

Mock interviews for internships: Improving pharmacy student preparedness using formative assessment

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Abstract

Introduction/context: Formative assessment, also referred to as assessment for learning, has been used in higher education to provide individually tailored feedback to students with the goal of improving current performance.

Aim: To determine whether formative assessment is an effective method for increasing students' odds of obtaining an intern pharmacist position.

Description of assessment method: Student participants were involved in a formative assessment task which involved two simulated mock interviews, one specific for community and one specific for hospital pharmacy. In preparation for the mock pharmacy interviews students received training and support from the university Careers and Employment Service. Training included how to develop their curriculum vitae, write a cover letter and respond appropriately to selection criteria and how to prepare for and interview well. After completion of interviews students received individual formative feedback.

Evaluation: Students were asked to complete two questionnaires to help identify the value of the assessment task. One questionnaire was completed directly after receiving formative feedback, the second after students had applied for actual intern positions approximately eight months after completing the formative assessment task. Most students (8/9) reported the formative assessment task helped them identify their areas of weakness, and allowed them to prepare in such areas prior to their actual interviews. Most students (8/9) indicated that the feedback helped them perform in their actual interviews.

Future implementation: Students valued the formative assessment task. There is scope to embed this assessment task into the undergraduate pharmacy curricula. Collaboration with the university Careers and Employment Service helped enhance student preparedness.

Keywords: *formative assessment, simulated mock interview, pharmacy education*

Introduction

Upon completion of a pharmacy degree (bachelor, or graduate-entry masters) in Australia, graduates are required to complete a period of supervised practice (1824 hours), known as an internship, to be eligible for general pharmacist registration (Pharmacy Board of Australia, 2013). Graduates tend to seek internships in the sector they envisage will be their venue of practice into the future. A graduate wanting to own or manage a community pharmacy seeks a community pharmacy internship, a graduate wanting to specialise in clinical pharmacy generally seeks an internship in a hospital pharmacy, while a very small number of graduates seek employment in the industry setting. In recent years the

number of pharmacy graduates looking for intern positions has increased significantly in Australia, from 485 graduates in 1997 to 1905 graduates in 2013 (Australian Pharmacy Council, 2013). This has been partly the result of an increase in the number of pharmacy degree programs, with currently 18 programs offered in 2014, a substantial rise from the six programs offered in 1997 (Marriott *et al.*, 2008), but mostly by a huge increase in places offered by the longer-standing pharmacy schools, and doubling and even tripling of intake by metropolitan schools. This has resulted in increased competition for intern positions in all sectors.

Application for intern positions across pharmacy sectors usually involves the composition of a position specific

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cover letter and professional resume. Preparation of well written cover letter and the ability to market one's self via a resume is known to increase one's chance of being invited for a formal interview (Shakoor, 2001). While interviews provide only a snapshot of an applicant's ability, an applicant's interview performance and the impression they leave, may lead to a job offer or job rejection (Arvey & Campion, 1982). Hence developing the knowledge and skills to construct a cover letter, resume and interview well are integral to unlocking future career opportunities and success.

University degrees aim to provide students with the knowledge, skills and graduate attributes for professional and workplace preparedness (Marriott *et al.*, 2008). Formative assessment is an important tool utilised by academics in higher education to help ensure such preparedness. Formative assessment aims to help the learner develop by providing them with constructive and meaningful feedback which enables them to identify areas for individual improvement, understand expected standards and consolidate learning (Yorke, 2003). The literature indicates that students highly value organised formative assessment and that such formative assessment helps prepare students for future summative assessment (Carroll, 1995; Rolfe & McPherson, 1995).

It can be suggested that formal interviews can be viewed as a summative assessment, as they are generally a mandatory requirement, formal and require the applicant to demonstrate the sum of their knowledge, skills and attitudes at a particular point. Preparing for 'summative' intern interviews through simulated formative interviews within the higher educational setting enables the opportunity for students to be provided with feedback on their interview skills and allows students an opportunity to action or remedy deficiencies. The outcome may be increased preparedness and confidence allowing students to perform better at actual interviews increasing career opportunities. One American study identified that preparing students for actual residency interviews by offering mock pharmacy interviews and faculty feedback increased student preparedness and increased match rates that is, students who participated in the study were more likely to obtain a residency position when compared to the national pharmacy cohort (Koenigsfeld *et al.*, 2012). Further study shows that, curriculum vitae (CV) and interview workshops while poorly attended, were rated as a useful component of an educational program for preparing American pharmacy students for postgraduate employment (Prescott Jr, 2010).

