

SHORT REPORT

# Perceptions of academic staff on pharmacist preceptor roles, skills, attributes and training requirements: A qualitative report

Gillian J Knott , Martina F Mylrea , Beverley D Glass 

James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia

## Keywords

Academic staff  
Preceptor attribute  
Preceptor development  
Preceptor role

## Correspondence

Gillian J Knott  
Pharmacy,  
College of Medicine and Dentistry  
James Cook University  
Townsville  
Australia  
gillian.knott@jcu.edu.au

## Abstract

**Objective:** To investigate the perceptions of academic staff at a regional Australian university of the role and ideal skills and attributes of pharmacist preceptors and the requirements for their training. **Methods:** Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted using a purposive sample of academic staff. Opinions on preceptor roles, skills and attributes, and training requirements were sought. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. **Results:** Academic staff perceived the need for training to be based on preceptor core competencies and individual preceptor needs and to be delivered online in a flexible format. Training content was recommended to include an overview of the pharmacy curriculum and university expectations, clinical teaching strategies, managing students, and providing feedback. Mandatory training was recommended to facilitate communication and promote consistency in the placement experience. **Conclusion:** Academic staff have highlighted that flexible, competency-based preceptor training tailored to the individual preceptor will deliver on the university's expectations to optimise the experiential learning of pharmacy students.

## Introduction

Experiential learning is an essential element of the current integrative approach to training pharmacy students across the globe to produce competent and work-ready pharmacy graduates (Wilbur *et al.*, 2018; Brownfield *et al.*, 2021). The integrative approach to the pharmacy curriculum highlights the relationship between academic staff (or faculty educators) and pharmacy preceptors, who play a pivotal role in experiential learning. Academic institutions are primarily responsible for ensuring that when teaching and developing students, both parties work together as a coordinated team with common goals and expectations and that preceptors are appropriately trained for their roles (Wilbur *et al.*, 2018; Brownfield *et al.*, 2021). A 2020 study found that, across the United States (US), preceptor training and development programmes varied significantly

between institutions and did not always meet the required accreditation standards (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020; Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, 2022). Consequently, there has been a recent focus on competency standards for preceptors (Walter *et al.*, 2018; Bartlett *et al.*, 2020; Zeitoun *et al.*, 2020) and a move towards a more collaborative and structured approach to preceptor training and development (Mulherin *et al.*, 2018; Brownfield *et al.*, 2021).

Unlike academic staff, who can focus on their teaching, preceptors are challenged to balance the often significant workload of their clinical practice with their precepting role (Ramani & Leinster, 2008; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2021). Due to the range of experiential placement sites, preceptor roles and responsibilities can also be diverse (Enderby *et al.*, 2021). Considering the increasing need for collaboration between university and the workplace and the lack of documented training programmes for

preceptors of pharmacy students in Australian universities, this study aimed to ascertain the opinions of James Cook University (JCU) academic staff on pharmacist preceptor roles, skills, attributes, and training requirements and inform the development of a training programme for JCU pharmacist preceptors.

## Methods

Students enrolled in the JCU B.Pharm. (Hons) programme spend 600 hours in practice during their degree under the supervision of voluntary pharmacist preceptors, who are coordinated by an administrative placements team and supported by JCU pharmacy academic staff.

This study consisted of a series of nine semi-structured interviews with JCU pharmacy academic staff, chosen using purposive sampling to ensure a broad range of academic staff. Staff were invited to participate in an interview by email and give their opinions on the roles, skills, and attributes of pharmacist preceptors and their training requirements, including the format and content of a training programme and suggested support measures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed using the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview data were initially coded under three broad categories: 1) Preceptor roles, skills, and attributes; 2) Preceptor training and support requirements; and 3) Barriers and enablers to training. Data were reviewed, refined and grouped into themes within these areas and then discussed in the manuscript along with illustrative

quotes. Ethics approval was obtained from the JCU Human Ethics Committee (H8276) to conduct the interviews.

