



# Was Pharmacy Their Preferred Choice? Assessing Pharmacy Students' Motivation to Study Pharmacy, Attitudes and Future Career Intentions in Sierra Leone

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## Abstract

**Background:** There is a dearth of skilled pharmaceutical workforce in the African region, and this is partly due to a limited number of prospective students entering the profession. An understanding of the factors that influence the choice of pharmacy as a career is needed to attract highly motivated and skilled individuals into the profession. Therefore, the objective of this study was to assess pharmacy students' motivation to study pharmacy, their attitude and future career intentions in Sierra Leone.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey of undergraduate pharmacy students enrolled at the College of Medicine, and Allied Health Sciences, University of Sierra Leone (COMAHS – USL) was carried out between May and June 2015. Descriptive statistics, as well as chi-square and Fisher exact two-tailed tests were used to analyze the data.

**Results:** Close to a quarter (24.3%) of pharmacy students surveyed chose pharmacy as their preferred major. The choice of pharmacy as a preferred major was common among first-year students, ( $p=0.001$ ), those who were married ( $p < 0.001$ ) and have had pharmacy practice experience ( $p < 0.001$ ). Motivation for choosing pharmacy was assessed based on three domains (education, personal and career-related factors). Students cited a subject teacher at school/ College (66.7%) as the most education-related influence, while friends and family members (61.1%) was the major personal-related factor. Also, students considered the desire for self-employment in a healthcare related job (27.8%), and excellent career opportunities (27.8%) as the major career-related factors that influenced their choice of pharmacy as a preferred major. Medicine was the first choice of study among the majority (95%) of students that chose pharmacy as a second choice when seeking admission into the university. Pharmacy students demonstrated a positive attitude toward the profession, and considered drug manufacturing (47.3%) and hospital pharmacy (43.2%) as the most desirable future career options.

*List of abbreviations:* COMAHS-USL, College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences, University of Sierra Leone; MOHS, Ministry of health and sanitation

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**Conclusion:** This study concluded that pharmacy was never the first choice of study for most pharmacy students that participated in this study. Educational authorities and other stakeholders should bear in mind the factors that influenced students' choices of pharmacy and the public perception of the profession when designing and implementing future recruitment strategies aimed at attracting qualified and highly motivated individuals with a passion for the profession of pharmacy.

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**Keywords:** Motivation to study; Attitude; Career Intentions; Pharmacy students; Sierra Leone

## 1. Introduction

Weak healthcare systems and the shortage of a skilled healthcare workforce are among the factors responsible for poor health outcomes seen in developing countries despite the significant advances in medicine and public health.<sup>1</sup> A recent pharmacy workforce report highlighted a dearth of pharmacy professionals in Africa.<sup>2</sup> For instance, there were approximately seven pharmacists per 100,000 of the population in Ghana in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Similar findings were observed in Tanzania<sup>4</sup> and Sudan.<sup>5</sup> The Pharmacy Board of Sierra Leone (PBSL) data for 2005 suggested that there were two pharmacists per 100,000 populations in Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> As at 2015, 167 pharmacists were serving a population of 7 million people in Sierra Leone with a ratio of one pharmacist to approximately 42,000 people.<sup>7,8</sup> This critical human resource shortage severely undermines equitable access to, and rational use of quality essential medicines.

Although attrition of qualified pharmacists is also a contributing factor to the shortage of this cadre of health professionals, the small number of people opting to enter the profession is perhaps the likely reason for a dearth of skilled health professional especially in the allied health professions in Africa.<sup>9</sup> Growth in the country's population led to a huge demand for healthcare including pharmaceutical services and coupled with the pharmacy profession's quest to incorporate the new reality of practice create the dire need for more competent pharmacy professionals. Currently, there is a hundred percent employment rate for pharmacists both in public and private sectors in Sierra Leone.<sup>7</sup> Also, employers of pharmacists especially in the private sector (community pharmacy) still report the continued lack of pharmacists to fill unoccupied positions. Unfortunately, over the years, pharmacy education and the healthcare system in Sierra Leone, have not adequately responded to this growing demand. For instance, the College Of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences, University of Sierra Leone (COMAHS-USL) is the only tertiary institution in the country that runs a

five-year undergraduate pharmacy program.<sup>10</sup> The enrolment rate per year ranged from 15–20 students. (Personal communication). As a way to increase the number of people entering the profession, the 2005 university Act allowed for the pharmacy technician school to upgrade its certificate course to a diploma program to cater for those who are less qualified to enter the bachelor degree program.<sup>10</sup> Graduates from the Diploma program were expected to join the degree program after some practice experience. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that most did not continue into the bachelor's program either due to family or work commitments and or lack of funds.

Recruitment strategies such as, but not limited to career fairs, campus visits, recruitment ambassador programs, pre-pharmacy clubs, leadership and mentoring academics, boot camps have been shown to have an enormous impact on the number prospective candidate opting to enter the profession.<sup>11</sup> In Africa, strategies such pre-pharmacy and other bridging programs, public engagement through radio and television, partnering with government and private sector to provide financial aid like student loans, or scholarship have been proposed.<sup>9</sup> The success of these approaches, however, would largely depend on a deeper understanding of the various factors that influence an applicant's choice of pharmacy as a career path.

A review of the available literature suggests that the proportion of students who selected pharmacy as their first choice of study ranged from 39% to 51.1% in Africa<sup>12,13</sup>; and 71.5% to 77.4% in advanced economies like the United Kingdom<sup>14</sup> and the United States.<sup>15</sup> Other studies have identified several motivational factors that influenced prospective students to choose pharmacy as their first career choice. One study conducted in the United Arab Emirates for example, identified the passion for helping people and being interested in science as key motivators.<sup>16</sup> Another set of studies in Ethiopia and the United Kingdom posited that being good at, or interest to study the sciences in high school, were key influencers.<sup>12,17</sup> A study conducted in Australia cited extrinsic factors such as future

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