İstanbul Journal of Pharmacy,
IJP 2025, 55 (2): 253–259

https://doi.org/10.26650/IstanbulJPharm.2025.1593390
Submitted: 29.11.2024
Revision Requested: 24.02.2025
Last Revision Received: 07.04.2025
Accepted: 07.04.2025

İstanbul Journal of Pharmacy

Original Article

Open Access

Expectations of Pharmacy Students for Their First Community Pharmacy Internship: A Qualitative Analysis From a Public University in Türkiye

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Pharmacy internships are crucial for students to integrate theoretical knowledge into their daily practice and acquire practical skills. Although there is extensive literature on pharmacy students' preparedness for internships, little is known about their expectations of pharmacy students in Türkiye. Thus, this study aimed to explore pharmacy students' expectations regarding their first community pharmacy internship to identify potential strategies for improving the learning process.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted shortly before the participants started their community pharmacy internships. The interview questions were developed based on the research team's focus and the findings of related studies. Second-year pharmacy students attending a public university in Türkiye were invited to participate before starting their first community pharmacy internship. Data were analysed using the Maxqda software.

Results: A total of 21 second-year students (6 males and 15 females) participated in the study, and this number was sufficient to reach data saturation. The analysis of the data revealed three categories: 1) Motivations to attend internship such as learning effective communication, and familiarising with medications, and learning the Prescription Entry System; 2) Perceived emotions; and 3) Expectations from pharmacists such as demonstrating tolerance, instructional approach, and guiding career choice.

Conclusion: Further research is needed to understand the impact of the pharmacist-pharmacy student relationships during community pharmacy internships. Additionally, preparatory courses for internships in pharmacy education could reduce students' stress levels and enhance their self-confidence.

Keywords Community Pharmacy · Internship · Pharmacy Students · Qualitative Analysis

Citation: Ulutaş Deniz, E. & Elveren, F. (2025). Expectations of pharmacy students for their first community pharmacy internship: A qualitative analysis from a public university in Türkiye. *İstanbul Journal of Pharmacy*, *55*(2), 253-259. https://doi.org/10.26650/IstanbulJPharm.2025.1593390

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INTRODUCTION

Community pharmacies constitute a significant part of the pharmacy practice worldwide. As the role of pharmacists as healthcare providers expands, community pharmacies offer more services to patients (Coelho et al., 2022; Tekin, 2020). Community pharmacies are widely regarded as key healthcare institutions, serving a large portion of the population and employing most pharmacists. A 2021 study by the International Pharmaceutical Federation, which included data from 79 countries, revealed a 12.1% increase in the average density of community pharmacists per 10,000 people from 2016, reaching 5.19 (n=42). Additionally, the study reported an 11.2% increase in the number of community pharmacies per 10,000 people, now standing at 2.78 (n=50) (International Pharmaceutical Federation, 2021). The role of pharmacists in community pharmacies has evolved from producing and distributing medications to providing pharmacy expertise that increasingly focuses on pharmaceutical care as an integrated part of healthcare services (International Pharmaceutical Federation, 2021). Based on these findings, it is essential to provide pharmacy undergraduates with a solid education and to introduce them to the skills such as responsibility, empathy, emotional resilience, and communication needed for teamwork, delivering patient-centred care, and being prepared to respond to necessary changes in community pharmacies (Oliveira et al., 2017). Fulfilling this role requires experiential knowledge, including both theoretical knowledge and professional development (Kolb, 2014). Experiential learning plays a crucial role in enabling students to acquire and enhance their skills in community pharmacy settings. Numerous studies have emphasised the significance of hands-on experiences and skill-building opportunities that arise from practical engagement in community pharmacies (Alnajjar & Mohammed, 2020; Kim et al., 2019). Internships rely on experiential learning, which involves students reflecting on concrete experiences, relating them to theory, formulating knowledge, making decisions, and solving problems by applying acquired knowledge and skills (Dubón et al., 2021). Pharmacy internships are crucial for students to integrate theoretical knowledge into their daily practice (Peterson et al., 2017) and acquire practical skills (Hatem, 2023). Internships provide an on-site learning environment for pharmacy students. In addition, internships complement pharmacy education through the direct application of curriculum content and the development of personal and professional skills (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2019). A study conducted by Al-Jalehawi et al. demonstrated that pharmacy students acquire valuable experience and knowledge during their internships, which equips them with the essential skills required for effective professional practice (Al-Jalehawi et al., 2022).

