

Speech and Language Therapy Degree: reflections about school admission criteria in Portugal and worldwide

Elsa Marta Soares¹, Etelvina Lima^{2,3}, Carina Pinto^{2,4}, Débora Franco^{2,4}, Andreia Salvador², Inês Lopes^{2,3}, Sónia Pós de Mina^{2,3}

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to identify the admission processes to the speech and language therapy degree worldwide and characterize how Portuguese speech and language therapists assess the candidates to the speech and language therapy degree. This is a descriptive, exploratory, and cross-sectional study. This study is divided into two studies. Questionnaires were used to collect data in both studies. The data were inserted and analyzed through descriptive statistics (via *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 27) and content analysis. Considering study 1, the results show that there are no school admission criteria performed by a speech and language therapist in most countries. However, in some institutions, there are some specific procedures considering the acceptance of applicants to enter the speech and language therapy degree. Study 2 reveals that Portuguese speech and language therapists use mainly informal assessment procedures when performing school admission criteria. The skills/areas most valued as school admission criteria for accessing the degree are writing and reading skills. Most participants consider it essential to perform the school admission criteria before candidates can access the speech and language therapy degree. There are different procedures worldwide considering the entrance in speech and language therapy degree. If school admission criteria should or should not exist is a matter of debate concerning inclusion and non-discrimination policies. Even in Portugal, where school admission criteria are mandatory, there is a high variability of procedures. All these results state the importance of discussing this matter in more depth, involving all the institutions and entities that formally represent the scientific area of speech and language therapy.

Keywords: graduate education; school admission criteria; speech therapy.

[es] Grado en Logopedia: reflexiones sobre los criterios de admisión a la educación superior en Portugal y en el mundo

Resumen. El propósito de este estudio es identificar los procesos de admisión a la carrera de logopedia en todo el mundo y caracterizar cómo los logopedas portugueses evalúan a los candidatos para la carrera de logopedia. Se trata de una investigación descriptiva, exploratoria y transversal. Este estudio se divide en dos estudios. Se utilizaron cuestionarios para recopilar datos en ambos estudios. Los datos fueron insertados y analizados a través de estadística descriptiva (vía *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) versión 27) y análisis de contenido. Los resultados del estudio 1 muestran la inexistencia de criterios específicos de admisión a la educación superior realizados por un logopeda en la mayoría de los países. Sin embargo, en algunas instituciones existen procedimientos específicos para la aceptación de los postulantes para ingresar en la carrera de logopedia. El estudio 2 revela que los logopedas portugueses utilizan principalmente procedimientos de evaluación informales al realizar los criterios de admisión a la educación superior. Las habilidades/áreas más valoradas como criterios de admisión a la educación superior para acceder al título son la escritura y la lectura. La mayoría de los participantes considera fundamental cumplir los criterios de admisión a la educación superior antes de que los candidatos puedan acceder a la carrera de logopedia. Existen diferentes procedimientos en todo el mundo que consideran el ingreso en el grado de logopedia. La existencia o no de criterios de admisión es una cuestión en debate en relación con las políticas de inclusión y no discriminación. Incluso en Portugal, donde los criterios de admisión son obligatorios, existe una gran variabilidad de procedimientos. Todos estos resultados ponen de manifiesto la importancia de debatir este asunto con mayor profundidad, implicando a todas las instituciones y entidades que representan formalmente el área científica de la logopedia.

Palabras clave: Criterios de admisión; Educación superior; Logopedia.

Sumario: Introduction. Research Questions. Methodology. Results. Discussion. Conclusions. References.

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¹ School of Health Sciences - Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal.
eps@ess.ipp.pt

² School of Health Sciences, Polytechnic of Leiria, Portugal.

³ CiTechCare, Polytechnic of Leiria, Portugal.

⁴ CLUL, Lisboa, Portugal.

Introduction

The school admission criteria to speech and language therapy degree (SLTD) vary across countries. In some countries, there are school admission criteria for admission. In contrast, in others, there are specific procedures to start and/or maintain the professional activity, such as obtaining the American Speech Hearing Association's certificate of clinical competence that requires the applicant to execute a series of activities beyond the presentation of the official graduate transcript (ASHA, 2021). In some countries, there are no school admission criteria to enter the degree (e.g., some universities of United States of America [USA]), and in others starting professional activity only depends on finishing the degree and asking for a professional license(s) (e.g., Portugal).

