

HIGH CGPA AND SOFT SKILL NEEDED TO GET PHARMACIST TRAINING REPLACEMENTS

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To gain exposure, fresh pharmacy graduates can opt to serve in local community pharmacies while waiting for job interviews.

At present, there is a stiff competition among pharmacy graduates to obtain provisional training placements at hospitals and premises approved by the government due to the insufficient number of positions for the Provisionally Registered Pharmacist (PRP). Such predicaments are quite similar to the situation currently faced by medical

graduates, who wait for up to one year to get housemanship placements at government hospitals.

The 1,400 pharmacy students, who graduate annually, only rub salt into the wound. If they do not pass the assessments during the one-year training and score excellent marks, the PRP will neither be granted the practicing licence nor allowed to work as registered pharmacists.

Liberalisation of PRP training in Malaysia has been extended to private facilities such as community pharmacies, private hospitals, the pharmaceutical industry and research and development centres recognised by the Pharmacy Board Malaysia (PBM), in addition to the government hospital facilities or institutions. PBM introduced the recent move to provide more working opportunities and increase the number of pharmacy graduate employment in the country.

Several measures have been taken by the government to assist unemployed pharmacy graduates and increase the number of training placements including the liberalisation of PRP training.

The Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society (MPS) has urged for a moratorium of at least five years on pharmacy programmes, calling for a freeze in the intake of students enrolled in a pharmacy programme in tertiary institutions in the country.

More recently, the government introduced a policy to offer service contracts to medical, dental and pharmacy graduates due to constraints in the permanent posts. Pharmacy graduates must

attend an interview by appointed panels of the Public Services Commission of Malaysia as a prerequisite to obtain PRP training placements.

Selection of candidates to be interviewed is generally dependent on Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) and other criteria set by the Public Services Commission. Those who have high CGPA will have higher chances of being shortlisted for the interview. Success at the interview, however, depends on many factors and not simply on CGPA. Thorough preparation must be done to be successful at making a good impression on the interviewers.

PREPARING THE BEST GRADUATES

Pharmacists are involved in solving complex problems such as managing patients with various diseases on multiple medications and identifying possible drug-drug or drug-food interactions. It is therefore vital for them to communicate effectively and play a crucial role in the provision of primary care.

In the wake of rising unemployment, pharmacy students must be prepared to be ideal candidates for the job and do their best to increase future employability.

In a 2014 study by Dr Norazrina Azmi of the Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, several factors affecting the academic performance among pharmacy students in local public universities were identified based on their CGPA. The majority of the students who obtained high GCPA were revealed to have remarkable time management skills and high academic competence.

Although the pharmacy curriculum in the local public universities has interweaved several courses as part of the approaches by the Higher Education Ministry to improve the student's communication skills, the majority of graduates were rated as mediocre.

Lack of academic and social success among students in higher education was also caused by academic entitlement, defined as a student's perception that he deserves good grading and educational services despite putting minimal efforts towards achieving academic success. They may neglect the importance of personality development and do not comprehend the impact of lacklustre performance at university until they have entered the workforce.

CULTIVATING SOFT SKILLS

In addition to a repertoire of knowledge and hard skills, pharmacy graduates must be equipped with good soft skills to be efficacious in their professional practice, especially when collaborating with other healthcare professionals to make clinical decisions. Soft skills can be

defined as having emotional intelligence and the ability to use technical abilities and knowledge effectively.

Students can develop the desirable qualities employers usually seek early on while they are at university, for instance through social interactions. The important elements that make good soft skills are communicative and thinking skills, problem-solving ability, teamwork, lifelong learning and information management, leadership, entrepreneur skills, ethics, high moral standards and professionalism.

There are many ways to develop these including:

- **Working in the community pharmacy**

Community pharmacists are involved in the management of a pharmacy selling a wide range of pharmaceutical, herbal and health care products, cosmetics and supplements. The community pharmacists on site can act as preceptors to help set the stage for the graduate's initial encounter with pharmacy practice. Basic information management and thinking and communicative skills required of a good pharmacist can be strengthened if a student works as an assistant to community pharmacists.

Fresh pharmacy graduates can opt to serve in local community pharmacies while waiting for the job interview to gain exposure to the management of prescription medications, dispensing of medication and counselling patients. They may be given the opportunity to assist the pharmacist in conducting basic preliminary health screening, given their skills and expertise, for instance monitoring blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol. The stint in the community pharmacies can increase their level of professional competency and build work readiness prior to working in government hospitals.

- **Joining community outreach programmes**

Soft skills can be gained and developed when students are involved in community outreach programmes offered by for instance non-profit, non-governmental organisations. There are plenty of volunteering opportunities available in the country for pharmacy graduates to address the needs of orphans and disabled children, and be part of support groups for people recovering from substance abuse. Working with people from various backgrounds can help to develop positive attitude, improve interpersonal skills and problem-solving ability.

- **Improving English communication skills**

There are various methods to improve spoken and written English. For example, one can enrol in English communication and/or writing classes. Setting up a blog to practise writing articles in English pertaining to pharmacy-related subjects can also be useful in

recalling the theories learnt during the undergraduate years. Surrounding themselves in an all English-speaking environment may also help to improve students' command of English.

- **Obtaining support from the faculty**

The pharmacy faculty can organise a workshop for fresh graduates and invite experienced pharmacists to share their insights and updates on employment trends and internship opportunities. Lecturers and faculty members can also provide support by offering them work as tutors for undergraduates or as research assistants. Lecturers can act as mentors to guide them through exposure to different sets of teaching or research skills and the culture of their disciplines, particularly for those who wish to pursue academic careers.

Both high CGPA and good soft skills are important for pharmacy graduates to excel in their future job hunt and, therefore, should be prioritised. With the recent restricted number of PRP training placements coupled with an increasing number of pharmacy graduates, one must strive to be competitive and be indispensable to secure a job. It is envisioned that the integration of soft skills with pharmacy practice can be improved as one of the core modules in the pharmacy curriculum via concerted efforts from pharmacy academicians.

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