Pharmacy education in Türkiye has lasted for five years. During this period, students are required to complete 120 days of internship, which allows them to apply and integrate the knowledge gained from the theoretical coursework. This experiential learning process is essential to foster the development of professional competencies and roles (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2019). These internships must be completed in the summer of the second, third, and fourth years, as well as during the spring semester of the fifth year. These internships are conducted in different institutions, such as community pharmacies, hospitals, and pharmaceutical industries. The first of these internships must be conducted in community pharmacies during the summer of the second year.

Upon beginning their community pharmacy internships, students encounter various stressors, such as anxiety about dispensing the wrong medication and lack of skills (de Almeida Romani et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, students typically begin their internships with strong motivation and high expectations for learning, anticipating significant personal and professional growth during their experiences (Mak et al., 2013). During community pharmacy internships, students are expected to acquire the necessary skills to competently navigate and manage diverse situations across multiple domains of professional development. This hands-on experience is intended to prepare students for the complexities of real-world practice. A systematic review by Peterson et al. determined that pharmacy students are likely to cultivate several skills during their internships. These skills encompass effective communication, teamwork, and clinical proficiency while also contributing to enhancements in their knowledge base, empathy, self-assurance, and cultural sensitivity (Peterson et al., 2017). Although there is a substantial body of literature concerning pharmacy students' preparedness for internships (Al-Jalehawi et al., 2022; Bannan et al., 2021), limited information is available on pharmacy students' expectations in Türkiye. Therefore, this study sought to investigate pharmacy students' expectations regarding their initial community pharmacy internship, with the goal of identifying potential strategies to enhance their learning experience.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design to gain insights into the expectations of students undertaking community pharmacy internships for the first time.

Sample Size

All second-year pharmacy students from a public university in Türkiye were invited to participate in the study before starting their inaugural community pharmacy internships. No specific exclusion criteria were applied. The curriculum at this institution focuses on theoretical knowledge and limited laboratory practices during the first two years. The first internship is scheduled for the summer semester of the second year and continues into the fourth and fifth years, with responsibilities becoming progressively more complex. Participation in the study did not include any financial or other incentives. To determine the adequacy of the sample size, we applied the concept of data saturation, which is commonly used in qualitative research to indicate the point at which no new themes or insights emerge (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Based on this approach, 21 students were deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation. The decision not to add further participants was based on the point at which no additional information emerged from the interviews, ensuring redundancy in responses.

Data Collection

In April 2024, the study's primary researcher presented the research to all 148 second-year pharmacy students set to begin their initial community pharmacy internship and provided instructions to those interested in participating. Queries were resolved through direct communication, and students who expressed interest were individually contacted in June 2024. During this follow-up, the study was reintroduced with detailed explanations of its purpose, duration, interventions, and ethical considerations concerning confidentiality. The participants then completed the informed consent documentation and were given an opportunity to address any additional questions.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted shortly before the participants started their community pharmacy internships. The interviews were conducted between June 1, 2024, and 15 July 2024. To ensure the integrity and precision of the study, the participants were assured that their involvement would not affect their academic evaluations. Interview questions were developed based on the research team's focus and findings from related studies (Soler et al., 2021). These questions were reviewed and endorsed by three qualitative research specialists who were not involved in this study. Although the interview guide was open to potential revision, no adjustments were necessary. Consensus on the interview format and content was achieved through several collaborative discussions among the researchers. Additionally, one student was asked to review and provide feedback on the final version of the interview guide, leading to minor revisions (Appendix 1). The feedback from this review was excluded in the data analysis. All interviews were conducted individually in secure and private settings within the university, with each session averaging 25 min in duration.

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted by a primary researcher who possessed extensive expertise in qualitative methods. The interviews were transcribed verbatim without any modifications by the interviewer. The transcripts underwent thematic analysis using the six-step framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2019) using Maxqda software to facilitate the process. Initially, a secondary researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times to become acquainted with the data and note preliminary impressions of meaning. The content was then coded using codes organised into thematic categories based on similarities. This categorisation process was refined and validated in collaboration with the research team. Following the development of the preliminary results version, it was reviewed by a qualitative research specialist to ensure the accuracy and coherence of the interpretations. No further adjustments were required.

Ethical Consideration

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of XXX University's Faculty of Pharmacy (2400107870). All participants voluntarily provided their informed consent.

