

The Practice of Speech-Language Pathology in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Since the first undergraduate program in SLP was established in 1985 at King Saud University, the SLP profession has witnessed remarkable advancement. This is reflected in the increase in the number of programs that offer graduate and postgraduate education, the rise in the number of practicing SLPs and their clinical skills, and the quality of services provided to clients with communication and swallowing disorders. This article will give information about SLP practice in Saudi Arabia, licensing systems, and challenges facing clinicians and the SLP profession.

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The professional who provides assessment and therapy for communication and swallowing disorders is called a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP). Speech-Language Pathology, as a profession, is part of the applied medical specialties and health rehabilitation. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt have well-established SLP professions compared to other Arab countries. In Jordan, there are bachelor's and master's programs, 4- and 2-year programs, respectively, in the field of speech-language pathology. In Egypt, the system is slightly different as SLP is considered a medical profession. In Egypt, MSc and Ph.D. programs are offered to physicians with bachelor's degrees in medicine (the program is called "phoniatics"). Individual bachelor programs exist in some other Arab countries, such as Kuwait, Lebanon, Tunisia, UAE, Morocco, Palestine, and Algeria. Apart from the Saudi SLP programs, all other programs in Arab countries do not require a year of internship when SLP students obtain their bachelor's degrees.

The first SLP bachelor's program in Saudi Arabia was started at King Saud University's (KSU) College of Applied Medical Sciences, as part of the health rehabilitation sciences department, in 1985, and the program name is speech and hearing disorders. The program contains intensive clinical training, followed by a compulsory

internship year, i.e., 12 months of dedicated, supervised clinical training. The trainee spends six months of their internship performing SLP services and the other 6 six months of their internship performing audiology services. Currently (March 2022), 615 males and females have graduated from KSU's Speech and Hearing program.

KSU continued to be the only university offering SLP programs in Saudi Arabia until Dar Al-Hekma University (DAH), a private university in Jeddah, launched an SLP program for female SLPs only. The first batch graduated from DAH in 2010; as of February 2022, 193 female SLPs have completed the program. Graduates are required to spend a year of internship practicing SLP under supervision.

In 2012 Princess Nora University (PNU) launched two separate programs for females: one in SLP and the other one in audiology. Unlike KSU, where students study both professions in one program, PNU's program is devoted to either SLP or Audiology. Students spend the whole year of internship practicing either SLP or audiology. The first batch of SLPs graduated from PNU in 2016, and 79 female SLPs have graduated. Two other SLP programs were launched two years ago, one at King Abdulaziz University in

Jeddah and the other at King Khaled University in Abha. The first group is expected to graduate in 2025.

Regarding postgraduate studies in speech-language pathology, DAH started a two-year M.Sc. program in SLP in 2017, and as of March 2022, 25 female SLPs graduated from this M.Sc. program. This year the program started accepting male students to study with female students. Alfaisal University in Riyadh (A private university) began a two-year M.Sc. program. This program was recently launched in the second half of 2021; the first batch of SLPs is expected to graduate around 2023.

Several Saudi SLPs obtained their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from abroad—mainly from the U.S and the UK and a few from other countries such as Australia, Jordan, and Egypt, as indicated by Saudi Commission for Health Specialties SCFHS records.

In Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS) is the organization that provides health practitioners with their practice licenses in addition to supervising and monitoring their postgraduate clinical training. The Commission monitors medical and paramedical residencies, fellowships, diplomas, and clinical

programs. It also developed a two-year clinical diploma program in communication and swallowing disorders (Alakeel et al., 2017). Clinicians who complete this program are qualified as first specialists in communication and swallowing disorders after completing two years of clinical experience. This clinical diploma accepts SLPs with bachelor's degrees in communication disorders. The program is competency-based and adheres to the CanMEDS framework. It follows the medical model in which the trainee spends the training period rotating between clinical centers (e.g., hospitals and rehabilitation centers). The trainee must master a comprehensive list of clinical skills in different areas of communication and swallowing disorders (e.g., pediatric language disorders, adult language disorders, pediatric speech disorders, adult speech disorders, or eating disorders). This diploma is expected to commence within the next two years.

Licensing of SLPs in Saudi Arabia:

As mentioned earlier, SCFHS is the licensing body in Saudi Arabia for all health practitioners (i.e., physicians, dentists, specialists, and nurses). SLPs are classified under the ranking of specialists along with other applied medical professions such as optometry, respiratory therapy, physical therapy, and clinical dietetics. According to the

SCFHS regulations, an SLP can practice in Saudi Arabia when they have at least a bachelor's degree in the profession (such as speech and hearing– speech pathology – communication disorders) followed by one year of structured, supervised clinical training. National universities that offer the program provide a compulsory 12-month internship (clinical training). SLPs who obtain their degrees from other countries and are willing to practice in Saudi Arabia must attend 12 months of supervised clinical training. Graduates from national government universities get direct certification from SCFHS upon completion of their year of internship. On the other hand, graduates from private national universities or abroad are requested to sit for a certification exam after completing their clinical training. This applies to all undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (i.e., BSc., MSc. or Ph.D.)

