



Independent practice pathways

Janice Ooi, a student SLT, reflects on the value of independent placements in a stretched workforce



Clinical placements sit at the heart of speech and language therapy training, yet for many students they are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. As a final-year student SLT, I am currently completing my last clinical placement with the SLT team at TalkAbout Speech Therapy.



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Would the experience match the breadth and depth of my NHS placements?

With vacancy rates in the profession reported to be as high as 21% (RCSLT, 2024), it's understandable that a stretched workforce may struggle to support student placements. Against this backdrop, I felt fortunate to be offered a placement with TalkAbout Speech Therapy. At the same time, I had some apprehensions.

My initial worries stemmed from uncertainty about what to expect in an independent setting. Would the experience match the breadth and depth of my NHS placements? Although some questions stayed with me, I chose to embrace the uncertainty.

Broadening experience

From the outset, my placement with TalkAbout has provided rich and varied learning opportunities. These have

included working across low-secure forensic units, high-dependency mental health rehabilitation settings, telehealth, community services and medico-legal work. I have supported individuals with complex needs, such as schizophrenia, Huntington's disease, traumatic brain injury and stroke.

My placement experiences have helped me develop a wide range of clinical skills, including managing my own caseload independently and working as part of a large SLT team and wider multidisciplinary team. Most importantly, I've been able to make a meaningful difference by empowering individuals with communication

difficulties to stay connected and express themselves in ways that matter to them.

The lasting impact of student placement

As a student, this placement has also enabled me to shape my professional identity as an SLT, refining both my therapeutic approach and clinical voice. Despite my initial worries, this experience has been overwhelmingly positive. I've had the invaluable opportunity to work alongside highly specialist SLTs with years

of experience across a range of sectors, gaining unique insight into areas of practice I hadn't previously encountered. The supportive, team-focused environment at TalkAbout has played a key role in building my confidence, not only as a student but as an emerging professional preparing to step into the workforce.

I'd like to encourage other students to remain open to the learning opportunities that come with clinical placements offered by independent SLTs. My experience at TalkAbout Speech Therapy has demonstrated just how much value these settings can provide in terms of exposure, diverse learning opportunities and development of clinical skills. In return, students bring enthusiasm, fresh perspectives and ideas that can support service delivery and development.

At a time of significant workforce pressure and the need to secure the long-term future of our profession, widening access to placement can play a key role in shaping confident and capable future SLTs (RCSLT, 2023). **B**

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