This study aims to investigate if creating a mock internship interview program better prepares and assists pharmacy students in attaining actual internships.

Description of assessment

As part of a formal assessment task, a cohort of 14 final year bachelor of pharmacy students were required to construct a curriculum vitae (CV) and associated cover letter, and undertake an interview for two 'mock

advertised' intern pharmacist positions. One mock position was for a community position; the other was for a clinical or hospital position. Students were provided with a briefing session which covered basic interview skills, how to write a CV and a position specific cover letter prior to the assessment task delivered by the Careers and Employment Service at the university. Students were required to integrate and demonstrate skills, knowledge and attributes they have developed over the degree to complete the formative assessment task successfully.

After submission of mock applications, students participated in two 20 minute mock interview sessions in front of a panel of four. The panel included a registered community pharmacist, registered clinical pharmacist, pharmacologist and the manager for the university careers and employment team. Accordingly, the pharmacy panel was established with experienced representation from the two primary pharmacy sectors in Australia. The mock interviews were conducted prior to the commencement of the Australian intern pharmacist position interview season. Interview questions and associated marking grids were sourced from external stakeholders, one question set from a regional teaching hospital, one question set from a community pharmacy. Both question sets were previously used in 2011 when interviewing potential intern pharmacists. Accordingly, both question sets were validated and simulated what was expected in a real life interview. While marking grids were used to aid formative feedback, the assessment task was not associated with a formal grade.

The aim of the assessment task was to provide students with constructive and meaningful feedback, to enhance learning and help identify knowledge, skills and attributes obtained and potential areas for improvement to become ready for actual internship interviews. Detailed formative feedback on how each student performed during their interviews was provided verbally and in written form at an individual debriefing session, allowing for dialogue between the student and assessor and was held one week after the interview sessions. A generalised interview feedback session was also provided; this session focused on how to improve generic interview skills and was delivered by the university Careers and Employment team.

The simulated mock interview assessment task was embedded in a fourth year pharmacy practice unit and therefore a compulsory requirement for course completion. While the formative assessment task was compulsory, participation in the evaluation of the assessment task was voluntary.

Immediately following the final session delivered by the Careers and Employment team students were emailed an initial questionnaire. The evaluation questionnaire, which incorporated Likert evaluation scales, aimed to identify student's impression of the mock interviews, their value in preparing them for future interviews; if they identified areas self-improvement and if they were going to take measures to develop self-improvement in the identified areas.

The final questionnaire, identical to the first although asking questions more retrospectively, was emailed out after internship positions were allocated for 2014, that is after students had used the skills developed during the mock interview assessment task formally for actual interviews. The evaluation survey aimed to identify student's perceived value of the formative assessment task in the context of applying for actual intern pharmacist positions. It also identified how many interviews students participated in and how many job offers were made. Further it identified if students were successful in obtaining a graduate position in the sector they had hoped for.

Evaluation

Most students (8/9) participating in the mock interview assessment task, all whom received detailed formative feedback on their cover letter, resume and two interviews, indicated that the task was beneficial and increased their preparedness and confidence when applying for actual intern positions. This finding is similar to the outcomes identified by Koenigsfeld *et al.* (2012) who examined if offering final year doctoral pharmacy students a mock residency interview followed by faculty feedback enhanced pharmacy student preparedness for actual residency interviews. Further, match rates identified that students that participated in the study were more likely to obtain a residency position when compared to candidates nationally.

Consistent with the literature, formative feedback was well received by students (Rolfe & McPherson, 1995). No students reported the assessment task to be time wasting or inefficient. Students were encouraged by the open, supportive and non-judgemental approach that was taken when feedback was provided. All nine students felt the way feedback was provided fostered and encouraged discussion and promoted self-evaluation of their performance. Most students (8/9) indicated that the feedback helped them perform in their actual interviews.

Limitations

While 14 students from the graduating class completed the formative assessment task, only nine students voluntarily completed the evaluation questionnaire. As such one limitation to the study is the small sample size and the inability to examine if the outcomes achieved are transferable to larger cohorts.

Future Implementation

This assessment task and evaluation supports the value of preparing students for summative assessment by formative assessment. Organisational issues such as intensive time demand on academics and timetabling requirements presented hurdles in the facilitation of the formative assessment task. In the future it is anticipated that students need only apply for and sit a mock interview for their preferred pharmacy setting. The collaboration between the pharmacy discipline academics and the

University's Careers and Employment Service team was a successful way to deliver teaching and learning and improve student preparedness for internship interviews.

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