# Design and evaluation of a pharmacist tutor training programme

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## Abstract

**Background:** Sessional staff are increasingly involved in health education at universities, although the lack of training and support experienced has been highlighted in recent years. Formal guidelines now exist in Australia for the management, support and training of sessional academic staff, with training programmes gradually becoming established in the majority of Australian universities. There is considerable variation in design, as well as limited data on the evaluation of such programmes in Australia. However, it is recognised that for optimal benefit, the programme should not only be institutionally supported, but also relevant to the needs of the particular discipline.

**Aims:** To design and evaluate a tailored training and support programme for pharmacist tutors who are involved in pharmacy student education at a regional Australian university.

**Method:** A pharmacist tutor needs-analysis study conducted at James Cook University (JCU) informed the design of the training programme. The programme was evaluated using two post-training participant self-evaluation surveys. Simple descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis were used to analyse the survey data.

**Results:** More than 80% of participants were satisfied with the design of the programme in terms of structure, content and duration. The second evaluation survey revealed that significant increases in self-rated tutor confidence and competence had occurred over the first semester of employment, particularly in the perceived problem area of assessment and marking.

**Conclusion:** This study has confirmed the benefits of discipline-specific tutor training, particularly to improve both tutor confidence and competence.

**Keywords**: *Sessional Staff, Pharmacy, Pharmacist Tutor, Training Programme, Programme Evaluation*

## Introduction

With the recent increase in numbers of sessional staff in universities worldwide, together with their significant teaching loads (Percy *et al.,* 2008; Andrew *et al.,* 2010; May *et al*., 2013), it is not surprising that the level of training and support in terms of professional development of sessional staff is currently considered to be inadequate. The 2008 Australian Learning and Teaching Council's (ALTC) RED Report (Percy *et al.,* 2008) reviewed the contribution of sessional teachers to higher education and highlighted the issue of their training. This has prompted the development of a wide range of sessional staff training and support programmes in Australia, from university-wide programmes to discipline-specific programmes. Following on from the RED Report, the Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching (BLASST) framework provided a more systematic evidence-based structure for sessional staff training in Australia, which focused on improving or sustaining teaching quality, as well as providing appropriate sessional staff support (Luzia *et al.,* 2013; Harvey, 2017; Matthews *et al*., 2017).

The potential benefits of training for sessional staff are numerous and include improved confidence in teaching, a better clarification of their roles and responsibilities, improved student engagement and more effective classroom management. The role of assessment, which is challenging for all academics, is often assigned to sessional teachers (Smith & Coombe, 2006; Salamonson *et al.,* 2010; Grainger *et al*., 2016) and training is expected to improve both the quality and consistency of their marking. Studies conducted in Australia and worldwide have demonstrated that training can improve tutor confidence and teaching performance, although the evidence for benefits in terms of student outcomes is limited (Retna, 2005; Kofod *et al.,* 2008; Young & Bippus, 2008; Matthews *et al.,* 2017).

There is little consistency between sessional staff training programmes in Australian universities, which can vary extensively in terms of overall design, including in structure, duration and content. Sessional staff are a diverse group with a variety of roles and responsibilities; therefore it is recognised that there is no one model or approach to training that would be appropriate for all disciplines and institutions. While a whole-of-university

policy framework is a recommended requirement to provide training consistency, it has also been suggested that for additional value, individual programmes be tailored to suit the particular discipline (Herbert *et al.,* 2002; Prpic & Ellis 2002; Smith & Bath 2004).

Evaluation of sessional staff training programmes has been undertaken in a number of ways, including participant self-evaluation, peer-tutor evaluations, student feedback and classroom evaluations (Kofod *et al.*, 2008; Young & Bippus 2008). Due to simplicity and ease of use, participant self-evaluation is the most common method of evaluation of these training programmes. Evaluations have been performed and documented in the United States of America (USA) (Young & Bippus, 2008), the United Kingdom (UK) (Goodlad, 1997) and more recently in several universities around Australia (Kofod *et al.*, 2008; Calma 2013; Matthews *et al.*, 2017). All studies have reported positive outcomes in terms of tutor confidence, improved communication with students and a shift towards a more student-centred learning.

This paper will describe the design and evaluation of a tutor training programme specific for pharmacist tutors at the James Cook University (JCU) in Queensland.