The ranking system adopted by SCFHS for applied medical professions, including SLPs, is a specialist ranking for bachelor holders, senior specialists for M.Sc. holders with at least two years of experience, and a consultant for Ph.D. holders with at least three years of experience. According to SCFHS statistics (March 2022), the number of certified SLPs is 879. SLPs with specialist ranking (bachelor's degree holders) represent the

majority, as they are 775. The number of SLPs with senior specialist ranking is 81, and finally, the number of SLPs with consultant ranking is 23.

Unlike most health professions, SLPs can practice in schools. Although the kind of practice in schools and health centers is slightly different, the credentials required by SLPs to practice in both sites are identical. Currently, in Saudi Arabia, SLPs who practice at schools are not required to be certified by SCFHS.

Challenges facing the profession of speech-language pathology

It is worth mentioning strengths before discussing the challenges facing SLP practice in Saudi Arabia. One can notice the massive improvement in the profession of SLP Since its launch in 1985. One university provided undergraduate education in SLP in 1985; currently, there are five universities. The number is expected to increase within the next few years. There was no postgraduate education in 1985, and now two universities provide MSc programs in speech-language pathology. The quality of SLP services has been supported by clinicians who have obtained international graduate and doctoral degrees in SLP.

The Saudi Society of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology (SSSPA) was established in 2005 and represents another strength of the SLP profession; the goals of SSSPA include providing support to SLPs and audiologists and continuing education to them (SSSPA website). This includes organizing conferences, lectures, symposiums, and workshops where national and international professionals conduct these activities. Although King Saud University supervises SSSPA (According to the Saudi system, scientific societies should be linked to a particular university), its efforts cover the whole country. SSSPA has witnessed a remarkable improvement in terms of memberships and achievements since its establishment. It organized hundreds of workshops, lectures, and courses in SLP and audiology, which were addressed to professionals and the community. In addition, the society organized two international conferences, one in 2015 and the other one in 2019. The third conference was held in October 2022 in Riyadh. To provide sources for SLP and audiology, the SSSPA constructed a database for Arabic assessment and therapy materials where clinicians' tools are reviewed and published on the SSSPA website.

This growth in the SLP profession in Saudi Arabia is evident. However several challenges were identified. The first is that subspecialization is not well acknowledged. Very few SLPs show interest in a particular area of communication disorders and devote their clinical practice and research studies to this area. Some health centers offer a form of broad subspecialization as they assign a group SLPs to deal with the pediatric population and another group of SLPs to deal with the adult population. However, most SLPs, especially in private practice, work as generalists, where the SLP provides services to almost all communication disorders.

Another challenge to the profession is dealing with swallowing disorders. Practice with subjects suffering from eating disorders requires an SLP. They have additional theoretical knowledge and clinical skills that will enable them to practice safely in providing assessment and rehabilitation services to clients with swallowing disorders. There are no clear rules and regulations that organize this practice. One can find junior SLPs without sufficient knowledge and clinical training who provide assessment and rehabilitation to subjects with swallowing disorders. This usually occurs at small health centers and private practices.

A few universities in Saudi innovated a new special education subspeciality called speech teachers. This happened ten years ago, and these programs continued to graduate 'speech teachers' until they were stopped three years ago. The aim of establishing these programs was to provide schools with professionals who can perform SLPs' duties. They claim that a speech teacher can provide assessment and therapy to students with speech-language disorders. When programs offered to speech teachers were reviewed by a committee established by SSSPA, it was found that they do not include clinical training. It was also found that faculty teaching in these programs were not SLPs and their degrees were in either special education or psychology.

Moreover, textbooks used for teaching were written in the Arabic language by non-SLPs. Graduates from these programs could not get certification from SCFHS, which made their employment at health facilities impossible, and the only working sites offered to them were in schools. It is believed that their practice with subjects with speech-language disorders is unsafe as they did not receive proper theoretical or clinical training.

Almost all major hospitals in Saudi offer SLP services with at least one SLP employed. However, the number of SLPs working in health centers and schools is low

and does not fulfill their great need. Thus, subjects suffering from communication and swallowing disorders find difficulty obtaining an appointment in government hospitals. One of the challenges that SLPs face is the shortage of vacant positions, despite the dire need for them at these sites.

Finally, as with other Arab countries, there is a shortage the materials for communication disorders constructed for the Arab population (adults and children). This shortage in assessment and therapy materials led practicing SLPs to make their tools. Only a few of these clinicians' constructed tools have been supported by research studies, but most are not. What characterizes these clinician's made tools is their relevance to culture. Materials used in these tools do not conflict with Islamic religious beliefs and are relevant to the Saudi environment and people's world experience. This is also related to the fact that SLP's research studies pertinent to the Arabic language are limited. This is true for both speech as well as language issues.

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