Professional Development for Speech and Language Therapists: The lifelong learning approach of universities

Juliane Mühlhaus1,2 and Kerstin Bilda1

1 Department of Applied Health Sciences, Hochschule für Gesundheit, Bochum, Germany
2 Department of Language and Communication, TU Dortmund University, Dortmund, Germany

Introduction

Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) are obligated to develop their professional skills and to acquire new knowledge, thus delivering the optimal and appropriate level of care to individuals with communication disorders. In Germany, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research is actively engaged in initiatives to open universities for practicing professionals (www.wettbewerb-offene-hochschulen-bmbf.de). For the field of Speech and Language Therapy, stakeholders recognize that it is crucial for practicing clinicians to gain their academic knowledge and skills in order to improve the health care system.

Using this mission as an opportunity, we have the chance to develop a Master program that considers the needs for both therapists and clinics: On the one side, the special needs for practicing SLTs are taken into account. On the other side, the program fulfills the clinical needs across the service continuum of SLTs.

Aim of the program

The aim of the Master program is to provide practitioners with the skills needed to implement EBP in their clinical practice. New learning outcomes should be applied in conjunction with professional practice. The Master program should prepare clinicians for new complex tasks and problem solving by focusing on the transfer of the best evidence into one’s own clinical practice. The Master program should ensure:

• the embedded EBP in each module of the curriculum
• the suitability of materials for self-directed learning (didactic concept and internet-based learning design)
• the quality of the management system (Mentoring administration, scientific experts and mentors)
• the professionalism of the study organization (planning, distribution, organization and implementation)
• the value of a scientific academic degree (acceptance of a course, its academic qualification and the employment opportunities)

Development process

The need for innovative topics within the given field was identified by:

• interviews (see Table 1)
• Constitution of a group of experts in the field (see Figure 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Researchers</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Clinicians</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Health Insurers</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Regulators</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Politicians</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Foundations</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Clinicians</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Young generation</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Media</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Patients</td>
<td>Speech-language therapy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of interviews clustered by stakeholders

Blended-learning approach

Working with full-time professionals, the structure of the Master program is based on a blended-learning approach. This approach combines best practices with specific methods of classroom and distance teaching elements:

• online-supported self-study
• online learning with mentoring support
• project-based learning in a virtual learning environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Introduction (one day)</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Getting started (approx. six weeks)</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Development (approx. two days)</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Theory-practice transfer (TPT) (approx. twelve weeks)</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Evaluation (approx. two days)</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Reflection (approx. two weeks)</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

• Need for orientation for demand and need in the field of SLTs as critical factor for sustainable educational programs at universities for practitioners (Faulstich, Graefner, Bade-Becker und Gorys, 2007)
• Results have an impact on the curriculum process of the Master’s program
• The curriculum of the Master’s program should embrace the clinical demands on SLTs and therefore, for the long term, might improve the healthcare performance

References


The PuG-project is supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research under the Program ‘Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen’. (hsg grant no. FKZ 160211036). We thank Sarah Görlich, Anna Hillebrandt, Maika Lippert and Laura Tuschen for transcription and the team of Prof. Dr. Heinke Röbben for their support of analyzing the interview data.

Contact: juliane.muehlhaus@hs-gesundheit.de

Hochschule für Gesundheit | University of Applied Sciences | Gesundheitscampus 6–8 | D-44801 Bochum | Tel. +49 234 77727-0 | info@hs-gesundheit.de | www.hs-gesundheit.de