## Methods

### Background

Pharmacist tutors have been involved in the Pharmacy programme at JCU since its inception in 1999 and have been regarded as an integral part of the programme. As currently practicing professionals, their particular roles in the programme are to enhance the link between theory and practice, to maintain the currency of the curriculum and to act as professional role-models for students. In 2012, 21 practising pharmacists were involved in tutoring across the four year Pharmacy degree; this included seventeen female and four male pharmacists. Their involvement has been predominantly in the practical and workshop sessions, together with academic staff members, in the areas of extemporaneous and clinical dispensing, over-the-counter (OTC) counselling and in the marking/assessment of student experiential placement workbooks.

With regard to training and support for pharmacist tutors, a general JCU university-wide sessional staff training programme has been conducted bi-annually since 2005. All JCU sessional staff, including pharmacist tutors, are required to attend this 4.5 hour face-to-face induction and training session on commencement of their employment.

### Programme design

A pre-training needs analysis study was used to inform the design of the tutor training programme (Knott *et al.,* 2017). Factors which were considered in the development of the programme included the structure, staff responsibility, duration and timing, attendance requirements and most importantly the content of the programme. Other factors which also influenced the

design of the programme included the already established JCU management and support programmes, the predicted number of attendees, as well as budgetary and time constraints. University policy requirements as well as documented examples of past and existing training programmes, particularly those in Australian universities, were also considered. JCU Pharmacy has a designated academic pharmacist tutor co-ordinator, who was given the responsibility of developing the programme.

The JCU pharmacist tutor needs-analysis study indicated an overwhelming tutor preference for a discipline-specific training programme. Those who had attended the generic university-wide sessional staff induction felt that it was completely unrelated to their role as a pharmacist tutor, and given the specific skill that their role required, a discipline-based training programme was deemed to be more appropriate (Knott *et al.,* 2017). This was therefore the approach that was taken. Given the small number of pharmacist tutors employed each year and the casual and part-time nature of their employment (some pharmacist tutors being employed for as little as 15 hours per semester), it was felt that rather than having a two tiered approach, it would be more practical to incorporate the general JCU sessional staff training into the pharmacy-specific programme. Liaison with the Director of the JCU Learning, Teaching and Student Engagement (LTSE) Unit was undertaken in order to develop a combined programme, which not only incorporated the standard Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) content requirements, but also the more discipline-specific information relating to the JCU Pharmacy programme. In line with the general JCU sessional staff requirements, it was decided that the completion of this training programme was to be a pre-requisite for ongoing employment.

The first pharmacist tutor training programme was delivered in February 2013 to 14 pharmacist tutors who had been employed for semester one of the 2013 Pharmacy programme. A face-to-face induction programme was conducted, which ran over a five-hour period. The content of the programme is outlined in Table I below:

**Table I: Overview of pharmacist tutor training programme content**

| |
|---|
| ❖ Registration, lunch and welcome from tutor co-ordinator |
| ❖ General  introduction to  Learning and Teaching at JCU |
| ❖ Overview of the Pharmacy program delivered by the Head of Pharmacy |
| ❖ Overview of each area of tutor involvement: |
|     • Extemporaneous dispensing |
|     • Clinical dispensing |
|     • Clinical counselling |
|     • Student placement |
| ❖ Clinical Counselling assessment activity |
| ❖ Outline of the tutor resources and support available at JCU |
| ❖ Conclusion, distribution of attendance certificates |
| ❖ Refreshments for tutors and academic staff |

An important part of the induction programme was the provision of opportunities for social engagement both before and after the programme, which allowed tutors to meet and liaise with academic staff and their fellow tutors prior to commencing duties. In addition to the face-to-face induction session, tutors were provided with a tutor manual and were introduced to the new online community support website that was specifically developed for pharmacist tutors.

*Programme evaluation*

The evaluation of the JCU pharmacist tutor training programme involved the use of two post-training self-evaluation feedback surveys. Prior to the distribution of these two surveys, ethics approval was obtained from the JCU Ethics Committee.

The first survey was distributed to the 14 programme attendees immediately following the training programme, with the aim of determining the initial impressions of tutors on the design of the programme and establishing whether it had adequately met their current training needs.

