

‘The readiness is all’ – Australian pharmacists and pharmacy students concur with Shakespeare on work readiness

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Abstract

Background: Understanding the concept of pharmacy students’ ‘work readiness’ is vital for all pharmacy educators, enabling use of informed learning strategies to optimise graduate attributes in an increasingly competitive market.

Aims: To explore the concept of ‘work readiness’ amongst community pharmacists and Australian pharmacy students, highlighting implications for educators.

Method: Australian community pharmacists were asked to explain their perceptions of graduate work readiness in face-to-face interviews during placement visits (2011, 2014). Pharmacy students were surveyed during lectures (2011). Results were thematically analysed.

Results: There were many similarities between pharmacists’ and students’ perceptions, both emphasising transferrable (‘soft’) skills. Knowledge was secondary to experience, practice skills, and personal attributes. Recently, pharmacy employers’ focus shifted towards graduates’ management skills, ability to grow business, and implement novel pharmacy services.

Conclusion: Pharmacy educators should consider implications regarding work readiness when designing and managing pharmacy curricula in order to optimise employment opportunities of pharmacy graduates.

Keywords: *Work readiness, perceptions, pharmacy, preceptors, students, education*

Introduction

In Australia, pharmacists are health professionals who possess a unique and complex body of knowledge and skills which they apply to optimise health outcomes in accordance with expected professional behaviours (PSA, 2010; PSA, 2011; Australian Government Department of Health, 2014). This is enabled by educating pharmacists in applied and enabling disciplines, as set down in their National Competency Standards Framework and Code of Ethics (PSA, 2010; PSA, 2011). There are exciting developments in terms of the future roles of the Australian pharmacists (Roberts *et al.*, 2007; Australian Government Department of Health, 2014; Australian Pharmacy Council, 2014), which has been a dynamic, worldwide pharmacy trend for several decades, shaped by a variety of global socio-political, environmental, and economic factors (Halperin, 1989; Australian Government Department of Health, 2014).

In addition to the professional, competency, and ethical standards, comprehensive, first-hand understanding of the concept of pharmacy students’ work readiness, as understood by the future employers as well as employees, is vital for pharmacy educators in academia and in the workplace (Litchfield *et al.*, 2010; Yorke, 2010; Goodall

et al., 2011; Caballero *et al.*, 2011). Completion of a degree does not guarantee a job these days, and contemporary employers want to know what graduates will actually do for them. Characterisation of what constitutes work readiness in the pharmacy context can, therefore, enable academic institutions and other pharmacy educators to provide pharmacy graduates with informed learning strategies that will result in an optimal set of necessary graduate attributes, enabling them to secure employment and thrive in the increasingly competitive pharmacy market (Halperin, 1989; Australian Pharmacy Council, 2014; Singleton *et al.*, 2014). Internationally, what also remains a major task across disciplines is to standardise the criteria for assessment and work readiness as a multidimensional construct. Current assessment methods have been evaluated as unable to measure work-readiness and a specific measure of work readiness needs to be developed in order to allow more effective education practices. There has been considerable attention to clarifying precisely which skills should be developed, and how, but far less on evaluating employability skill provision and its impact on graduate work-readiness overall, which is increasingly important as industry worldwide continues to lament graduate

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inadequacies in certain employability skills and the extent to which they are job-ready (Jackson *et al.*, 2003).

The core purpose of the traditional pharmacy curriculum is to develop competent pharmacists by providing students with knowledge and skills (Halperin, 1989; Roberts *et al.*, 2007; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2010; PSA, 2011; Noble *et al.*, 2013; Singleton *et al.*, 2014). Interestingly, students' identity formation or professional socialisation as 'professional pharmacists-in-training' tends to not be a focus of the curriculum experience (Weidman *et al.*, 2001). There is a notable gap in the literature on work readiness in the discipline of pharmacy and there is no data on pharmacy employers' and employees' understanding of what constitutes work-readiness in the Australian community pharmacy context. The sole aim of this study was to explore understanding and perceptions of the concept of work readiness amongst the pharmacy students and their community pharmacy preceptors in south-east Queensland in order to inform future teaching strategies, particularly in the area of pharmacy practice and work-integrated learning (WIL).

