

# PHARMACY GRADUATES' CHRONICLE IN MALAYSIA: BALANCING CGPA AND SOFT SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

*Liberalisation of Provisionally Registered Pharmacist (PRP) training in Malaysia has recently been extended to the private facilities recognized by the Pharmacy Board Malaysia (PBM). This has increased the number of graduate employment opportunities. Pharmacy graduates are required to undergo an interview with the Public Services Commission of Malaysia (PSC) and are not allowed to work as pharmacists unless they pass the provisional training. Selection of candidates to be called for interview is generally dependent on their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). Success at the interview, however, is based on their overall performance and not simply on their CGPA. The chances of success at interview are enhanced by their ability to combine their theoretical knowledge learnt at university with soft skills such as good communication and emotional intelligence. This paper outlines the importance of soft skills and offers suggestions as to how Malaysian pharmacy graduates can enhance them.*

**Keywords:** *pharmacy graduate; soft skill; pharmacy practice; liberalisation.*

## CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

Although there is an increasing demand for pharmacy graduates to fill various positions in communities, hospitals and industrial sectors throughout the country, statistics show that these rising numbers have recently caused a point of saturated market in pharmacy employment. Thus, some of them

are left jobless with longer waiting time before they are called up for interviews for training placement as provisionally registered pharmacists at government hospitals. The present article discusses the importance of balancing their academic performance with good soft skills and how to optimize their performance for the interviews by offering ways to identify and enhance their competencies to become more competitive and proactive.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Liberalisation of Provisionally Registered Pharmacist (PRP) training in Malaysia has been extended to the private facilities such as community pharmacies, private hospitals, pharmaceutical industry and research and development centres recognized by the Pharmacy Board Malaysia (PBM), in addition to government hospital facilities or institutions. The recent move was introduced by the PBM to provide more working opportunities and to increase the number of pharmacy graduate employments throughout the country. At present, there is high competition among the pharmacy graduates to obtain provisional training placements at hospitals and premises approved by the government due to insufficient number of positions for PRPs. Such predicaments are quite similar with the situations currently faced by the medical graduates, whereby they must wait for up to one year to get their housemanship placements at government hospitals.

### **Curbing the Pharmacist Plethora**

The increasing number of pharmacy graduates totalling up to 1,400 annually, is only rubbing salt to the wound. If they do not pass the assessments during the 1-year training and score excellent marks, the PRPs shall neither be granted the practising licence nor allowed to work as registered pharmacists. To overcome the crisis, several measures have been taken by the Malaysian government to assist unemployed pharmacy graduates and to increase the number of training placements including the liberalisation of PRP trainings. The Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society (MPS) has urged for a moratorium of at least 5 years on pharmacy programmes, calling for a freeze in the intake of new students enrolled for pharmacy programmes in universities and colleges throughout the country in response to this plight (Mahmood, 2016). More recently, the Malaysian

Government has introduced a new policy by offering the medical, dental and pharmacy graduates to serve on contract (Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 2016) due to constraints in the permanent posts. The pharmacy graduates must undergo an interview by the appointed panels in the Public Services Commission of Malaysia (PSC) as a prerequisite to obtain the PRP training placements (“Guidelines on Liberalisation of PRP Training in Private Sector for Graduates of Pharmacy Degree Programme” 2016). Selection of the candidates to be interviewed is generally dependent on the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) and other criteria set by the PSC. Those who have high CGPAs will have higher chances of being shortlisted for the interview. Success at the interview, however, depends on many factors and not simply on their CGPA. At this point, thorough preparation must be done to be successful during interviews as competition is high for PRP recruitment.

### **Preparing the Fittest Graduates**

Pharmacists are involved in solving complex problem such as managing patients with various diseases on multiple medications and identifying possible drug-drug or drug-food interactions. It is thus vital for them to communicate effectively and play a role in the provision of primary care. In the wake of a high unemployment rate, pharmacy students must be prepared to be ideal candidates for the job and work their best to increase their future employability. In a study by Azmi *et al.* 5 in 2014, several factors affecting the academic performance among the pharmacy students in Malaysian public universities were identified based on their CGPAs (Azmi et al., 2014). Majority of the students who obtained high GCPAs were revealed to have remarkable time management skills and high academic competence. Even though the pharmacy curriculum in the public universities in Malaysia has interweaved several courses as part of the approach by the Ministry of Higher Education to improve students’ communication skills, majority of the graduates were rated as mediocre. Lack of academic and social success among students in higher education is often caused by academic entitlement, defined as student’s perception that he or she deserves good grading and educational services despite putting minimal efforts and responsibilities towards achieving academic success (Cain, Noel, Smith, & Romanelli, 2014; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2010). Often, they may overlook the importance of personality development and do not comprehend the impact of lacklustre performance in the universities until they have entered the workforce.

