



Letter to the editor

Time to entrust? Rethinking pharmacy intern assessment in South Africa

Deanne Johnston,¹ Ané Orchard²

¹ Discipline of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

² Department of Pharmacy and Pharmacology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Corresponding author, email: johnstonD@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

Background: An essential component of the pharmacist internship is to establish whether the intern is competent to practise independently. In South Africa, this decision is based on multiple assessments: examination, portfolio of evidence, and progress reports. Globally, there has been development and adoption of Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs) to assess both pharmacy students and interns in the workplace. This letter reviews assessments for pharmacy interns in South Africa, discusses the use of EPAs in pharmacy education, and argues for their integration as a means to enhance the structure, consistency, and future-readiness of the existing framework.

Methods: This letter does not employ a specific methodological approach. It reviewed the current assessment framework used by the South African Pharmacy Council to evaluate pharmacist interns and compared these to EPAs used in pharmacy education.

Findings: The current assessment framework, based on competency principles, lacks a structured and prospective mechanism to determine the interns' readiness for independent practice. Literature has shown that EPAs have been used successfully internationally to longitudinally evaluate the competency of pharmacy students and interns to complete profession-based activities in the workplace. EPAs have demonstrated applicability in evaluating clinical reasoning and decision-making through the assigning of a level of entrustment for specific clinical tasks.

Conclusion: The structured pharmacy internship model in South Africa provides a strong foundation for piloting EPAs. Given the dearth of local information, this letter calls for the development and piloting of EPAs to assess pharmacy workplace competencies.

Keywords: entrustable professional activities, pharmacy internship, competency assessment, South Africa, workplace-based assessment

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Introduction

The primary objective of the pharmacy internship is to determine whether the intern can effectively apply their academic knowledge and practical skills within a pharmacy setting, ultimately demonstrating readiness for independent professional practice. In South Africa, this is formalised through a mandatory one-year internship, which pharmacy graduates must complete before qualifying for registration as community service pharmacists. Many countries across the globe assess readiness to practice before permitting the graduate to work independently.¹ A variety of assessment methods have been used to evaluate competency and have included written, oral, and objective structured clinical examinations. However, no "gold standard" for assessment emerged, resulting in variability in intern readiness, lack of standardisation, or tutor subjectivity. Despite the structured nature of South Africa's internship programme, current assessments may lack the prospective, workplace-based insight needed to ensure consistent readiness for practice. Another method of assessing competency is through Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs).

EPAs have gained traction in medical education, where it has been extensively explored to help supervisors in deciding if students

are ready to work independently.² The uptake of EPAs in pharmacy education has been explored within the last decade, where they were first implemented by the University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy in the assessment of pharmacy practice.³ Since then, EPAs have been used extensively in the assessment of students' and interns' readiness to practice independently.^{4,5} In South Africa, there are no studies published, although one is being undertaken at the University of the Witwatersrand, that have explored the EPAs in the South African context, including in the training of undergraduate pharmacy students. This letter reviews the current assessments used for pharmacy interns in South Africa, discusses the use of EPAs in pharmacy education, and argues for their integration as a means to enhance the structure, consistency, and future-readiness of the existing framework.

Assessments of pharmacist interns in South Africa

In South Africa, Bachelor of Pharmacy (BPharm) graduates are required to complete a minimum of 365 days of practical training under the direct supervision of a tutor. During their internship, interns are evaluated via three mechanisms: pre-registration examination, Portfolio of Evidence (PoE), and progress reports⁶ (Table I).

Table 1: Overview of the evaluation of the internship⁶

	Examination	Portfolio of Evidence (PoE)	Progress reports (PRs)
Description	An online examination comprises 120 multiple-choice questions (MCQs), divided into two sections: 40 calculations and 80 general practice.	A PoE comprises six entries submitted online, based on continual professional development entries completed by pharmacists.	Progress reports are completed by the tutor based on observations from the workplace.
Proof of competency	Pass both sections of the exam in the same sitting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculations 60% • General practice 50% 	Successful in all six entries.	Favourable progress reports. The number of PRs depends on the sector of registration.
Basis of assessment	Entry-level criteria for newly qualified pharmacists are described in the Competency Standards for Pharmacists in South Africa.		Questionnaires are developed by the SAPC.

Additional criteria apply to interns completing their internship in academia, the manufacturing, and wholesale sectors.