## Results

Interviewees included three tenured pharmacy staff, four pharmacy adjunct staff, and two pharmacy tutors. The interviews lasted 18 minutes on average. All interviewees were registered pharmacists, with five having prior experience as a preceptor. Two of the adjunct staff members were concurrently engaged in precepting activities.

As educators, participants agreed on the essential role of the preceptor in linking theory and practice. Table 1 presents the identified themes, with illustrative quotes on preceptor roles as an educator, role model, mentor, and assessor (Condrey, 2015). It also displays ideal skills and attributes the preceptors should possess, highlighting the importance of good communication, feedback, knowledge, experience, and adaptability. Several staff members emphasised that, as educators, preceptors should be able to determine the current level of student knowledge and skills and facilitate their development throughout their placement. One tenured staff member identified that teaching, assessment, and feedback are not necessarily innate skills and that preceptors may require additional tools and strategies to assist them in these roles. Some staff also had concerns about the preceptor's role in student assessment, suggesting that competency-based assessment would be most suitable for the practice.

**Table 1: Academic staff perceptions of preceptor roles and ideal skills and attributes**

Preceptor roles	
Theme	Quote
Educator	<i>"I think they need to integrate what they learn at university into their field of practice, so they can understand and link the knowledge ..."</i> (Academic Staff 2) <i>"... they'd at least need to have a base skill of being able to determine where a pharmacy student is at, and the steps to progress that student along ..."</i> (Academic Staff 1)
Role model	<i>"I think it's primarily to be a good role model, to provide students with an opportunity exactly what a good professional pharmacist should be ... just be over and above the standard ..."</i> (Academic Staff 8)
Mentor	<i>"In my opinion, a preceptor is a person who provides guidance and mentoring but in doing that, they need to have an ability to develop the student..."</i> (Academic Staff 6)
Assessor	<i>"I sometimes get concerned, just from people I've observed, that they might give a bit more positive feedback than perhaps they really thought the student deserved. Just because, they feel confronted by talking to the student about anything that wasn't ideal..."</i> (Academic Staff 4)

**Table I: Academic staff perceptions of preceptor roles and ideal skills and attributes (Continued)**

Preceptor skills and attributes	
Theme	Quote
Good communication	<i>"... how you communicate with your staff; how you communicate with your patients, and how you communicate with other pharmacist or colleagues, and how you make the interprofessional collaborations as well. So that, those are the things that the students can learn just by observing how the pharmacist is working in that environment."</i> (Academic Staff 7)
Good knowledge and experience	<i>".... obviously, they need to have a very professional outlook in their role and to have some good clinical experience. So that, they're able to provide both a clinical aspect....and a general knowledge of what the pharmacy industry is about."</i> (Academic Staff 3)
Adaptable	<i>"I think that they need to be good teachers in the sense of their communication skills, and I think they should be able to...be problem solvers, in regard to being able to work with students, different types of students."</i> (Academic Staff 5)
Provides feedback	<i>"what's the point of them being the preceptor or having the person on placement if you can't provide the feedback. It should be constructive feedback and pointing out maybe what could have been done better if there were any major concerns"</i> (Academic Staff 9)

Table II includes themes with quotes from academic staff on the format and content of training and preceptor support.

Participants recommended flexible online training as the most practical option, with the proposed programme content including various elements, such as setting university expectations for preceptors, dealing with challenging students, conflict management, providing feedback, student assessment, and teaching skills. Most staff favoured compulsory training for preceptors; a

common suggestion was to incentivise attendance by offering continuing professional development (CPD) points to promote training activities among preceptors. Recommendations for preceptor support included acknowledging the preceptor's role and regular communication with the university. When considering the enablers and barriers to preceptor training, participants agreed that most pharmacists often grapple with time constraints, hindering their ability to undertake training programmes, where the main benefit would lie in standardising the quality of precepting.