## **Cultivating Soft Skills among Pharmacy Students**

In addition to repertoire of knowledge and hard skills, pharmacy graduates must be equipped with good soft skills to be successful at professional practice, especially when collaborating with other healthcare professionals to make important clinical decisions. Soft skills can be defined as having the splendid emotional intelligence and ability to use technical abilities and knowledge effectively (Hassan et al., 2013; Kvaskoff & McKay, 2014; Wheeler, 2016). Students can develop the desirable qualities employers usually seek early on while they are at the universities, for instance through socialization and interactions with other people. The important elements that make good soft skills are communicative skills, thinking skills, problem solving skills, team work force, life-long learning and information management, leadership skills, entrepreneur skills, ethics, moral and professionalism (Hassan et al., 2013).

There are many ways to develop this including:

### **1. Working in the community pharmacy**

Community pharmacists are involved in the management of a pharmacy selling a wide range of pharmaceutical products, health care products, cosmetics and herbal products or supplements. The community pharmacists in site can act as preceptors to help setting the stage for the graduate's initial encounter in pharmacy practice. Basic information management, thinking and communicative skills required as a good pharmacist, could be strengthened if students are willing to put in extra efforts by working as an assistant to the community pharmacists or medical practitioners in the private facilities. Graduates may opt to serve in the local pharmacies whilst waiting for the job interview to gain adequate exposure to the management of prescription medications, medication dispensing and patient counselling. They might be given the opportunity to assist pharmacists in conducting basic preliminary health screening given their skills and expertise, for instance, blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol monitoring. The stint in the community pharmacies could increase their level of professional competency and build work readiness prior to working in the government hospitals (Fejzic & Barker, 2015).

## **2. Joining community outreach program**

Soft skills can be gained and developed when students are involved in community outreach programmes often offered by non-profit, and non-governmental organizations. Students can learn to understand the different dynamics in a team and be an effective team player, particularly when performing activities within a group for the target community. For instance, plenty of volunteering opportunities are available in Malaysia for pharmacy graduates to address the needs for orphans or disabled children and be part of the support groups for people recovering from substance abuse. In addition to gaining beneficial experience, their involvement in the new realm via working with people from various backgrounds can help to develop positive attitude, improve interpersonal skill and problem-solving ability.

## **3. Improving English communication skills**

Good communication skill is the key to developing strong social support network and building up self-confidence. In Malaysia, unfortunately, poor English proficiency is associated with the rising unemployment among graduates especially the Malay students who usually prefer to converse in their native language (Ibrahim et al., 2013). There are various methods that can be used to improve spoken and written English. For example, one can obtain continuous training with the right groups and improve their command in English by enrolling for English communication and/or writing classes. Other conventional methods include setting up a personal blog to practise writing on any articles pertaining to the pharmacy practice in English, which can also be useful in reminiscing the learned theories and practical during the undergraduate years. Surrounding themselves in an all English-speaking environment may also help to improve their command in English e.g. watching English movies, reading English novels and speaking to native English.

## **4. Obtaining support from the faculty**

As a part of the finishing school approach to professional development and mentoring for next generation of scholars and researchers, the

faculty can set up a workshop for the freshly graduated students and invite the experienced pharmacists working in the local community pharmacy, pharmaceutical company and hospital pharmacy as speakers. They may provide the insights and latest updates on the employment trend and internship opportunities for their junior pharmacists. The lecturers and faculty members can also provide supports by offering them to work as tutors for the undergraduate students, or as research assistants to carry out the research works. Lecturers may act as mentors to guide them through exposure to the different sets of teaching or research skills and the culture of their disciplines, particularly for those who wish to pursue academic careers.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both high CGPAs and good soft skills are important for pharmacy graduates to excel in their future jobs and thus, should be prioritized. With the recent restricted number of PRP training placements coupled with 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 the concerted efforts from the pharmacy academicians.

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