Methods

Community pharmacy preceptors (N = 92) were visited by the Placements Team (Course Convenor, Lecturer, and two Placement Coordinators) during the regular 4th year MPharm cohort's placements visits in Semester 1 of 2011, as part of their Placements Course (comprising 13 weeks of lectures, ten weeks of placement one day per week in community pharmacies). The weekly day in pharmacy is followed by a post-placement follow-up workshop discussion. During visits, community preceptors were asked the questions on their beliefs around work readiness (Table I). Their responses were recorded in writing and immediately de-identified. This survey was voluntary and anonymous. All visited preceptors provided valid responses, with a 100% response rate. Also in 2011, pharmacy students (N = 71) from the same cohort as the preceptors, were administered an anonymous, voluntary survey in lecture in order to explore their thoughts on the same concept of work readiness (Table II). The answers were provided in writing with a response rate of 100% from those who attended the lecture. It should be noted that Tables I and II record the number of responses not the number of respondents, as some respondents mentioned several issues.

A similar anonymous questionnaire associated with the same community pharmacy placements visits by the Placements Team (Placement Coordinator and Course Convenor this time) was conducted again in the same Placements Course of 4th year MPharm three years later, in 2014. Students were not surveyed on this occasion as focus was on the preceptors. Community pharmacy preceptors were asked the same question again and were also asked if their choices of future employees were influenced by the apparent increase in demand for pharmacy jobs (Table III). Their responses were recorded in writing and immediately de-identified. There were 43

reportable preceptor responses, and 13 stated they were too busy to attempt answering the question.

Ethical clearance for this voluntary study was provided by the University's Human Ethics Research Committee. All responses were collated and thematically analysed. The themes are presented as a number of overall responses within the studied cohorts (Tables I, II, III).

Results

In addition to the perceived importance of students' basic clinical and practice knowledge, as evident in Tables I and II, students' and preceptors' responses emphasised the value of 'soft', transferrable skills and social intelligence in pharmacy graduates. Both groups reasoned that these skills could not always be 'learnt at university', but could sometimes be gained through experience or were, in some cases, simply an individual's personality trait that turns out to be favourable for employment.

Table I: Pharmacy students' responses in 2011 (N=71)

<i>What do you think makes you 'work ready' as an intern pharmacist?</i>	
Student response category	Frequency of responses
S1. Positive, appropriate attitude to work and good personality	20
S2. Motivation, initiative & enthusiasm	20
S3. Professional work ethic (punctuality, organisation, mannerism)	19
S4. Willingness to learn and ability to learn quickly	18
S5. Having pharmacy core knowledge/knowledge of role	17
S6. Communication skills	16
S7. People skills (empathy, counselling, patience)	15
S8. Work experience in pharmacy practice	11
S9. Being able to work independently/ quick responder	6
S10. Being able to work in a team	4
S11. Application of knowledge	4

Students' responses, similar to those of preceptors', also emphasised the value of effective communication skills, accepting constructive criticism, friendliness, personality, and willingness to learn. Interestingly, students did not mention the value of work experience nor the ability to work independently as frequently as preceptors, but instead perceived having a positive attitude to work, good personality, motivation, and enthusiasm as the more desirable work readiness skills. In 2014 preceptors emphasised that they preferred interns who can use their imagination and think laterally to problem solve.

Three years later, preceptor responses to the same question were similar in some aspects. This time there was an additional element about the influence of the increased demand for jobs (Table III).

