age with regards to technology and promotion. Stuffy leaflets in GP surgeries are not cutting it anymore, and we talked about reflecting diversity via 'Instagram influencers', on YouTube, and perhaps converting the successful #mySLTday Twitter campaign into a vlog (video blog) format.

Whilst there was very much a feeling of 'there's so much more to do' in the room, hopefully the enthusiasm will convert into some tangible actions and lead to us taking the next step towards a more diverse profession. ■

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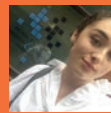
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"I found the discussions and the whole day incredibly insightful! In particular, I took part in the group discussing gender, focusing mainly on getting more men into the profession. Not only do I feel as though I contributed well in all the discussions I took part in, I feel as though what has been said on promoting speech and language therapy to attract a younger audience will be taken forward, with the aim of achieving a diverse profession!"

Jack Griffiths, student SLT

🐦 @JackGrifSLT



"I attended the workshop with gender diversity in mind because, as students, we are all aware of the gender imbalances. I wanted to explore why we are a heavily female profession and what we can do to promote gender equality within our profession. It was a joy to see all the different groups, including ours, come up with solutions and action plans on the path towards a diverse profession. Moving forward, I will be focusing on promoting our profession in a more representative way and spreading awareness to the wider community, not just through schools, to encourage equality and diversity."

Emily Dye, student SLT

🐦 @EmilyDyeSLT



"There is still a lot to be done to promote speech and language therapy as a career to a diverse range of people, such as making sure careers advisers are more skilled-up. It was extremely motivating to share discussions with a range of students, professionals and academics. Learning from individuals about their route into speech and language therapy means that we can adapt, innovate and ultimately safeguard the future of our profession. As SLTs, communication is our superpower. Given our range of skills, I've no doubt we can do this, and I'm excited to see our profession becoming more reflective of the clients we support in the future."

Carolina de Freitas, SLT NQP

🐦 @SLTCarolina

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