The code of ethics and deontology of the speech and language therapy profession varies in different countries, considering the specific conditions related to professional performance in each country. However, European Speech and Language Therapy Association (ESLA, 2019) in the European Union managed to identify common points, one of which is: communicating effectively with adequate linguistic competence (level C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language) for the profession (Council of Europe, 2018). This principle, like others, is referred to as a basis of the common ethical duties towards patients (ESLA, 2021). In fact, in the 2nd article of the Portuguese Association of Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) ethical and deontological code (1999), it is clearly stated that “The SLT should have a sufficient level of oral and written skills to be able to exercise the profession” (p.2). Beyond the principles defined in this ethical and deontological code, some formal procedures must be authorized to practice the profession. In Portugal, after the degree and to start the professional career, the SLT must have a professional license issued by the Portuguese Health Ministry and registered in the Portuguese Entity of Health Regulation (Decree No 320/99). However, this license and registration do not require any kind of exam (practical or theoretical) that may assure the competencies of a given person to exercise the profession (like a bar examination). The selection procedures occur before students enter an SLTD. In this way, the Higher Education Institutions in which this degree is available and the *Direção Geral de Ensino Superior* (DGES, the entity that regulates the higher education in Portugal) establish a series of school admission criteria that the candidate must accomplish before entering specific degrees (DGES, deliberation No 336-A/2021).

For admission to SLTD, students must do the school admission criteria from Group A, which is constituted by a medical form that must be filled by a physician who states that the candidate does not have any mental, sensorial, or motor illness that seriously interferes with the functional capacity and interpersonal communication (DGES, deliberation No 336-A/2021). The candidates to SLTD must also deliver a written statement form from an SLT, under the terms defined by the Higher Education Institution and approved by the National Committee for Access to Higher Education, attesting the “*absence of language and/or speech disorder*” in the domain of Portuguese language as it is spoken and written in Portugal (DGES, deliberation No 336-A/2021, p. 312-(12)). Each higher education institution has its own written statement form. These forms differ about which skills (e.g., hearing, orofacial motricity, oral and written language, fluency, articulation, or voice) should be assessed by the SLT (Superior School of Health – Polytechnic of Leiria, 2021; Superior School of Health – University of Aveiro, 2021; Superior School of Health - Alcoitão, 2021; Superior School of Health - Polytechnic Institute of Setubal, 2021). Although all institutions require the written statement form, which confirms the absence of any language and/or speech disorders, none explains how the SLT should assess the candidates (skills and procedures). These differences between institutions and the absence of a uniform procedure that the SLT can follow may raise questions about heterogeneity in the candidate's assessment. Beyond this and having into account the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly article 19^o: *everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers* (United Nations, 1948), it is essential to reflect and question the adequacy and justice of applying school admission criteria. Some of these criteria can exclude students with communication, language, speech, and/or swallowing disorders going against the right to education as stated in the 26th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and referred by Mcleod (2018) and Mazzoni, et al. (2001). It is also important to mention that the role of SLT is to defend communication rights, and these school admission criteria can bring a scope of practice conflict. Once there are no known studies concerning the reality of school admission criteria in SLTD, it is crucial to understand this process to bring some light to this subject.

Research Questions

Research question: What are school admission criteria to access a speech and language therapy degree in Portugal and worldwide?

Study 1

- Identify the school admission criteria to the speech and language therapy degree worldwide.

Study 2

- Characterize how Portuguese speech and language therapists assess the candidates, based on Portuguese's school admission criteria, to the speech and language therapy degree?

Methodology

Study 1

A descriptive, exploratory, and cross-sectional study was conducted. A selection was done of 598 higher education institutions with SLTD and 103 entities associated with the profession. Considering data collection, an online survey was applied, using google forms. This survey was sent by email to entities and institutions related to SLTD and was available for three months. The survey had two questions for sociodemographic characterization and three questions that focused on the aim of the study. During the survey, all ethical procedures were assured, including the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, following Helsinki's World Medical Association Declaration.