**Table II: Academic staff perceptions of training format and content, and preceptor support**

Training format and content, and preceptor support	
Theme	Quote
Online flexible format	<i>"...training online would be an effective way given that we have preceptors spread all over the country and all over the state....and an ability to do that in the preceptor's own time may be of benefit as well...."</i> (Academic Staff 4)
Defining university expectations	<i>"Explaining the differences between the different year levels and what the expectations were on students at different levels as well..."</i> (Academic Staff 6)
Managing students	<i>"...if the student is unmotivated to do anything at their placement, then it becomes very difficult for the preceptor... So, some tools or education on how to handle that situation ..."</i> (Academic Staff 6)
Teaching strategies	<i>"... we're not all teachers, ... I might be a great pharmacist, but I might not necessarily be a good teacher. So we need to give the tools for those preceptors to be able to perform that teaching role for our students."</i> (Academic Staff 1) <i>"I think there is quite a skill to being able to deliver feedback effectively... it's a hard thing to teach ..."</i> (Academic Staff 8)
Preceptor Support	<i>"I think it'd be nice if you were a preceptor to be on some sort of regular, let us say, email or some sort of regular communication that sort of said, "These are the things that are happening in universities with students...."</i> (Academic Staff 3) <i>"A certificate of appreciation, that may be good idea, because some pharmacies display, those kind of things in their waiting areas and those patients also acknowledge that. Like, "This pharmacy supports the placements and trains the students"</i> (Academic Staff 7)

**Discussion**

This study sought to explore the opinions of pharmacy academic staff on preceptor training.

The ideal roles and attributes of preceptors have been investigated from the perspective of both preceptors and students (Sonthisombat, 2008; Chaar et al., 2011; Young et al., 2014; O'Sullivan et al., 2015; Knott et al., 2022a; Knott et al., 2022b); the study results are

aligned with these findings. Identifying preceptor essential roles, skills, and attributes will help generate appropriate preceptor competencies to enhance preceptor development (Vos Chair *et al.*, 2018; Walter *et al.*, 2018; Young *et al.*, 2014).

While academic staff ideally preferred face-to-face contact with preceptors, this approach was not considered practical, and participants recommended an online flexible programme. Live training is usual in the US (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020), with face-to-face interactions thought to be vital in developing meaningful relationships between preceptors; however, live online interactions may be a viable alternative (Vos Chair *et al.*, 2018). The provision of CPD points to incentivise training is typical in existing programmes, and integrating preceptor competencies within this CPD process is recommended (Knott *et al.*, 2020; Brownfield *et al.*, 2021).

Academic staff recognised the need for preceptors to understand the university curriculum and expectations. Similarly, a 2021 study of preceptor needs found that an orientation to the curriculum and learner expectations was essential, noting that it was a specific Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education requirement (Williams *et al.*, 2021). Participants also mentioned the management of challenging or poorly performing students. Conflict management is a well-established concern and a recommended area of development for preceptors (Phillips *et al.*, 2014; Kendrick *et al.*, 2021). Staff identified the lack of preceptor training and experience in teaching, with the literature supporting the need for preceptors to be knowledgeable of teaching strategies to motivate and develop students and effectively deliver feedback (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2021). This study highlighted the lack of clarity around the preceptor's role in assessment and concerns regarding variability in preceptor evaluations, with staff recommending that preceptors undertake performance-based rather than knowledge-based student assessment. Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs) for pharmacy students are considered an effective tool for preceptor evaluation of practice-based activities to promote the development of independent practice (Wilbur *et al.*, 2018).

Academic staff advocated the importance of regular university communication and collaboration with preceptors. A culture of inclusion is essential, and preceptors should be recognised and valued for their contribution to the curriculum (Fejzic *et al.*, 2013; Whalen *et al.*, 2017; Williams *et al.*, 2021).

