

# Perceptions on requirements to inform the design of a pharmacist tutor training programme

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## Abstract

**Background:** Practising pharmacists as sessional tutors have been identified as providing value to a Pharmacy programme, particularly in maintaining the currency and relevance of the curriculum. However, the lack of training and support provided to this sessional academic workforce has been considered as a risk to the quality of their contribution to the education of pharmacy students at universities.

**Aim:** This study thus aimed to determine the requirements of pharmacist tutors in order to inform the design of a pharmacy tutor training programme.

**Method:** A cross-sectional survey was administered to pharmacist tutors, with simple descriptive statistics used to calculate frequency counts and percentages. Focus groups with tutors, pharmacy academic staff and students were conducted in order to interpret and develop the survey data.

**Results:** Ninety-six percent of the 27 respondents supported the development of a pharmacy-specific tutor training programme, indicating that they saw their primary role as providing the link between theory and current practice. This was strongly supported by the participants in both the staff and student focus groups. Assessing student performance and giving effective student feedback were identified as two key areas for inclusion in a pharmacist tutor training programme, with 93% and 89% of respondents respectively rating these areas as very important and important.

**Conclusion:** This study highlighted the need for a pharmacy-specific tutor training programme, addressing key areas, which have been identified by not only the tutors themselves but also the pharmacy academic staff and students.

**Keywords:** *Pharmacist Tutors, Pharmacy Student Perceptions, Training Programme, Tutor Support*

## Introduction

Tutor training is relatively new to Australia, but is well established in both North America and the United Kingdom (Kurdziel & Libarkin, 2003; Park, 2004). However, increased recognition of the important role of sessional staff, such as tutors, in teaching and learning at universities has led to the development of general policies and guidelines for the training and support of these sessional staff in Australia (Australian Universities Teaching Committee [AUTC], 2003; Percy *et al.*, 2008a).

While a tutor is often regarded as a specific type of sessional teacher who focuses on individual or small group teaching, the term 'tutor' is today used more broadly and there is considerable overlap between the roles and responsibilities of a tutor and other types of sessional teachers. In the university setting, a tutor's role can vary significantly between institutions and within faculties and departments and can encompass the full range of teaching related duties. This may include leading tutorial or workshop sessions, practical demonstration, group facilitation and marking student assignments and other forms of assessment (AUTC, 2003; Percy *et al.*, 2008a, 2008b; Young & Bippus, 2008).

The trend towards increased casual or sessional employment of academic staff (Percy *et al.*, 2008a; Andrew *et al.*, 2010) and the subsequent benefit to universities in terms of increased diversity and flexibility of student education has been highlighted over recent years (Herbert, Hannam & Chalmers, 2002; AUTC, 2003; Kimber, 2003). The increased employment of practising pharmacists as sessional tutors has been invaluable in assisting to bridge the gap between theory and practice and ensuring that student education is both current and relevant to their chosen profession (Chan, 2010). However, the distinct lack of training and support programmes for sessional staff, including pharmacist tutors, has implications for the quality of teaching provided by this particular group of academic staff (Kimber, 2003; Cowley, 2010; May *et al.*, 2011). Due to both the diversity within these staff and the variety of roles that they undertake (Percy *et al.*, 2008a), it is recognised that for optimal success, a training programme should be tailored to suit the needs of the particular department or institution (Herbert, Masser & Gauci, 2002).

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The potential benefits of training for sessional staff include improved confidence in teaching, better clarification of roles and responsibilities, improved student engagement, and more effective classroom management (Retna, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that training can improve tutor confidence and teaching performance (Goodlad, 1997; Barrington, 1999; Young & Bippus, 2008; Kofod *et al.*, 2008). Marking and assessment is a common responsibility of sessional teachers, necessitating training in this area to improve both the quality and consistency of marking and thereby improve the overall quality of university education (Smith & Coombe, 2006; Salamonson *et al.*, 2010). While there is evidence for a range of benefits of sessional staff training, there is a paucity of information regarding what should be included in a training programme. The aim of this study was therefore to identify the particular requirements to include in a training programme for sessional pharmacist tutors. These requirements were identified through consultation with key stakeholders and with reference to the current and potential roles of pharmacist tutors in Australian Universities (Percy *et al.*, 2008a; 2008b).

