Behaviour is assessed before a would-be student starts a university course

Schools of pharmacy have to include appropriate health and good character checks as part of the admissions process. Harsha Parmar and Jason Hall describe the procedure and competency standards at the University of Manchester.

We live in a diverse society, so it follows that the pharmacy profession that serves this society should be as diverse as those in it. Applications to study pharmacy should therefore be welcomed from all sectors of society. However, it must be recognised that some individuals may not be able to register as a pharmacist irrespective of how well they do in their MPharm and preregistration training because of concerns over their fitness to practise. It could be considered unfair to allow students who would never be able to join the Register to enrol on a pharmacy programme without at least warning them of this risk at the start.

In 2009, a code of conduct for pharmacy students was published and, at the same time, guidance on student fitness to practise procedures in schools of pharmacy was issued (Pf, 23 May 2009, p623). The code and guidance have raised the profile of student fitness to practise so that students should be aware that their behaviour or health could have an impact on their ability to pursue their chosen career. This article addresses assessing fitness to practise of applicants to pharmacy programmes.

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society guidance on fitness-to-practise document states: “As part of the admissions process, applicants must be informed that their fitness to practise before or during their period of study as a student may impair their eligibility to practise. It should be made clear that such a decision is not made automatically and the fitness to practise committee takes into account the circumstances of the case. In addition, the decision is subject to appeal.” In this article, we describe the process of assessing the fitness to practise of applicants, which is a very important process to ensure that students are fit to practise as students. We also discuss the consequences for non-registration due to fitness to practise failure.

Good character

Information on the Society’s website (www.rpsgb.org) suggests that several students have successfully obtained a pharmacy degree and successfully completed preregistration training only to be denied entry to the Register on account of criminal convictions sustained earlier in their lives. Conducting a criminal record check at the point of entry to an MPharm programme could help alleviate this situation in a number of ways.

First, it could save time and expense for applicants if they know there is no point in pursuing a career in pharmacy. Secondly, having the criminal records reviewed by a school or faculty fitness-to-practise committee could allow students to continue with their studies if the committee considered the conviction or caution did not impair fitness to practise. However, there is no guarantee that the professional regulator would come to the same decision, but the fact that it has been formally reviewed by a fitness-to-practise committee should provide some reassurance to the student. Thirdly, it should raise awareness of the need to maintain good character and avoid criminal convictions to the rest of the students on pharmacy programmes.

The procedure at Manchester

Students in all years of the MPharm at the University of Manchester are required to declare any convictions, cautions or police investigations (monkeybusinessimages/Dreamstime.com).

MPPharm students in all years of the MPharm at the University of Manchester are required to declare any convictions, cautions or police investigations. The MPharm programme director chairs the meeting and can co-opt representatives from NHS trusts where MPharm students undertake hospital visits as part of the MPharm.

Where necessary, students are asked to provide further information, such as a copy of the police charge sheet for the panel to review. The panel reviews the case using the Society’s assessment of good character document and template to assist with the determination.

At this point, the panel considers the seriousness of the offence and the relevance of the offence to pharmacy. Students with minor traffic violations are informed in writing that they can proceed with their studies. All other students are invited to attend an interview with representatives from the panel. The purpose of the interview is to collect further information on the nature of the offence, if necessary, and to explore whether there was any personal mitigation or rehabilitation, whether the student has insight and whether the conduct was characteristic.

In coming to a decision, the panel takes all of the above into account plus the level of cooperation given by the student and the time since the offence was committed. If the panel...
“Several students have successfully obtained a pharmacy degree and successfully completed preregistration training only to be denied entry to the Register on account of past criminal convictions”

has concerns with the student’s fitness to practise, it will refer the matter to the head of school, who could conduct a formal investigation and, depending on the outcome of the investigation, could refer to the faculty fitness-to-practise committee. Where there is no concern, students receive written notification that they can continue with their studies.

**Good health**

Education providers cannot refuse to provide education to students simply because they have a disability or a long-term health condition. However, schools of pharmacy must be able to demonstrate that students are able to achieve the learning outcomes required of the MPharm programme. Less favourable treatment for a reason related to a person’s disability can be justified when it is the application of a “competence standard.”

A competence standard is defined as an academic, medical or other standard applied by or on behalf of an education provider for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability. In the case of vocational courses, competence standards are based on the requirements of the regulatory bodies and decisions about fitness to practise should be made with reference to these. Therefore, there is no duty to make an adjustment to a provision, criteria or practice of a kind which the act defines as a “competence standard”.

However, the duty does apply to the process of demonstrating that a person meets the competence standard. We cannot alter the learning outcomes for an individual student, although we could make reasonable adjustments to the method of assessing the learning outcomes for a student with health problems or disabilities.

The Disability Rights Commission has recently published a code of practice “Disability Discrimination Act 1995: Code of Practice Post-16”. This is aimed at post-16 education providers and follows recent changes to the law under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. With this in mind, a set of five core competency standards for pharmacy has been devised at the University of Manchester. These standards will be taken into account during the production of the competency standards. Figure 1 summarises the possible action that could be taken when an applicant is “red-flagged”.

If additional information or action has been undertaken, the possible outcomes could be:

- Reasonable adjustments can be made for applicants to fulfill the competency standards for pharmacy.
- Applicants may withdraw their application if they are unwilling to risk gaining the competency standards (even with reasonable adjustments), required to obtain an accredited MPharm degree.
- Applicants could be refused a place.

**How will applicants be assessed?**

Once applicants receive a firm offer from the university, they will be sent a pre-acceptance medical questionnaire. This must be checked and countersigned by their GP before being assessed by the university’s occupation health department. Some potential applicants with a health- or disability-related problem may be concerned about their ability to fulfill the competency standards of the course. Such applicants are encouraged to contact occupational health or the disability support service at an early stage in order to explore the situation in depth and consider the feasibility of making reasonable adjustments. It is hoped that the process will prove helpful to students in deciding whether to pursue an application.

The university’s occupational health department will screen each applicant’s questionnaire and decide the appropriate course of action based on the information provided. Where disabilities exist, each applicant will be considered on an individual basis. An assessment will be made to determine whether a candidate can, with reasonable adjustments, meet the above competencies. Figure 1 summarises the possible action that could be taken when an applicant is “red-flagged”.

**Conclusion**

Schools of pharmacy have to include appropriate health and good character checks as part of the admissions process. Competency standards allow schools to assess an applicant’s potential ability to fulfill these standards in order to obtain an accredited MPharm degree, with reasonable adjustments if required. We must treat each applicant on an individual basis, although adjustments cannot be made to the outcomes of the course or its constituent parts, reasonable adjustments can be made to the method of learning and how a student demonstrates the achievement of outcomes.

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CORE COMPETENCY STANDARDS

A set of five core competency standards for pharmacy has been devised at the University of Manchester. They are:

- **Awareness of environment** A potential student has the ability to respond to the needs of patients rapidly and effectively.
- **Ability to maintain a safe environment** A potential student has the ability to remain alert at all times.
- **Communication** A potential student has the ability to communicate with patients, colleagues and other healthcare professionals.
- **Dexterity** A potential student has the necessary health to deal with specific areas of pharmacy and associated duties (adjusted as appropriate) in which he or she is engaged.
- **Cognitive functions** A potential student is in possession of sound judgement and insight.

Figure 1: Possible action that could be taken when an applicant is “red-flagged”.

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