Table II: Pharmacy preceptors' responses in 2011 (N=92)

<i>What qualities do pharmacists/you look for in an intern pharmacist? What makes them 'work ready'?</i>	
Pharmacy preceptor/pharmacist response category	Frequency of responses
(S4.) Willingness to learn & ability to learn quickly	17
(S8.) Work experience in pharmacy practice	16
(S3.) Professional work ethic (punctuality, organisation, mannerism)	15
(S9.) Being able to work independently/ quick responder	13
(S5.) Having pharmacy core knowledge/ knowledge of role	12
Customer service & (S6.) communication skills	10
(S1.) Positive, appropriate attitude to work and good personality	9
Student confidence (<i>not mentioned by Students</i>)	7
Student shows initiative and is hardworking (<i>not mentioned by Students</i>)	7

Corresponding Student responses from Table 1. are labelled as S1., S2., etc., for easy comparison between student and Preceptor responses)(N=92)

Table III: Pharmacy preceptors/pharmacists' responses in 2014 (N=43)

<i>What qualities do pharmacists/you look for in an intern pharmacist? What makes them 'work ready'? Has what you look for in interns changed given the increased demand for pharmacy jobs?</i>	
Pharmacy preceptor/pharmacist response category	Frequency of responses
Work experience and engagement in pharmacy, in community; student confidence	22
Customer service/counselling and communication skills	19
Interest in growing business, excellent management skills, adaptable	18
Positive, appropriate attitude to work and good personality	15
Evidence of being a team player, leadership, ability to teach within team	11
More intern applicants available, better ones can be employed, and applicants often needs to pass a trial period;	10
Knowledge, good grades; ability to problem solve, imagination	9
Taking responsibility for new professional pharmacy services to increase revenue and improve customer service	9
Professional work ethic (punctuality, organisation, mannerism);	7
Student is an all-rounder	5
Needs to have excellent references	3
Not from NESB (poorer listening/comprehension)	2

Preceptors emphasised the value of pharmacy interns having good social intelligence, participating in the community, and having an enthusiastic attitude and good interpersonal skills, while exhibiting appropriate behaviour, with appropriate professional boundaries, because, they reasoned – ‘everything else could be taught on the job’.

Another notable difference was a distinctly new observation by some preceptors – that there was a real competition for jobs, and preceptors could now pick and choose intern pharmacists because they were ‘getting 200 applications for one position, and not 50 like a few years ago’, and also that they could get ‘good ones cheap’, and did not have to settle for the mediocre ones. Other preceptors stated that their perception of desirable work readiness attributes had not changed, yet most of their answers indicated otherwise. Also, many pharmacy graduates were applying for internship ‘not having done any work in the pharmacy as a result of the increased competition for those jobs even at the undergraduate level’. Work experience was still on top of the list of desirable graduate attributes, together with engagement in community as a whole. Good customer service and counselling and communication skills were also rated highly.

There was a profound interest in employing graduates who now needed to possess skills not mentioned in the previous study, for example – candidates who are already capable of and interested in growing business, possessed excellent management skills, and were adaptable. ‘Doing well in management course’ would give intern applicants a significant advantage and having any management experience ‘if not in pharmacy then even at McDonald’s’ would be a bonus.

Intern pharmacists being able to take responsibility for new professional pharmacy services in order to increase pharmacy revenue and improve customer service were in demand, and several preceptors stated that they needed a ‘new generation of pharmacists to implement these services, as well as teach the rest of the team how to implement them’. Preceptors did not only expect certain skills and attributes in job candidates, but were also looking for clear evidence of those skills by contacting referees, which was also a newly reported aspect of the pharmacy intern hiring process. Now that more pharmacy internship applicants were available, better candidates could be employed and internship applicants are often required to ‘pass a trial period’, ranging from several days to weeks, before securing internship employment. It was not uncommon to terminate employment if interns did not meet expectations – a new internship pharmacist could easily be employed at short notice due to the increased demand for jobs. Some preceptors also expected that ‘graduates would already be all-rounders’ and could ‘hit the ground running’.

Interestingly, the majority of preceptors stated they were increasingly receiving intern job applications from students who had ‘no prior pharmacy work experience whatsoever’. Preceptors believed the reason for this was due to the high undergraduate student numbers nationally,

all competing for work experience. This included paid and unpaid work experience. Importantly, preceptors valued any type of work experience more than placement experience – because ‘all students do placement’.

Communication skills were again highly valued, and some preceptors even mentioned that they would not employ students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) because ‘they needed their employees to not have any challenges in their verbal communication’. They mentioned that customers ‘sometimes demanded to speak to non-NESB people and as employers [they] needed to provide that continuity of service for the customers in order to keep them, because customers keep asking to speak to the same pharmacist’.