Study 2

A descriptive, exploratory, and cross-sectional study was conducted. A questionnaire was disseminated through email and social media and was available for two months. For its validation, all the recommended methodological procedures were applied: authorization of an ethics committee, establishment of a focus group and implementation of two pre-tests. After the first pre-test, it was perceived that more questions had to be added to the survey to obtain the intended data. The application of the second pre-test proved that it was possible to gather the data. The final survey was divided into two parts: the first one related to sociodemographic characterization; the second one with 17 questions directed to the aim of the study (14 closed questions and three open questions). A "snowball" sampling technique was used that allowed the possibility to collect the answers of 307 Portuguese SLTs, from a universe of 2400 SLTs with professional certificates. Three exclusion criteria were used, namely: a) work outside of Portugal; b) have a professional experience of two years or lesser; c) without experience in applying school admission criteria. After applying these criteria, the sample was composed of 159 SLTs, aged between 20 and 59 years old ($M_{age}=29,0$ years), whose professional experience ranges from 3 to 40 years ($M=8,03$ years).

Data analysis – Study 1 and Study 2

Measures were used for the treatment and data analysis based on descriptive statistics (frequency) via *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS), version 27. Procedures, namely the categorical content analysis technique (Bardin, 2018), were also used to analyze the participants' answers.

Results

Results are presented considering the data collected in Study 1 and Study 2.

Study 1

Data were collected in different countries regarding the execution of school admission criteria to enter SLTD (see table 1). From the 701 institutions that were identified, our sample was constituted of 127 answers to the questionnaire. Most participants were Higher Education Institutions (87,4%), although some Professional Associations also answered the survey (12,6%).

Table 1. Participants of Study 1

Participants	Higher Education Institutions			Professional Associations
	Graduation	Master	PhD	
	89 (80.2%)	72 (64.9%)	5 (4.5%)	
Total	111 (87.4%)			16 (12.6%)

Results collected about the question: “In your country, do the applicants for the degree of speech and language therapy have to be assessed by a speech and language therapist before being accepted to the degree?” are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Assessment by an SLT to the candidates by country

Country	Yes (n)	No (n)	Total
Armenia	0	1	1
Australia	0	1	1
Austria	2	1	3
Belgium	0	2	2
Bulgaria	0	1	1
Brazil	0	7	7
Canada	0	3	3
Chile	0	1	1
Colombia	1	0	1
Croatia	1	0	1
Cyprus	1	0	1
Denmark	0	3	3
France	1	0	1
Germany	0	3	3
Greece	1	0	1
Iceland	0	2	2
India	0	1	1
Iran	0	1	1
Ireland	0	3	3
Italy	0	4	4
Kosovo	0	1	1
Latvia	0	1	1
Malta	0	1	1
Netherlands	2	0	2
New Zealand	1	1	2
Norway	0	1	1
Philippines	0	2	2
Puerto Rico	0	1	1
Romania	0	2	2
Russia	0	1	1
Saudi Arabia	1	0	1
Scotland	0	1	1
Singapore	1	0	1
Slovakia	1	0	1
Slovenia	1	0	1
Sweden	0	2	2
South Africa	0	4	4
Spain	0	4	4
Switzerland	0	1	1
Turkey	0	2	2
UK	0	3	3
USA	8	43	51
Total	22 (17.3%)	105 (82.7%)	N=127 (100.0%)

It is possible to perceive that, in most countries, there is no execution of school admission criteria by an SLT considering the acceptance of applicants to enter the SLTD. It is also possible to observe the variability of procedures in the same country since, in Austria, New Zealand, and the USA, there are institutions that apply school admission criteria and others that do not.

Despite not executing school admission criteria, institutions indicate parameters/skills (one or more) considered regarding the application to the SLTD (Table 3).