RESULTS

A total of 21 students (6 males and 15 females) participated in the study, and this sample size was adequate to reach data saturation, as indicated by Guest et al. (2006). Saturation is defined as the point at which no new themes emerge from the data after a certain number of interviews or participants. The participants were aged between 17 and 21 years and were all in their second year of university. The demographic information and interview durations of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Participants ID	Gender	Age (years)	Interview period
S1	Female	19	35 min
S2	Female	18	25 min
S3	Female	18	20 min
S4	Female	19	25 min
S5	Female	19	20 min
S6	Male	20	35 min
S7	Female	21	35 min

Participants ID	Gender	Age (years)	Interview period
S8	Male	19	25 min
S9	Female	19	30 min
S10	Female	18	25 min
S11	Female	20	30 min
S12	Male	20	20 min
S13	Female	21	20 min
S14	Male	17	20 min
S15	Female	21	25 min
S16	Male	20	35 min
S17	Female	21	30 min
S18	Male	20	30 min
S19	Female	20	35 min
S20	Female	17	30 min
S21	Female	18	25 min

S: Student

Data analysis revealed three categories: Motivations to attend the internship, perceived emotions, and expectations from pharmacists. The results were presented using direct quotations from the interviews, which were anonymized and labelled as S1 through S21.

Motivations to Attend the Internship

Participants emphasised that they felt prepared to start their first community pharmacy internships and highlighted their motivation to learn social skills, such as communication and familiarisation with medications. Additionally, most students indicated an interest in observing and learning about the Prescription Entry System.

"*I believe that gaining a better understanding of the system will* be beneficial for me, especially since I am not yet very familiar with the prescription entry system." (S9)

"*I anticipate engaging in observation, as I will examine the environment within the pharmacy. Specifically, I aim to observe how pharmacists operate, what tasks they perform, and how they perform their responsibilities.*" (S5)

"*I aspire to gain a deeper understanding of medications, particularly their active ingredients and their proper usage. Additionally, I wish to learn how to effectively communicate this information to patients.*" (S19)

"*I aim to enhance my ability to communicate effectively with individuals, recognising that not everyone who comes to the pharmacy is a patient. My goal is to develop better communication skills to engage with all visitors, understand their needs and respond to them appropriately.*" (S18)

Perceived emotions

When asked how they felt before starting their first internships, most students expressed excitement and eagerness, while a minority reported feeling stressed. Those who reported stress emphasised their lack of confidence, attributing it to their unfamiliarity with the tasks.

"*I feel very stressed because of the uncertainty. I am unsure about what will happen, what I will be expected to do, which systems I will need to use, or how I will handle medication sales. I worry that I might have to constantly rely on others or be unable to contribute meaningfully.*" (S14)

"*I am excited and highly enthusiastic. I am eager for my internship to begin and work as soon as possible. In fact, I feel so motivated that I would even consider staying and continuing beyond the internship if the opportunity arises.*" (S4)

Expectations From the Pharmacists

Students emphasised that they expected pharmacists to provide career guidance during their community pharmacy internships. They expressed a desire for this guidance to help them determine whether community pharmacies are a suitable field for their careers.

"*I hope the pharmacist will provide me with comprehensive guidance to help clarify whether I should pursue a career in community pharmacy or explore other areas. I seek their advice to resolve my uncertainties regarding this decision.*" (S11)

The students expressed expectations that the pharmacists would tolerate their mistakes. They also emphasised the desire for a realistic teaching approach that would effectively impart essential tasks related to community pharmacies.

"*As this is my first internship, I am relatively inexperienced and anticipate making some mistakes. Therefore, I expect the pharmacist to be tolerant and understand my errors.*" (S13)

"*I expect pharmacists to demonstrate various tasks to me and encourage my professional development. Rather than discouraging me from engaging in tasks, I anticipate a more instructional approach where the pharmacist actively teaches and guides me through the processes.*" (S9)

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated that the community pharmacy internship was an important period during which students tested their suitability for community pharmacies and either confirmed or reconsidered their career choices.

The participants stated that their greatest desire was to learn how to communicate with patients and integrate it into their practice. Their expectations after completing their second academic year, bolstered by simulation training, centred on effective communication with real patients.