Tutors were ask to comment on the duration, relevance and usefulness of each section of the programme, with usefulness being graded for the various content areas using a four-point Likert scale. Participants were also invited to comment on what they felt were the best aspects of the programme and any suggested improvements. In the final section of the survey, demographic information was collected and this included previous tutoring experience, previous attendance at a JCU sessional staff training programme and whether they were a past graduate of JCU.

The second survey was distributed by mail in June 2013, to the 12 tutors who had attended the complete training programme. This second survey was posted five months after the first survey and aimed to assess the longer term impact of the training programme on the tutors as well as to identify any issues which may have arisen during the first semester following training, which could be addressed in future training programmes.

Participants were asked to rate their level of competence at three stages during their development as a tutor: prior to the training programme, immediately after the programme, and after one full semester of tutoring. The desired tutor competencies were derived from the original pre-training tutor needs-analysis survey (Knott *et al.,* 2017) and were rated using a five-point Likert scale. These competencies included general confidence levels, confidence in marking and assessment, teaching consistency, teaching knowledge and skills, ability to work effectively in a team, ability to enhance student learning, ability to deal with problem students, and enhancement of career opportunities.

Tutors were also requested to provide feedback regarding any problems that they experienced in their first semester of tutoring and any personal benefits that they had seen since completing the training. Demographic information on participants was also collected in a similar manner to the first survey but tutors were additionally asked to identify their area(s) of tutoring involvement over the previous semester.

*Data analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequency counts and percentages for demographics and for the Likert scale responses to the programme relevance and usefulness, as well as for tutor confidence and competence levels. Thematic analysis was performed on the responses to open questions.

## Results

*Demographics*

Although the voluntary nature of participating in the feedback evaluation survey was clearly stated, all 14 participants in the tutor training programme agreed to complete the post-training survey. Since two participants had not attended the full programme, their feedback was not included in the results, reducing the final response rate for the first survey to 86%.

Participants of the training programme were found to be mainly experienced tutors (75%), with 42% being past JCU graduates. Although attendance at the JCU general sessional staff induction session was considered to be a requirement of ongoing employment, it was noted that two out of the nine experienced tutors had not attended this session.

A response rate of 83% was achieved for the second survey which was administered to tutors five months post-training, after having completed their first semester of tutoring.

The largest area for participation in the Pharmacy degree course was in 'Clinical Dispensing and Counselling' followed closely by 'Extemporaneous Dispensing', with only one tutor being involved in 'Placement Marking'. Three tutors (30%) were involved in more than one area of the pharmacy programme, with one tutor being involved in all of the four areas.

*Programme feedback*

Ninety-two percent of respondents agreed that the duration of the programme was adequate, while one tutor felt that the session was 'a bit too long' and contained information which was not necessary (this tutor was only engaged to tutor in one area of the programme). Eighty-three percent of tutors (10 out of the 12) felt that the information provided was relevant to their current needs, while the remaining two tutors felt that it was partly relevant, mainly due to the fact that they did not tutor across all areas. Below are some selected comments from tutor respondents:

> '*the session provided a good platform for standardised teaching and learning at JCU*'

*'the in-depth presentations and explanations were very helpful'.*

*'very good presentations from all'.*

*'time was well managed' 'no section was too long'.*

Participant ratings of usefulness of the various areas of the training programme are illustrated below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Tutor ratings of usefulness of areas of tutor training programme (n=12)**



**Area of training**
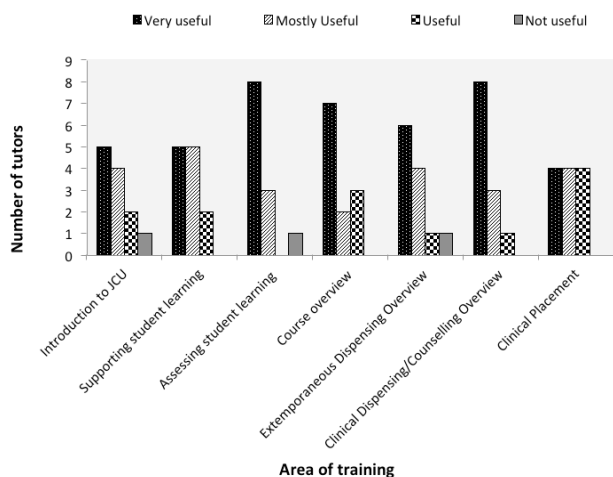
Participants found that the two most useful sections of the training programme were 'Assessing student learning' and 'Clinical Dispensing and Counselling', both of which were rated as either very useful or mostly useful by 11 out of the 12 tutors (96%). The 'Extemporaneous Dispensing' section and the 'Pharmacy Course Overview' were also rated by the majority of tutors as very useful (83%) or mostly useful (75%).