Table 3. Parameters/skills considered in the application to the SLTD by institutions that do not execute school admission criteria

Parameters/Skills	n	%
Selection based exclusively on academic merit	53	41.7
No reference to parameters/skills considered in the application to the Speech and Language Therapy Degree	4	3.1
Qualitative assessment that does not impede access to the degree	18	14.2
Without execution of school admission criteria because of legal and ethical impediments	16	12.6
Selection based on motivation letter	16	12.6
Informal assessment of communication skills (interview)	14	11
Remediation plan	14	11
Assessment of physical health (all degrees of the institution execute them)	8	6.3
Selection based on <i>Curriculum Vitae</i>	5	3.9
Auditory and speech assessment	10	7.9
School admission criteria just executed in graduated training	2	1.6
Selection based on the reference letter	2	1.6
Exclusion from the degree because of very severe disorders	1	0.8
Language proficiency	1	0.8
Skills honour commitment	1	0.8

Most institutions select the applicants considering their academic merit (50,48%) exclusively. In other institutions, a qualitative assessment does not impede the entrance in the SLTD (15,24%). A remediation plan is implemented when an impairment is found in some of these institutions (11,43%). One institution refers that those students may be excluded if the found impairment is severe. In the absence of an assessment done by SLT, institutions may implement different procedures such as selecting based on a motivational letter (14,9%) and/or on an interview to make an informal communication assessment (11,43%).

Institutions that describe the assessment of candidates regarding the application to the SLTD indicate different parameters/ skills (one or more) that are considered (Table 4).

Table 4. Parameters/skills that are assessed when school admission criteria are considered to the entrance in the SLTD

	n	%
Interview	13	10.2
Cognitive skills	3	2.4
Selection by curriculum	6	4.7
Motivation letter	16	12.6
Communication skills	13	10.2
Speech skills	22	17.3
Language skills	18	14.2
Voice skills	14	11
Fluency skills	9	7.1
Auditive skills	12	9.4
Orofacial motricity skills	2	1.6
Sensorial skills	1	0.8
Ethical behaviour	2	1.6

	n	%
Clinical supervision by a Speech and Language Therapist	1	0.8
Personal appearance	1	0.8
Clinical Essay	1	0.8
Reference letter	13	10.2
Written essay	2	1.6
No information	2	1.6

In countries where school admission criteria are applied, the parameters/skills most frequently assessed are speech (17.3%) and language (14.2%) skills. With a high percentage, it is also considered a motivation letter.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted in Portugal, where an SLT must assess the SLT candidates before being accepted to the degree.

Concerning the instruments used by SLT (Table 5) to assess the candidates, the results indicate that informal assessment (85,5%) procedures are more used than the formal ones (34,0%). However, some SLTs uses formal and informal assessment (32,1%) procedures.

Table 5. Type of assessment used by SLT to assess candidates to SLTD

		Informal Assessment		
		No	Yes	Total
Formal Assessment	No	20 (12.6%)	85 (53.5%)	105 (66.0%)
	Yes	3 (1.9%)	51 (32.1%)	54 (34.0%)
	Total	23 (14.5%)	136 (85.5%)	159 (100.0%)

The results (Table 6) also show that the skills/areas that are most valued as school admission criteria for accessing the degree are writing and reading skills (75,5%), articulation (37,1%) and voice (34,0%) skills. In contrast, the least valued areas are chewing (1,3%), swallowing (1,3%), resonance (1,9%) and semantic (1,9%) skills.

Table 6. Skills/areas that are formal and informal assessed

Skills/Areas	Formal Assessment	Informal Assessment
Communication		15 (9.4%)
Language		39 (24.5%)
Complex language understanding	3 (1.9%)	
Oral language	1 (0.6%)	
Semantic		3 (1.9%)
Morphology & Syntax		6 (3.8%)
Phonology		6 (3.8%)
Pragmatic		49 (30.8%)
Writing & Reading skills	1 (0.6%)	120 (75.5%)
Auditory discrimination	5 (3.1%)	
Articulation	37 (23.3%)	59 (37.1%)
Articulation & Phonology	4 (2.5%)	
Speech		13 (8.2%)
Orofacial motricity	16 (10.1%)	36 (22.6%)
Chewing		2 (1.3%)
Swallowing		2 (1.3%)
Breathing		5 (3.1%)
Voice	1 (0.6%)	54 (34.0%)
Resonance		3 (1.9%)
Fluency		38 (23.9%)

It is important to perceive that 50,3% of the sample do not refer difficulties fulfilling the written statement form concerning the school admission criteria. Problems pointed out by SLT (49,7%) in the school admission criteria process are presented in Table 7. Deciding on the assessment instruments and assessing the candidates' skills are the most challenging aspects mentioned by SLT.