Insufficient time is a well-known barrier to training (Danielson *et al.*, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2021). However, staff also recognised the importance of quality and

consistency of precepting and thus the requirement for compulsory training. As an additional quality assurance, the literature suggests that students be encouraged to confidentially evaluate preceptor performance to ensure that educational goals are met (Danielson *et al.*, 2015; Brownfield *et al.*, 2021).

### Limitations

Despite the small sample size and being a single university study, where the findings may not reflect the broader academic community, this work presents valuable insights into pharmacist preceptor training requirements from the viewpoint of academic staff. Although this article presents only the perspectives of academic staff to inform the creation of a training programme for preceptors, which may be seen as a limitation, other key stakeholders, particularly preceptors, have been extensively consulted in the design of the preceptor training programme (Knott *et al.*, 2022a; Knott *et al.*, 2022b).

### Conclusion

This study highlighted the crucial requirements for a preceptor training programme from the perspective of academic staff. The areas deemed essential for training encompass teaching strategies, managing problematic students, providing feedback, and understanding university expectations. Fostering engagement and collaboration between academic staff and preceptors will ensure that preceptors feel valued and supported, which, in turn, will result in training initiatives that adequately address preceptor needs and contribute to an improved student placement experience.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Source of funding

The authors did not receive any funding.

### References

Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education. (2022, January). *Self-assessment instrument for the professional degree program of colleges and schools of pharmacy version*