It was noted that those tutors who were new to JCU rated all sections of the programme overall more highly than past tutors. As you would also expect, there was a tendency for tutors to rate more highly those sections which related more to their allocated tutoring areas. For example, one tutor, who was involved only in 'OTC Counselling' rated this section of the programme as very useful and other sections as not useful.

There were minimal problems experienced by tutors during the first semester post-training, although several tutors had minor issues with difficult or unmotivated students. Benefits of the training programme highlighted by tutors after the first semester included increased confidence levels, improved teaching ability, updated knowledge and improved networking opportunities.

*Best aspects of the programme*

Tutor responses regarding the best aspects of the training programme were evaluated using thematic analysis, with

five main themes identified. These themes, along with some selected tutor comments are included in Table II below.

**Table II: Thematic analysis of tutor comments about the best aspects of the training programme (n =12)**

| |
|---|
| 1.  **Interaction:** Several tutors commented on the benefit of meeting and interacting with not only other tutors, but also staff from the Discipline of Pharmacy. *'Meeting and interacting with other tutors…….'*  [Tutor 1] *'……meeting all the tutors/staff.'* [Tutor 3] *'The introduction to the staff and school (discipline) was very useful for a first time JCU tutor'* [Tutor 4] |
| 2.  **Tutor roles and expectations**: Tutors found that the training programme had assisted in clarifying their roles and what is expected of them by the Discipline. *'It gave a good idea of what you will be doing and what is expected of you'* [Tutor 2] *'Having a standardised teaching and learning protocol is very helpful'* [Tutor 4] *'Areas that were directly appropriate to my expected position as a tutor e.g. how to mark students on their performance and give feedback …..'* [Tutor 9] |
| 3.  **Tutor acknowledgement**: Several tutors who had previously tutored into the pharmacy programme commented on the benefit of the training programme in acknowledging tutors as an important part of both the Discipline of Pharmacy as well as the whole university. *'…..having tutors acknowledged as important part of pharmacy programme'* [Tutor 3] *'The information about JCU requirements for sessional staff was important as I have never felt part of JCU, only the pharmacy department'* [Tutor 6] *'Intro from [Director - TLD] made me feel like I am a staff member of JCU, not a helper..'* [Tutor 10] |
| 4.  **Provision of Information:** Various information areas were highlighted by participants as being useful. *'The overview of the course was also important as again I felt more part of the actual course and not just my subjects. It helped to tie things together'* [Tutor 6] *'The introduction to the values of JCU and the student assessment sections were very useful to know. The overviews delivered by [all the pharmacy staff] were very useful regarding preparation and the roles tutors have to play'* [Tutor 7] *'…..Quick overview by [extemporaneous dispensing supervisor] was also good as it will prompt some 'at home prep work'* [Tutor 9] *'Assessing students in clinical role-play, placement activity marking and process'* [Tutor 10] |
| 5.  **Tutor support**: Various support measures available were highlighted by the training programme participants as being useful. *'……. printed support material'* [Tutor 1] *'Highlighting issues/problems likely to be encountered by tutors …….'* [Tutor 3] |

In addition to the above themes, comments from one experienced tutor were that it would have been good to have this programme previously (*i.e,.* when they first commenced as a tutor) and that it was good to have the information as one combined training session rather than a general JCU training followed by a pharmacy specific session.

*Ratings of competence*

Eight areas of their competency were self-rated by tutor participants prior to the programme, immediately after the programme and after one full semester. The results were collated and an average rating was calculated at each of the three stages for each of the eight areas of competence. The results are provided in Table III.