Table 7. SLTs difficulties related to school admission criteria process

	n	%
Decide what to assess	27	17.0%
Decide how to assess	37	23.3%
Decide the assessment instruments	57	35.8%
Decide if the candidate is apt	20	12.6%
Others	4	2.5%

Most of the participants (98,1%) consider it is essential to assess the candidates to SLTD. Despite the difficulties that SLT may or may not have, all of them (100%) consider the importance to standardize procedures.

Discussion

There are several inconsistencies in the process of school admission criteria, both in Portugal and worldwide. This highlights the importance to reflect on several aspects of the admission of candidates to the SLTD.

Study 1

The literature shows that regulations and procedures are established to certify the SLT as a recognized professional by formal entities (e.g., ASHA, 2021; SPA, 2020), but it is not evident the existence of systematized procedures access the SLT degree. For example, in the USA, the opportunity to be a certified SLT relies on specific exams, documents, and proofs. Still, it does not depend on individual biological characteristics of each person (e.g., race, colour, age, gender, creed, disability) and on cultural, social, and economic issues (e.g., religion, marital status, parental status, ancestry, military discharge status and source of income) (ASHA, 2021). In Australia, the certification is required based on a professional standard related to acquired knowledge, code of ethics, legislation, and policies (SPA, 2020). Still, as in the USA, there are no defined procedures considering access to the degree.

It is important to refer that one of the reasons mentioned, in this study, for the non-execution of school admission criteria is related to legal and ethical aspects (15,24%). The policies of inclusion and non-discrimination influence the debate about the possibility of executing school admission criteria. As stated in point 1 of the 26th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), *technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all based on merit*. It is interesting to perceive that academic merit is one of the parameters/skills considered by 53 of the 127 institutions that participated in this study. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) reinforces the above perspective *reaffirming the right to education of every individual, as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and renewing the pledge made by the world community at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All to ensure that right for all regardless of individual differences*. Beyond that, institutions that also assess other parameters/skills implement a remediation plan for the students (14 of the 127 institutions) when it is necessary to ensure the right to education access.

In the case of institutions that apply school admission criteria, the skills analyzed vary considerably between them. Some choose to assess individuals' skills (e.g., speech, language, and communication skills). In contrast, others opt to consider parameters/skills more related to personal, interpersonal, and motivational skills (e.g., motivation letter, reference letter and interview). Guidelines that regulate the access and/or selection of candidates for the SLTD were not found, which can be why the diversity of parameters/skills was founded.

This study demonstrates that several countries/institutions are aware of the importance of respecting and defending the right to education as stated by Universal Human Rights (United Nations, 1948; UNESCO, 1994). In this institution, candidates for SLTD are not excluded from acquiring knowledge based on disorders or disabilities. This agrees with the role that entities and society have in respecting and dignifying people with any disorders, and more specifically, the SLT's duty to support people with communication disorders (McLeod, 2018). But at the same time, SLT needs to offer quality services, as stated by ESLA's (2019) practice profile.

Therefore, a gap of understanding seems to exist between providing a service of excellence and the skills needed to assure this quality. These reflections raise some questions: why do some institutions consider that people with disorders can attend SLTD, and others consider that these candidates are not eligible?