- 2.0 standards 2016. Retrieved March 18, 2023, from <https://www.acpe-accredit.org/pdf/Rubric2016Guidelines20bUpdate2022.pdf>
- Bartlett, A. D., Um, I. S., Luca, E. J., Krass, I., & Schneider, C. R. (2020). Measuring and assessing the competencies of preceptors in health professions: A systematic scoping review. *BMC Medical Education*, *20*(1), 165. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02082-9>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Brownfield, A., Williams, C. R., Cox, C. D., Davis, L. E., Haines, S. L., Rambaran, K. A., Ruble, M., & Smith, M. D. (2021). Moving a national preceptor development platform from design to reality. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *86*(6), 8593. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8593>
- Chaar, B. B., Brien, J., Hanrahan, J., McLachlan, A., Penm, J., & Pont, L. (2011). Experimental education in Australian pharmacy: Preceptors' perspectives. *Pharmacy Education*, *11*(1), 166–171. <https://pharmacyeducation.fip.org/pharmacyeducation/article/view/320>
- Condrey, T. (2015). Implementation of a preceptor training program. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, *46*(10), 462–469. <https://doi.org/10.3928/00220124-20150918-04>
- Danielson, J., Craddick, K., Eccles, D., Kwasnik, A., & O'Sullivan, T. A. (2015). A qualitative analysis of common concerns about challenges facing pharmacy experiential education programs. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *79*(1), 06. <https://doi.org/10.5688%2Fajpe79106>
- Enderby, C. Y., Davis, S., Sincak, C. A., & Shaw, B. (2021). Health-system pharmacist preceptor development and educational needs for accessible resources. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, *13*(9), 1110–1120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2021.06.042>
- Fejzic, J., Henderson, A., Smith, N. A., & Mey, A. (2013). Community pharmacy experiential placement: Comparison of preceptor and student perspectives in an Australian postgraduate pharmacy programme. *Pharmacy Education*, *13*(1), 15–21. <https://pharmacyeducation.fip.org/pharmacyeducation/article/view/218>
- Kendrick, J., Beauchesne, A., Lee, Y. V., & Carr, R. (2021). Conflict between pharmacy preceptors and pharmacy learners in experiential education. *Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, *74*(1), 36–42. <https://doi.org/10.4212/cjhp.v74i1.3044>
- Knott, G. J., Mylrea, M. F., & Glass, B. D. (2020). A scoping review of pharmacy preceptor training programs. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *84*(10), 1322–1334. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8039>
- Knott, G. J., Mylrea, M. F., & Glass, B. D. (2022a). What do preceptors want? A mixed methods study exploring pharmacist preceptor perceptions of their training and support needs at a regional Australian University. *Pharmacy Education*, *22*(4), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.46542/pe.2022.224.718>
- Knott, G. J., Mylrea, M. F., & Glass, B. D. (2022b). Pharmacy student perceptions of the roles and attributes of pharmacist preceptors in Australia. *Pharmacy*, *10*(6), 169. <https://doi.org/10.3390/pharmacy10060169>
- Mulherin, K., Walter, S., & Cox, C. D. (2018). National preceptor development program (PDP): Influential evidence and theory. The first of a 3-part series. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, *10*(3), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2017.12.002>
- O'Sullivan, T. A., Lau, C., Patel, M., Mac, C., Krueger, J., Danielson, J., & Weber, S. S. (2015). Student-valued measurable teaching behaviors of award-winning pharmacy preceptors. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *79*(10), 151. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7910151>
- O'Sullivan, T. A., Cox, C. D., Darbishire, P., Dinkins, M. M., Johanson, E. L., Joseph, A., & Vos, S. (2020). The status and adequacy of preceptor orientation and development programs in US pharmacy schools. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *84*(2), 7540. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7540>
- Phillips, H., Fuller, P. D., May, J. R., Johnston, S., & Pettit, N. N. (2014). Conflict resolution strategies between preceptor and resident—A case-based scenario. *American Journal of Health System Pharmacy*, *71*(3), 184–186. <https://doi.org/10.2146/ajhp120679>
- Ramani, S., & Leinster, S. (2008). AMEE Guide no. 34: Teaching in the clinical environment. *Medical Teacher*, *30*(4), 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01421590802061613>
- Sonthisombat, P. (2008). Pharmacy student and preceptor perceptions of preceptor teaching behaviors. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *72*(5), 110. <https://doi.org/10.5688%2Fajpe7205110>
- Vos Chair, S. S., Brown, M. M., Cardello, E. A., Dintzner, M. R., MacKinnon III, G. E., Maroyka, E. M., Mbi, P., Park, S., Weaver, K. K., Zeeman, J. M., Bradley-Baker, L. R., & Plaza, C. M. (2018). The report of the 2017-2018 Professional Affairs Standing Committee: The development of the preceptor self-assessment tool for entrustable professional activities for new graduates. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *82*(7), 885–898. <https://doi.org/10.5688/AJPE7162>
- Walter, S., Mulherin, K., & Cox, C. D. (2018). A preceptor competency framework for pharmacists. Part 2 of a 3-part series. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, *10*(3), 402–410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2017.11.018>
- Whalen, K., Aistrope, D. S., Ausili, J., Besinque, K. H., Cardello, E. A., Hritcko, P. M., MacKinnon III, G. E., Maroyka, E., Burke, E. S., Trent, S., & Bradley-Baker, L. R. (2017). The report of the 2016-2017 Professional Affairs Standing Committee: Formally embracing and engaging preceptors in the academy - The time has come. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *81*(9), S16–23. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpeS16>
- Wilbur, K., Wilby, K. J., & Pawluk, S. (2018). Pharmacy preceptor judgments of student performance and behavior during experiential training. *American Journal of*

*Pharmaceutical Education*, **82**(10), 6451.  
<https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe6451>

Williams, C. R, Wolcott, M. D., Minshew, L. M., Bentley, A. B., & Bell, L. (2021). A qualitative preceptor development needs assessment to inform program design and effectiveness. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, **85**(10), 8450. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8450>

Young, S., Vos, S. S., Cantrell, M., & Shaw, R. (2014). Factors associated with students' perception of preceptor excellence. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, **78**(3), 53. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe78353>

Zeitoun, A., Sacre, H., Hallit, S., Zeenny, R. M., Sili, G., & Salameh, P. (2020). Clinical preceptor competencies for a better pharmacy education: A suggested framework for Lebanon. *Journal of Pharmaceutical Policy and Practice*, **13**, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40545-020-00217-3>