## Methods

A mixed methods approach was employed, with the main instrument being a self-completion questionnaire which, following ethics approval from the University, was posted to all past, present and potential pharmacist tutors (40 potential participants) at the James Cook University (JCU). The structured questionnaire consisted of 24 questions including closed questions, of which several were graded employing a 5-point Likert scale. Questions were grouped into four main categories - core demographic data of respondents; perceived importance of potential roles of pharmacist tutors; requirements for tutor training; and perceptions of existing supports. In addition, the questionnaire included several open questions to allow participants the opportunity to add further comments or suggestions. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequency counts and percentages for demographics and Likert scale responses. Thematic analysis was performed on the responses to the open questions according to the thematic analysis methods of Liamputtong, and Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Liamputtong, 2013).

The results of the tutor questionnaire were then used to inform the design of three focus groups involving the key stakeholders for the programme, which included pharmacist tutors, pharmacy students and academic staff. Focus groups were semi-structured and of approximately one hour in duration, with each group containing five to seven participants who were representative samples of tutors, students and academic staff respectively. Based on the results of the tutor questionnaire, five areas for focus group discussion were identified. These included the role of pharmacist tutors, past experiences with or as pharmacist tutors, their perceived benefits of tutor

training, their ideal requirements for a tutor training programme and additional support requirements. Focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was performed for each of the five discussion areas as above.

## Results

### Demographics of Pharmacist Tutors

The response rate to the survey was 68% (27 tutors) and in agreement with current literature on sessional staff (Davis *et al.*, 2009; Bexley *et al.*, 2011; May *et al.*, 2011), the demographics of the tutor respondents were found to be quite diverse in terms of level of experience, qualifications and specialisation. All tutors are practising pharmacists with years since graduation varying from less than five years (30%) to more than 20 years (41%); 26% had postgraduate qualifications and 37% had a particular area of specialisation. This diversity is considered to be an advantage on the one hand in terms of the broadening of the student learning experience, while on the other hand it increases the complexity in tailoring an ideal training programme to meet the needs of all the tutors. The predominance of female respondents (81%) is attributed to a combination of an observed Australia wide increase in feminisation of the pharmacy workforce and the attractiveness of part-time work and flexible hours for females with family responsibilities.

### Roles of the Pharmacist Tutors

Figure 1: Tutor Rating of their Various Roles

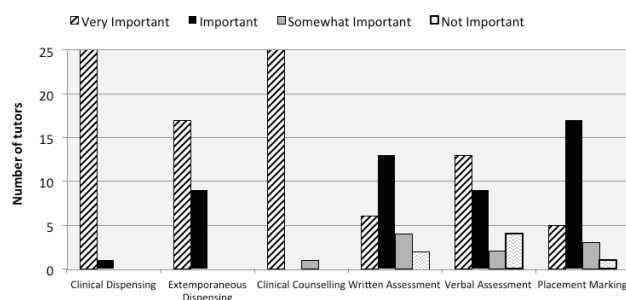


Figure 1 illustrates the ratings of survey respondents of the importance of tutor involvement in six main areas of pharmacy student education at JCU. Tutor respondents felt that their role should primarily be in clinical dispensing, extemporaneous dispensing and clinical counselling, which involve the integration and practical application of information delivered across the pharmacy degree. The involvement of tutors in assessment and marking, while considered to be important overall, was felt to be less important than their role in the practical aspects of the course. Given the concerns expressed in the literature associated with marking amongst sessional and casual university staff (Smith & Coombe, 2006; Salamonson *et al.*, 2010), this area was highlighted for

further discussion in the focus groups. Both tutors and academic staff in the focus groups expressed concerns about the tutors’ ability to mark appropriately and consistently, particularly in the area of assessing verbal communication.