Similarly, a study conducted in Saudi Arabia indicated that most intern pharmacists believed that their internship years helped them develop various skills, including communication skills (Bannan et al., 2021). Pharmacists must engage in effective communication to deliver high-quality patient care and build strong relationships with patients (Svensberg et al., 2018). Communication skills can be gained through practical experience and formal education. Training in patient communication has become an increasingly critical component of pharmacy curricula (Svensberg et al., 2015). As the importance of communication skills in pharmacy practice has become increasingly recognised, the development of effective methods for teaching and evaluating these skills has become essential for educators. Simulations involving simulated patients have been extensively used and endorsed both as a pedagogical tool and as an independent assessment method (Fejzic & Barker, 2015; Gülpınar & Özçelikay, 2021). Although the pharmacy students participating in this study took a communication course with simulation practice during the first semester of their second year, they still wanted to experience and learn communication in real-life settings. Despite being a valuable teaching tool, simulation practice lacks the realism of actual patient encounters, which may explain this preference. (Sansom & Cox, 2013) recognised reflective learning activities as a means of bridging the pharmaceutical theory with the practical complexities of pharmacy practice (Tsingos et al., 2014). Additionally, research indicates that fostering reflective thinking and reflective learning can enhance lifelong learning skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, clinical reasoning, decision making, communication abilities, self-directed learning, and overall professional development (Croke, 2004; Donaghy & Morss, 2007; Droege, 2003; Poirier et al., 2007; Tsingos et al., 2014; Wetmore et al., 2010).

Participants emphasised that they expected pharmacists to approach them with patience and provide guidance in a constructive and instructive manner. As Hatem (2023) notes, interpersonal relationships, particularly the relationship between students and pharmacists, are key factors in the success of internships. The quality of this relationship largely determines how positive the learning experience is. This study demonstrates that students aspire to find mentors who exhibit empathy, approachability, and genuine commitment to their educational growth. Additionally, the research highlights that students value attributes such as trust, guidance, effective communication, understanding, the capacity to create opportunities, and the facilitation of learning. However, it can be challenging to ensure that these expectations are met, especially given the heavy workload of community pharmacists. Therefore, multiple internships with various pharmacists in different community pharmacies may be necessary to allow students to gain diverse perspectives within the field of pharmacy (Hatem, 2023).

Some students reported feeling stressed when asked how they felt before starting their first internship. They cited the prospects of performing an unfamiliar job in an unfamiliar environment. Reflective learning methods can be exceptionally beneficial for helping both students and educators identify opportunities to enhance pharmacy practice, thereby reinforcing a student-focused approach to learning. Research suggests that reflective journals enable students to document their experiences, critically evaluate their practices, convert these reflections into educational insights, and establish a forum to address and mitigate their uncertainties (Mann et al., 2009; Tsingos et al., 2014). Lucas et al. (2019) observed that participating in virtual internship programs before beginning their first "real-world" pharmacy internships significantly enhanced pharmacy students' learning and confidence. The results of the study revealed that most students felt that these virtual programs increased their familiarity with the processes, expectations, and potential activities they might encounter in community pharmacies (Lucas et al., 2019). Therefore, virtual internship programs can help alleviate students' stress.

At this public university in Türkiye, educators not only advocate the use of reflective journals but also promote knowledge sharing and address challenges encountered during internships through seminars and workshops. Before starting their first internships, the students expressed feelings of being "eager" or "enthusiastic." According to existing research, these emotions stem from the desire to learn from and adapt to this new practical experience, which in turn enhances students' sense of belonging (Borrott et al., 2016; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009). Ongoing follow-up throughout the entirety of pharmacy education is necessary to assess students' satisfaction with their learning experiences, stressors, and experiences after initial exposure to real-world healthcare settings. Regular feedback from instructors helps students articulate their experiences, thereby improving their learning outcomes and supporting the development of enhancement strategies.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that participation was voluntary, which may have resulted in a sample that reflects the experiences of more motivated students. Although data saturation was reached, the small sample size and specific context meant that the findings may not be broadly generalisable to all pharmacy students, although they may be relevant to similar settings.

CONCLUSION

Before starting their first community pharmacy internships, pharmacy students' primary expectations were to confirm their suitability for the pharmacy profession, define their career goals, and develop effective communication skills with patients. They also hoped to work with pharmacists that were tolerant, understood their concerns and issues, and provided guidance and an instructive approach to their careers.

Further research is needed to understand the impact of the pharmacist-pharmacy student relationships during community pharmacy internships. Additionally, preparatory courses for internships in pharmacy education could reduce students' stress levels and enhance their self-confidence.

Ethics Committee Approval	The research was sanctioned by the Ethics Committee of Atatürk University's Faculty of Pharmacy (2400107870)
Informed Consent	Consent was obtained from all participants who participated in the study
Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Author Contributions	ContributionsConception/Design of Study: E.U.D.; Data Acquisition: E.U.D., F.E.; Data Analysis/Interpretation: E.U.D., F.E.; Drafting Manuscript: E.U.D., F.E.; Critical Revision of Manuscript: E.U.D.; Final Approval and Accountability: E.U.D., F.E.
Conflict of Interest	The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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