Both the pre-registration and PoE are based on the competency framework, which identifies six domains and is associated with defined competencies:

1. Public health
2. Safe and rational use of medicines
3. Supply of medicines and medical devices
4. Organisation and management skills
5. Professional and personal practice, and
6. Education, research, and critical analysis

The blueprint of the pre-registration examination distributes questions across the six domains, covering the majority of the competencies listed.⁶ In the PoE submissions, interns are required to submit one entry per domain, keeping in mind that it is compulsory to complete the competency relating to ethical and legal practice.⁶ Criteria for the assessment of the PoE are defined according to the four steps outlined in the continual professional development (CPD) cycle. The tutor, an experienced pharmacist, completes progress reports assessing the intern in the work environment when observing their competence, knowledge, and attitude.⁶ The method of assessment is determined by the tutor and may include direct observation, simulation, evaluation of case studies, and oral questioning. However, the assessments may be subjective, where the intern is judged competent or not, according to the tutor's satisfaction.

Brief overview of entrustable professional activities

Medical education has evolved over time to focus on assessing competency, where the supervisor of trainees trusts the ability of the trainee to perform specific professional tasks. Ten Cate² described EPAs as clearly defined, measurable activities or tasks that are performed by qualified professionals within a specific timeframe and grounded in core competencies. EPAs are not intended to replace competencies, but provide a means to evaluate them in practice.² EPAs are not evaluated using traditional grading methods such as marks or percentages. Instead, they are assessed through levels of entrustment, which reflect the degree to which a tutor is confident in the intern's ability to perform a professional activity and the extent of supervision required. This provides a more nuanced and practical measure of readiness for independent practice.²

Entrustable professional activities in the context of pharmacy

The discussion of incorporating EPAs in pharmacy practice was introduced almost ten years ago, when the advanced pharmacy practice curriculum was initially introduced in the United States to evaluate competencies in the workplace,³ including incorporation into the training of pharmacy students.⁷ For example, the level of entrustment in a pharmacy student ready to commence experiential training would be low, as the student may have only recently gained the knowledge components without practical application; thus in the workplace, they are at first only permitted to observe the pharmacist. In contrast, a supervisor would entrust more tasks, such as dispensing medication and counselling of the patient, to a student nearing the end of the qualification under their direct supervision. The American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) developed a set of Core EPAs to guide pharmacy education and experiential learning.⁸ Since their development by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP), the Core EPAs have been widely adopted across the USA pharmacy schools as a foundational framework for assessing student readiness for practice, guiding experiential learning, and aligning educational outcomes with real-world professional expectations. Richardson⁹ discusses how EPAs are being used in the UK to support trainee pharmacists during clinical placements, especially in light of their expanded role, such as prescribing. The application of EPAs in pharmacy has extended into internship programmes.

Australia has developed 14 validated, implemented, and evaluated EPAs for pharmacist interns based on the competency framework for pharmacists in Australia.^{4,5} Using a validation tool, they determined the degree to which the EPAs were (i) "discrete units of work", (ii) entrustable, essential, and important tasks of the profession" and (iii) "curricular role" described by a panel of experts who were pharmacists from community, hospital and academia.⁵ The finalised EPAs were implemented, where the preceptor (tutor) assesses the interns at four pre-determined timepoints and assigns a level of entrustment varying from "Observe only, even with direct supervision" (Level 1) to "supervise at a distance and/or post hoc" (Level 4). An initial cohort demonstrated that across all EPAs, there was a progression in the level of entrustment assigned by the preceptor, indicating their suitability in assessing competency in the workplace.

The Australian Pharmacy Council¹⁰ present EPAs as an evidence-based approach to determine readiness for practice as a pharmacist, where they will need to make decisions autonomously. Compared to traditional assessment methods, EPAs offer a structured approach to evaluating intern readiness. Rather than relying solely on observed performance, EPAs incorporate reflective feedback sessions where the supervisor probes the intern's understanding of potential risks, complications, and alternative approaches. This deeper engagement enables a more comprehensive assessment of clinical reasoning, decision-making, and adaptability, key attributes for independent practice.

Proposed integration within the assessment framework for pharmacist interns in South Africa

The current assessment framework for pharmacy internship in South Africa provides three distinct components, which are all based on either the competency framework or assessing competency. Although there is a strong emphasis on evaluating competence in the current framework, one needs to question whether these assessments are still fit-for-purpose. To our knowledge, there is no published literature that has evaluated the assessment framework.

The current assessment framework, while grounded in competency-based principles, lacks a structured, prospective mechanism to evaluate readiness for independent practice. EPAs offer a validated, workplace-based approach that complements existing assessments by providing a more nuanced, longitudinal view of intern development. Given the global momentum and demonstrated success of EPAs in pharmacy education, we strongly recommend that academic institutions and the South African Pharmacy Council initiate pilot studies to explore the integration of EPAs as a mechanism to assess competency in the

workplace, and in particular the internship programme. This shift would not only enhance the objectivity and consistency of intern evaluations but also ensure that graduates are truly prepared to meet the demands of independent professional practice. South Africa's existing competency framework and structured internship model provide a strong foundation for piloting EPAs. Their integration could enhance the reliability, transparency, and future-readiness of intern assessments.

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