**Table III: Tutor training programme - Participant average ratings of competence (n=10)**

| Tutor competence | Prior to training | Immediately after training | After one full semester |
|---|---|---|---|
| General confidence level | 3.6 | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| Confidence in marking and assessment | 3.1 | 3.9 | 4.3 |
| Teaching consistency | 3.1 | 3.8 | 4.0 |
| Teaching knowledge and skills | 3.6 | 4.0 | 4.0 |
| Ability to work effectively in a team | 4.1 | 4.4 | 4.4 |
| Ability to enhance student learning | 3.3 | 3.6 | 4.0 |
| Ability to deal with problem students | 2.7 | 3.2 | 3.7 |
| Enhancement of career opportunities | 2.8 | 3.5 | 3.8 |

**Ratings**: 1. Unsure;  2. Poor;  3. Average;  4. Good;  5. Very Good

Initial competence prior to training was between average and good (3 to 4) in most areas, while competency ratings after one full semester of tutoring were mostly between good and very good (4 to 5). Prior to training, the area in which tutors felt least competent was in their ability to deal with problem students, with overall tutor competence in this area being poor to average (2.7). In the areas of 'marking and assessment' and 'teaching consistency', overall tutor ratings were between average and good (both 3.1). The area in which tutors felt most competent prior to training was in their ability to work as a team, which was rated overall as good to very good (4.1). This result is not surprising as pharmacists are accustomed to working in teams in both community and hospital pharmacy environments as well as with their increasing roles in areas such as professional pharmacy

services, hospital specialty teams, general practice clinics and other multidisciplinary teams (Ackerman, 2010; Van *et al.,* 2011; Mak *et al.,* 2012).

While tutors rated the management of problem students initially as a low to average area of competence (2.7), the rating of their competence increased quite significantly both immediately after the training programme as well as after one full semester (now 3.7 - average to good). The least significant overall change was in the tutor's ability to work effectively in a team, which was the area that tutors initially felt most competent.

*Suggested improvements*

As improvements for future programmes, the following suggestions were made by participants:

· Further information on the completion of batch sheets in extemporaneous dispensing

· Advice on how to deal with problem students

· More opportunities for interaction and discussion

· Perhaps some training in presentation skills

· Better use of the online website and discussion forum

**Discussion**

The feedback evaluation of the pharmacy specific tutor training programme revealed highly positive results overall, with the majority of tutor participants finding that the design of the programme was appropriate for their current needs. The most useful areas of the programme were thought to be the sections on 'Assessing Student Learning' and 'Clinical Dispensing and Counselling'. With assessment and marking being highlighted as an area for concern in the literature (Smith & Coombe, 2006; Salamonson *et al.,* 2010; Grainger *et al.,* 2016; Richards *et al.,* 2017), it was encouraging to see that this section was found to be one of the most useful section of the programme, indicating that the information provided was felt to be relevant and that the programme had succeeded to some degree in addressing this problem area. With at least 75% of respondents being involved in either clinical dispensing or counselling, it was expected that this section of the programme would be regarded as one of the most useful areas of the programme. These areas are also an everyday part of pharmacy practice and as such, it is not surprising that tutors are interested in teaching 'what they do'.

As you would expect, the new tutors rated all sections overall more highly in terms of usefulness than the experienced tutors. Studies in the literature support this belief that new tutors would find a training programme more helpful than those with teaching experience (Stewart *et al.,* 2004; Young & Bippus 2008).

The themes of interaction, role clarification and tutor acknowledgement were identified as important benefits of the training programme. The opportunity to meet and interact with other tutors and academic staff was thought

to be an important contributing factor to the integration of tutors into their new role. Being able to talk to other tutors, both new and experienced, can help to allay any initial concerns they may have about tutoring and the sharing of experiences can make them feel that they are not alone and enable a smoother transition into their tutoring role; this is supported by evidence in the literature (Herbert *et al.*, 2002; Kift, 2002; Stewart *et al.,* 2004). Meeting and interacting with academic staff, particularly those who they will be working with in the future, may also put the tutor more at ease and assist with clarification of their role in the teaching team and expectations of staff within the discipline.

The contribution of sessional staff in universities has long been thought of as under recognised and undervalued with sessional staff often feeling marginalised and not included in the organisational culture of the university (Kimber, 2003; Anderson, 2007; Davis *et al.*, 2009; Ryan *et al.*, 2013). The Pharmacy tutor training programme therefore has addressed this issue and played an important role in recognising and acknowledging tutors and facilitating their integration into both the discipline and the University.