Maybe entities with legal recognition could contribute to the resolution path considering access to the profession without limiting course attendance. Considering inclusion policies, every student should be admitted, regardless of personal, social, cultural, or biological issues (UNESCO, 2016; Salmi, 2020). It would be necessary for the entities that regulate the profession to construct guidelines that accurately determine the skills to perform the profession.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted in Portugal, where an SLT must assess the candidates for the SLTD before being accepted to the degree. However, no standard form establishes the areas and parameters/skills to evaluate and the tools to use. This condition leads the professionals to assess different parameters/skills in different ways (e.g., Superior School of Health – Polytechnic of Leiria, 2021; Superior School of Health – University of Aveiro, 2021; Superior School of Health - Alcoitão, 2021). As can be verified in this study, there are three different approaches to assess the candidates: formal assessment, informal assessment and both types. In this point, it is important to refer that the results also show that despite having standard instruments available, Portuguese SLT uses more informal than formal assessment. On the one hand, in Portugal, there is still a reduced number of assessment tools that are translated, adapted, and validated to European Portuguese, which can conduct the SLT to use informal assessments. On the other hand, as the assessment procedure is not standardized, there is no demand to apply any specific tool or procedure. Considering this, it seems necessary to reflect on the decision-making process of SLT when choosing the instrument to do the school admission criteria.

The SLT report difficulties in doing the school admission criteria as some of them are not sure about the parameters/skills to assess (17%), how to assess them (23,3%), which tools should they use (35,8%) and at the final decision about if the candidate is apt to enter the degree (12,6%).

The execution of the school admission criteria is demanded by law (Deliberation No. 336-A/2021) that states that the candidate must be assessed by an SLT that declares the absence of language and/or speech disorders and mastery of oral and written Portuguese. These results indicate that SLT might assess reading/writing skills (75,5%) and speech skills (articulation – 37,1%; voice – 34%) in a higher percentage because of what is written in the law. However, results related to language do not converge with this thought as this area is only assessed by 24,5% of the SLTs.

It is very intriguing to perceive that most SLT refer to the fact that they do not assess communication skills. Once communication is one of the main bases of speech and language scope of practice, various reflections can be done concerning these results:

- a) Do SLT consider that assessing language and speech skills assures the assessment of communication skills? Communication skills go beyond language and speech skills, so communication assessment should target specific aspects.
- b) Since communication skills are so intrinsic to the human condition itself and are consequently used in interactions (DeVito, 2016; Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth, & Hosek, 2017), do SLT have overconfidence in detecting difficulties in communication skills, just by observing the person (and not considering this as a formal or informal assessment)? Since communication skills are particular and can be challenging to assess, it seems crucial to implement an accurate assessment process.

The dichotomy of being apt or not apt to be accepted in SLTD allows us to reflect on some critical points. The international and national policies about inclusion state that every person has the right to have access to education and knowledge. The policies against discrimination are referred to in study 1 as one of the reasons for not executing the school admission criteria. This does not happen in Portugal, where the students' entrance in the degree can be blocked because of disorders in the assessed areas. The policies in Portugal related to school admission criteria oblige to the delivery of the written statement form from an SLT and a physician that state that the candidate has what is defined as required skills. Despite this, it is interesting that Portugal also advocates inclusive principles in education, standing up for the individualization of the teaching-learning process (Decree No 54/2018). This seems to be a challenging subject once it requires the analysis and deep discussion of aspects related to the different policies and facilitators and barriers in higher education institutions regarding inclusion (Santos et al., 2015; UNESCO, 1998). Considering the results of this study and the difficulties reported by Portuguese SLT concerning the school admission criteria, it seems necessary that higher education institutions and the SLT professional and scientific associations gather to discuss and review procedures and develop a national strategy concerning access to the degree and the profession.

Conclusion

As it was possible to understand in this research, the procedures to access SLTD vary across countries. Therefore, it seems of central importance that the different entities that represent SLT discuss this issue thoroughly and develop guidelines that can bring equity to this process.

The analysis of the Portuguese context in the scope of accessing SLTD highlights the need to define international procedures and reinforces the impact that an SLT bar association can have in this process.

As a limitation to this research, the heterogeneity detected in the different countries in describing the phenomenon studied may have interfered with the terminology used to describe it. In addition, it is considered that despite the time available for the collection of study 1, it was not possible to collect information from all countries that have the SLTD.

Developing a focus group with national and international representatives of higher education institutions and the SLT professional and scientific associations will be essential to deepen data collection and promote solutions to the identified problems.

It is considered that this research raises important aspects that urge to be addressed concerning the admission criteria to the SLTD and SLT profession.

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