In 2014, one preceptor expressed frustration about the current research and explained their choice not to participate was because ‘universities should not be doing social research but pressuring the Government to change the labelling laws, *etc.* since this sort of research does not change anything’. These responses were aligned with the growing contemporary concerns communicated by the profession.

Discussion

Initial study in 2011

The exploratory study of preceptors and students identified many similarities between the two groups, and some differences. The transferrable skills and personal attributes were valued by both students and preceptors, quite similar to the skill sets listed in the Australian Graduate Outlook Survey 2013 (Graduate Careers Australia Ltd., 2014) and the Pharmacy Education Taskforce’s Global Competency (GC) Framework (Federation International Pharmaceutical, 2012). These observations have also been reported in the literature across a variety of disciplines (Halperin, 1989; Roberts *et al.*, 2007; Tymon *et al.*, 2011; Noble, 2013; Rutter *et al.*, 2013; Walker *et al.*, 2013; Teoh *et al.*, 2013). For several years now, at the top of the list of the selection criteria desired by future Australian employers are ‘Interpersonal and communication skills (written and oral)’ (Graduate Careers Australia Ltd., 2014), which were first and sixth most frequently reported skills by the pharmacy students, and sixth and seventh skill mentioned by the pharmacists. Communication skills are one of the core pharmacy competencies in Australia and have long been established as part of the pharmacy and most other discipline curricula (Halperin, 1989; Roberts *et al.*, 2007; Oliver, 2008; PSA, 2011; Noble *et al.*, 2013; Australian Pharmacy Council, 2014). Communication skills have also been identified as integral to ‘professional/personal competencies’ in the GC Framework (sec 4.1). Similarly, the ability to ‘use appropriate (verbal and non-verbal) communication skills to build, report and engage with patients, health and social care staff (sec 4.1.5) is akin to the domain of interpersonal skills. They tend to be more elusive to define, teach, and assess due to the associated complexities and their personal and intrinsic nature (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2010; Rust *et al.*, 2011). The value of

these graduate attributes global competencies are also consistent across other disciplines (Oliver, 2008; Forum AUQ, 2008; Walker *et al.*, 2013;). Further, the skills that have been reported to be valued nationally for the past few years, such as ‘passion, knowledge of industry, drive, commitment, attitude’, ‘critical reasoning’ and ‘work experience’ (Graduate Careers Australia Ltd., 2014), also rated quite highly in the student and preceptors’ responses, similar to reports in the literature (Oliver *et al.*, 2007; 2011).

Students placed more importance on attitude and personality traits and motivation, whereas preceptors valued ability to learn quickly and having experience more than did students (Tables I And II). Research in health disciplines has uncovered four critical work readiness factors: social intelligence, organisational acumen, work competence and personal characteristics, with social intelligence and clinical skills considered to be critical graduate competencies for which graduates tend to be underprepared, with a considerable room for improvement in the education industry (Costello, 2010; Kelly *et al.*, 2011; Rust, 2011; Tymon, 2011; Walker *et al.*, 2013; Daniels *et al.*, 2014; Gilligan, *et al.*, 2014). No student mentioned confidence, initiative, and hard work as the desirable traits, whereas these were valued by some preceptors. ‘Knowledge’ was secondary to experience, practice skills, attitude, personality traits and affinities, and both groups placed it on the fifth place, consistent with similar literature (Oliver, 2008; Ltd GCA, 2014). It was a very common occurrence in preceptors’ responses that they ‘want an intern with a basic knowledge but the right attitude – I can teach them everything they don’t know, but only if they wish to experience it and be taught’. Similar views have been reported in the literature (Oliver *et al.*, 2007; Kelly *et al.*, 2011; Oliver *et al.*, 2011; Rust *et al.*, 2011; Walker *et al.*, 2013; Daniels *et al.*, 2014).