The inclusion of a counselling assessment activity in the training programme was very well received, with this section allowing for interaction and discussion among programme participants and presenters. Results from programme evaluations in the literature report positive feedback on tutor participation and interaction within training programmes in activities such as role-plays and simulations (Goodlad, 1997; Kift. 2002; Young & Bippus, 2008).

There was considerable variation in participant opinions about the best content areas of the programme, with each of the content areas being highlighted as important by at least one participant. This result may reflect the different backgrounds and experiences of the individual tutors. The overview of the pharmacy programme was considered to be particularly useful in enabling the tutors to understand how the relevant course information is integrated and progressively taught within the degree programme.

With regard to suggested improvements to the programme, although the extemporaneous dispensing session was rated highly in terms of usefulness, the need for further information in this area was highlighted. The JCU needs-analysis study identified that not all pharmacists have up-to-date knowledge in extemporaneous dispensing. This may be partly due to the fact that with extemporaneous dispensing becoming a less common role for pharmacists, the more recent graduates have had less training and practice exposure in this area than the more experienced (less recent) graduates. However, for the less recent graduates, it was also important to have a knowledge of the newer dosage forms and recent compounding practices.

The second survey revealed that the self-rated competencies of tutors in all areas of potential benefit showing significant increases from pre-training to post training. The most significant improvement in tutor competence was in the problem area of assessment and marking. In addition to being the most improved competence immediately after the programme, the area of marking and assessment also showed the most significant overall improvement in ratings of tutor competence. While evidence is lacking, it would be expected that competence in marking and assessment would improve with experience and several studies have indicated that marking consistency improves over time due to increased familiarity with the marking criteria and guidelines (Smith & Coombe, 2006; Grainger, 2016).

Tutors also found that the potential for enhancement of career opportunities was significantly improved by the training programme, changing from 2.8 (poor to average) prior to the programme to 3.8 (average to good) after one full semester of tutoring. This finding correlates with the opinions of tutors in the needs analysis study, that participation in a tutor training programme may lead to increased recognition of their role in the university teaching team and improve prospects for future employment (Knott *et al.,* 2017).

It was noted that the difference in competence levels immediately after training was much more pronounced than after one full semester. For example, Table III illustrates that while tutor ratings of competence in teaching knowledge and skills increased immediately after the training (from 3.6 to 4), there was no further change to this rating at the end of the semester, after the tutors had experienced five months of tutoring. This result supports the belief of professionally trained educators, that although many believe that the best way to learn to teach is to do it, a grounding knowledge of pedagogy is also required to improve teaching ability, particularly for new tutors (Prpic & Ellis, 2002; Kofod, 2008; Persellin & Goodrick, 2010).

Also significant was the fact that in some areas of competence, while competence improved immediately after the programme, it did not continue to improve over the following semester. This indicates that while the programme itself was effective, there is a need for ongoing training and support for tutors in order to maintain and improve teaching skills. This concurs with the literature, which identifies the lack of availability of ongoing training and development opportunities for sessional staff and the need to address this issue (Kift, 2002; Prpic & Ellis, 2002; Ryan *et al.,* 2011; Hamilton, 2013). Ongoing training may be facilitated firstly by the further use of the online delivery format to provide additional information throughout the academic year via the tutor community website. Subject-specific in-class training for tutors may also be provided on an ongoing basis by the relevant subject co-ordinators.

*Limitations of the study*

While sample sizes for both tutor evaluation surveys were small, response rates were high at 86% for the first survey and 83% for the second survey. There was also the potential for bias with the researcher also being the tutor training co-ordinator and being known to the majority of respondents. However, this bias was felt to be

minimal as the training programme aimed to benefit the participants and it was therefore in their best interest to provide honest and genuine responses.

## Conclusions

This JCU Pharmacy specific tutor training programme was designed, delivered and evaluated, with results indicating that the programme provided numerous benefits for the tutors in terms of improvements in both confidence and competence in their tutoring ability. For pharmacy students, while evidence may be lacking, this training programme has the potential to assist in bridging the gap between theory and practice, thus ensuring the currency and relevance of the curriculum and contributing to the development of professionalism. In addition, the benefits of this programme include improved communication and networking between academic staff and pharmacist tutors, thus addressing the issue of marginalisation and acknowledging pharmacist tutors as an integral part of the Pharmacy teaching team.

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