Various roles of tutors were discussed in the focus groups, including their support of the full-time academic staff, the provision of increased opportunities for individual or small-group contact and broadening of the student learning experience. Maintaining the link between theory and practice was highlighted by all three focus groups as a crucial role for pharmacist tutors. Academic staff members also commented on the fact that pharmacist tutors as teacher-practitioners are often seen by students as role models for the profession and can therefore assist in the development of professionalism. Table I below lists some selected comments from focus group participants regarding the role of the pharmacist tutor.

**Table I: Role of the pharmacist tutor - selected focus group comments**

The role of the pharmacist tutor – Selected focus group comments
<i>‘...it’s like a link between what we’re learning and actual pharmacy practice...’ [Student]</i>
<i>‘I think the students sometimes like to see the relevance of what they’re doing and where they’re going and .... So I think, particularly having pharmacists working in the community coming in reinforces that’ [Tutor]</i>
<i>I suspect that the pharmacist tutors that come in actually don’t realise what they are bringing by bringing the profession into the lab ..... that they [students] are picking up on how to ultimately behave and function as a professional by watching them.’ [Academic Staff]</i>
<i>‘.... to provide assistance to the lecturer running the practical classes and then ..... help out when needed for questions from the students to keep them on track’ [Tutor]</i>
<i>‘... you can have a more personal .... learning experience ..... there’s less people around you and you feel more comfortable to be able to ask and to learn that way.’ [Student]</i>
<i>‘As a graduate of this programme, then a tutor and now a lecturer in the programme ..... you appreciate more the role that the tutors do play, because you’ve seen it and .....it was nice having three or four different opinions sometimes because when I got to practice..... there’s no black and white, it’s all grey.’ [Academic Staff]</i>

**Experiences with or as pharmacist tutors**

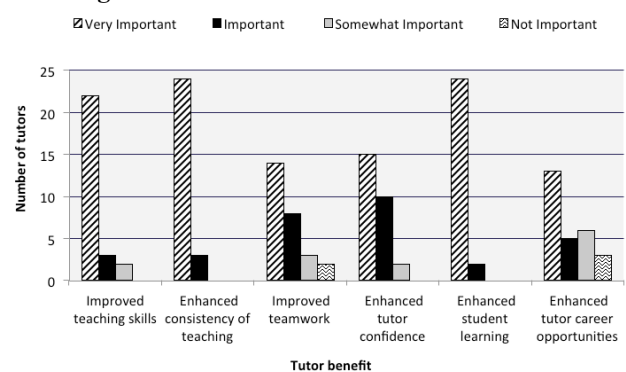
While tutors in the focus group commented on how much they enjoyed their role and how rewarding it could be, they reported having difficulty in their initial transition to teaching and this highlighted the need for training prior to tutoring.

In terms of support, tutors commented on the high level of support that they had received from academic staff after joining the teaching team at JCU. This is in contrast to the literature, which suggests that while a team approach is felt to be important for optimal student learning and engagement, this does not always occur (Retna, 2005; Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Ryan *et al.*, 2013). The student focus group noted that pharmacist tutors were in general very enthusiastic and helpful, particularly in motivating students by relating the university experience back to the practice. However, students also noted that individual tutor attributes such as confidence, enthusiasm, communication skills and pedagogical style varied among the tutors and this was felt to have an impact on their learning. Similarly, academic staff observed a range of tutoring styles and interactions between tutors and students. Academic staff reinforced the value of a team approach and the importance of consistency of teaching and adherence to standard university procedures for optimal student teaching and learning.

**Potential benefits of training**

The tutor questionnaire responses regarding the perceived benefits of a tutor training programme are represented in Figure 2, with the most important benefits indicated as the potential for enhanced consistency of teaching and enhanced student learning. Improved confidence and improved teaching skills were also regarded as important. Of least importance was the potential for enhancement of career opportunities, although this was still felt to be of some benefit, with the tutor focus group commenting that training may enhance recognition of the tutor and improve career prospects.