Subsequent study in 2014

This follow-up study repeated the question from 2011 and had an added element of investigating if the desirability of work readiness attributes were influenced by the increase in demand for pharmacy intern positions. A number of new trends emerged – for example choosing applicants with capabilities in the areas of pharmacy management and business, with an emphasis on increasing revenue through implementation of new professional services (Roberts, 2007; Australian Government Department of Health, 2014). Trial employment for intern pharmacists were also a novel concept, previously unreported in our findings, nor the literature.

There seemed to be the expectation that intern pharmacists should already be capable of performing their duties with little to no additional training. It has been reported that there is a disconnect between what employers want from their graduate recruits and what universities deliver, and employers can sometimes have unrealistic expectations (O’Keefe, 2007). It has also been

shown that one in six companies thought universities had not prepared their graduates well and 2% of employers thought graduates were very well prepared for work, while 82% thought graduates were quite well prepared. Employers sometimes feel graduates should be work-ready from day one and able to perform at a high level while universities sometimes come from a different perspective and see their role is to educate from an academic and theoretical standpoint (Crebert, 2004; O'Keefe, 2007; Litchfield, 2010; Oliver, 2011; Oliver, 2013).

Being a team player, and, importantly, showing evidence of being one was emphasised by the preceptors, and is known to be valued as a general graduate attribute (Crebert, 2004). Preceptors emphasised that calling referees from interns' CVs to look for evidence on all of the above issues was usual practice, something that was novel in itself – as anecdotal evidence in pharmacy industry is that pharmacists did not even have CVs several years ago. Interestingly, it was expected that interns would be able to share their skills with the team, and be a teacher and a leader in the pharmacy team – an attribute that is not aligned with pharmacy graduate attribute, but instead a more advanced pharmacy practitioner (Bress *et al.*, 2011; Ragan *et al.*, 2013; Australian Pharmacy Council, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2014).

Another novel observation by preceptors was that they wanted pharmacy interns who are familiar with the 'new professional pharmacy services' (Australian Government Department of Health, 2014), and that they would not only run them in the pharmacy in order to improve customer service, but also to increase the pharmacy revenue in the process. Pharmacists seemed to need 'help' from interns in order to implement change. There are similar findings in terms of the pharmacist profession culture characterised by a slow acceptance of long-term change, which is probably why pharmacists wished to use 'fresh blood' to implement these services. In order to enable the students to expand clinical services in community pharmacy, it is essential to expose students to similar opportunities in pharmacy education and practice (Maynard, 2011; Ragan, 2013) and the need for substantial curriculum change to better develop graduates' professional attributes is becoming increasingly recognised (Rydon, 2008; Litchfield, 2010; Oliver, 2013; Noble *et al.*, 2013; Rutter *et al.*, 2013; Smith, 2013; Gilligan *et al.*, 2014;).

Conclusion

Pharmacy educators and professional bodies have the responsibility to inform and build the work readiness capacity of pharmacy students and develop graduate attributes that can positively influence their employability. Limitations of our study are the relatively limited number of participants, a lack of student survey in 2014, and a possibility that teaching material in the Placements Course may have influenced student responses. Another possibility is that the Placement booklet itself, routinely supplied to preceptors annually,

may have influenced their responses. However, influences of the 'everyday information flow' are unavoidable. We need to be aware of the values that underpin what pharmacy employers and students perceive as relevant work readiness attributes. We should also remain open to the readily available contributions from other university areas (*e.g.* Career Services, International Student Services) when considering our students' work readiness education. Both preceptors and pharmacy students recognised the value of work experience when applying for internship jobs, however, work experience is increasingly difficult to acquire in Australia due to the increased demand during undergraduate years. Importantly, there is an emerging trend of pharmacy employers focusing on prospective pharmacy interns' management and business skills, as well as their adaptability and capability to implement the latest professional services and educate workplace teams regarding their implementation. The best way to teach the multitude of work readiness skills and behaviours remains to be determined. This exploratory study has highlighted the value of seeking the perceptions of two major stakeholders regarding pharmacy students' work readiness. A deeper understanding would perhaps be achieved if pharmacy educators, the third major stakeholder, were included in future research. Our findings have major implications for optimisation of the pharmacy curricula, in particular the design of career development and work-integrated learning components.

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