

Demand for speech therapists on the rise

Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) has established a new master program to train professional speech therapists to meet the growing demand of people with speech, language and literacy deficiencies as well as swallowing disorders.



Dr. Leung Man-tak, MST program leader and an associate professor at the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies of HKPU.

By CHAI HUA in Hong Kong

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Speech therapy is becoming more and more common in developed countries. In the United States, for instance, there are 43.5 ASHA-certified therapists for every 100,000 residents, according to the American Speech-Language-

Hearing Association (ASHA) survey in 2012.

It has become one of the hottest professions in the country, said the US Bureau of Labor, which published a set of statistics predicting the enrollment of speech therapist will grow by 23 percent from 2010 to 2020 — faster than average for all occupations.

Hong Kong started a local programme to train the profession about 20 years ago and, currently, there are about 400 active full time speech therapists working in the city (5.7 per 100,000 residents). The demand for speech therapy service, however, is still increasing

rapidly, experts say.

To cope with high demand, HKPU in 2013 introduced a new entry level master program — Master of Speech Therapy (MST) — the first of its kind for Hong Kong and the mainland.

“As more speech therapists join the community, they educate the public so that parents know their kids with speech, language and literacy difficulties are not hopeless,” says Dr Leung Man-tak, the program leader and an associate professor at the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies.

“With increased public awareness, more families are seeking professional help. They want to know not only how their children can survive in society, but also how to have a quality life.”

HKPU had spent three years planning the program and welcomed its first 36 students last summer.

The MST program aims to produce graduates who are able to practice as speech therapists in Hong Kong and on the mainland, with local and international professional recognition. Therefore, the curriculum is designed, in a way, to meet the standards for local and international recognition.

“To become a universally qualified speech therapist, students need to have sufficient clinical experience, which can’t be required through large lecture classes. Each supervisor can only handle 3-4 students at a time, and it’s difficult to find experienced professional speech therapist supervisors in Hong Kong.

“One of our advantages is that we have a clinical base to provide students placements in a wide range of communication and swallowing disorders, coupled with the biggest team of experienced professional therapists in Hong Kong,” says Leung.

The clinical base referred to is the Speech Therapy Unit (STU) — a platform the department created a year-and-a-half ago to serve education and research purposes through the provision of speech therapy services.

The unit ensures the program’s clinical curriculum meets international requirements in terms of supervised contact clinical hours and coverage of contents.

“Our philosophy of teaching is PBL (problem-based learning) plus traditional lectures and skills training. This is especially suitable for speech therapy because, normally, the cases we encounter are usually not those classical examples mentioned in textbooks,” Leung adds.

Students will learn foundation courses through traditional lectures in the first year, and PBL will be the main teaching approach in the second year to enhance their integration of learning through courses, theory and practice.

The program also stands out for its strong linguistic study and research support since it’s under the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies.

“Speech therapy originates from Western countries, so most of the literatures and norm data are in English. But speeches are actually culturally bound, and Chinese and English are very different typologically. We are very strong in local linguistic studies and combining them.”

A good grasp of English is a necessary and proficiency in both Cantonese and Mandarin is an advantage for applicants who are interested in the program.

Explaining why Mandarin is an advantage, Leung says “One of our inspirations to set up the program is the need for professional speech therapy and quality facilities on the mainland.”

The department is already cooperating with hospitals and schools in Guangzhou, Foshan and Shenzhen. For long-term development, Leung expects to help more patients and families in the Pearl River Delta area.

The school’s STU currently has more than 300 patients, including some from mainland, who visit the clinic every week for professional help.

A speech therapy center is also on the cards with the aim of training mainland teachers and doctors who are interested in the subject so that they can help local patients on completion of their studies.

“The market is so big and I don’t know how far we can go. I hope more and more people will choose the profession, and our work can be used as an example,” Leung says.



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