**Figure 2: Tutor Rating of Potential Benefits of Training**



**Training programme structure**

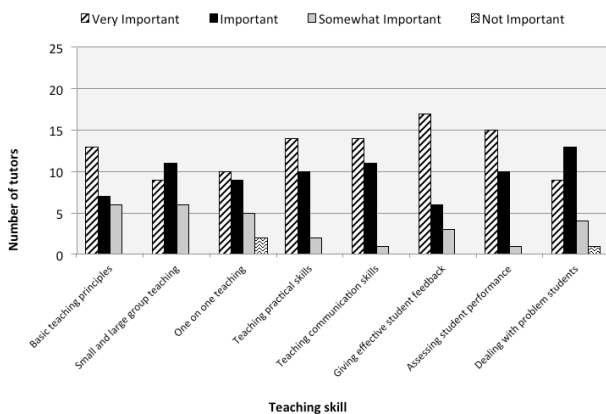
The majority of tutor survey respondents agreed that it was important for tutors to have a training programme and that a programme tailored to Pharmacy rather than a University-wide training was more appropriate. Seventy-eight percent of tutors agreed that training should be a

compulsory requirement for all new tutors. In the design of the programme, the preference of the tutors was for a combination of an online and face-to-face format, with the face-to-face component containing the practice based information and the online component providing the more process-driven information.

**Training programme content**

Figure 3 shows tutor questionnaire responses regarding the importance of various areas of training for inclusion in the programme.

**Figure 3: Tutor Rating of Various Components of a Training Programme**



While all of the eight proposed areas were felt to be of importance to the majority of the tutors, the two most important areas were the provision of effective student feedback and assessing student performance. Considering the significant role of pharmacist tutors in the practice areas of the pharmacy programme, it is not surprising that the teaching of practical and communication skills was highlighted as an important area for training.

The pharmacist tutor focus group participants reinforced the requirement for a pharmacy-specific programme due to the specific skill set required for their particular role in the pharmacy degree programme. Both staff and students believed that basic teaching skills, particularly in the area of effective communication would be an important component of the programme. The topics of assessment and student feedback were again highlighted by both tutor and academic staff focus groups for inclusion in the training programme.

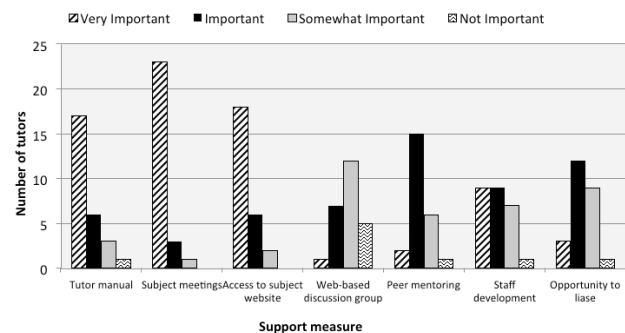
In addition to the content outlined in Figure 3, tutor focus group respondents also suggested that they be provided with an overview of the pharmacy degree programme to provide some perspective to their tutoring role.

**Training programme – support requirements**

Support measures for tutors were also investigated and as shown in Figure 4 below. By far the most important

means of support was felt to be a subject specific meeting with the relevant practical coordinator prior to the commencement of the semester. In addition, tutors felt that it was important to have access to lecture and workshop material for their particular subject, thus enabling them to provide information which is consistent with the material that the students are currently learning in class. Tutors also felt that an overview of the available resources at the University would be helpful.

**Figure 4: Tutor Rating of Additional Support Measures**



Both tutors and academic staff reinforced the benefits of teamwork and an inclusive culture as this was felt to be a significant contributor to better learning outcomes. This could be achieved in a number of ways, including the increased involvement of tutors in classroom presenting and demonstrating, as well as regular tutor meetings with academic staff to discuss any tutoring or practical issues.

**Discussion**

This study revealed that, as was the trend in the literature, pharmacist tutors at JCU are a diverse group, with a predominance of female tutors and a wide range of qualifications, specialisation and career aspirations (Kimber, 2003; Cowley, 2010; May *et al.*, 2011, 2013). While many roles for pharmacist tutors were identified, their most important role was believed to be the provision of the link between the theory and pharmacy practice, with this being identified as a unique contribution of pharmacist tutors. The literature supports the value of practicing pharmacists as teacher-practitioners in broadening the student knowledge base, maintaining the currency of the curriculum and in the development of professionalism (Chan, 2010; Schafheutle, 2012).

It is also evident from the results of this study that the previously provided University-wide training programme for sessional staff at JCU had not adequately addressed the current needs of pharmacist tutors and lacked relevance to their particular role and skill-set. This finding is in line with the literature, which suggests that while university-wide framework policies are required, a

training programme should ideally be locally relevant to the individual school or discipline (Herbert, Masser & Gauci, 2002; Prpic & Ellis, 2002; Smith & Bath, 2003, 2004).

The requirement for university teachers to receive formal training in educational methods has been debated. While a good knowledge of subject matter is regarded as important for effective teaching, it is now being recognised that teaching is 'a skill which can be acquired, developed and refined' rather than an innate talent (White & Stephenson, 2000, p.38; Persellin & Goodrick, 2010). Although they may be more than adequately qualified in their field, these qualifications do not necessarily equip the tutor with the appropriate skills and knowledge necessary to teach effectively, manage classes and deal with challenging student behaviour (Kift, 2002). Therefore a grounding knowledge of pedagogy is thought to be an essential requirement of all tutor training programmes.

The process of assessment and marking has been highlighted in the literature as a complex skill, which requires significant training and experience (Smith & Coombe, 2006; Salamonson *et al.*, 2010; Peters *et al.*, 2011; Halcomb *et al.*, 2009). Pharmacy tutors and academic staff unanimously agreed that this element of teaching and learning is a major problem area for tutors and should be addressed in the tutor training programme to improve quality and consistency in marking and assessment.

The issue of marginalisation of sessional staff has been discussed widely in the literature over recent years. The facilitation of networking opportunities has been found to have a significant effect on the integration of sessional staff into higher education institutions (Kift, 2002) and the benefits of working together as a team to enhance student learning are supported by the literature (Retna, 2005; Percy & Beaumont, 2008). Therefore opportunities for interaction and discussion with fellow tutors and pharmacy staff should be considered as an important element of any sessional staff training programme, in order to promote integration, enhance teamwork and allow for self-reflection.

### Limitations of the study

While sample sizes for the tutor questionnaire were relatively small, the high response rate of 68% ensured that a good representation of tutors was achieved. There was potential for bias with the researcher also being an academic staff member of JCU as well as the tutor coordinator, therefore being known to the majority of respondents. This bias was felt to be minimal as the project aimed to benefit tutors and thus it was in their best interest to provide honest and genuine responses.

### Conclusion

The literature has highlighted the paucity of information pertaining to the development of sessional staff training

programmes, particularly in the health sciences, with no examples of pharmacy-specific training programmes being found. This study has provided support for the benefits of a discipline specific tutor training programme. Based on feedback from key stakeholders, the ideal pharmacist tutor training programme would provide an overview of their roles and responsibilities, a grounding in educational methods, and training in the teaching of communication and practical skills, as well as assessment and marking. An overarching aim would be to strengthen the link between theory and practice and promote the integration of sessional staff into the university teaching team. The findings of this study will therefore be useful in providing the foundations for the design and development of a pharmacy-specific tutor training programme for JCU. This project may also provide valuable information for other schools or disciplines at JCU as well as other Australian Universities to optimise the design of future discipline specific sessional staff training programmes.

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