



Supporting students toward a successful transition to university: Preparing for Pharmacy - a first-year student's perspective

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ABSTRACT

This vignette explores the lived experience of a first-year pharmacy student from a widening participation background and the impact of the University of East Anglia's Preparing for Pharmacy (PfP) programme (Harrington and Norton, 2024). It briefly introduces PfP and the BECOME model we developed to build around the programme. The vignette's main focus is combining student narrative with academic reflection to illustrate how targeted support initiatives can transform access, transition, and belonging in education.

The student's journey highlights a non-traditional path - facing academic setbacks and ultimately discovering pharmacy through PfP. The programme's outreach activities, exposure to professional tools, hands-on workshops, and sustained staff mentorship shaped both academic confidence and career identity. These elements reflect wider themes of inclusion and student retention.

The article interweaves personal accounts with literature-informed academic commentary, creating a reflective dialogue between student voice and academic practice. This hybrid approach provides insights into how programmes like PfP scaffold first-year success and break down systemic barriers. The contribution complements wider discussions within the EFYE community around belonging, identity, and transition, offering both practical and emotional resonance.

Keywords: pharmacy, first year experience, access, widening participation, student transition, university preparedness

Context

This vignette from University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich, explores the lived experience of a first year pharmacy student, Akshika (and co-author), through the success and challenges of first-year transition, who studied the UEA Preparing for Pharmacy (PfP) programme prior to undergraduate entry. Academic commentary is provided by Carl and Rosemary who developed PfP to support first year student success.

My journey into pharmacy has been anything but conventional. Coming from a disadvantaged background as a widening access student with no family history of Higher Education (HE), I faced

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numerous challenges prior to HE and had concerns about gaining entry into my desired university course. The PfP programme significantly impacted my transition to university life, equipping me with essential skills and support that provides benefits throughout my academic journey and future career.

Entering my first year as a pharmacy student, I felt well-prepared. The connections made with faculty members and fellow students on PfP fostered a supportive environment that eased my transition into university life. My advisor has been particularly impactful; our strong student-advisor relationship has instilled a sense of confidence in me throughout this journey. Having known her since the PfP programme, I feel secure reaching out to her whenever I need 1-1 guidance, knowing I have someone who genuinely cares about my progression through the pharmacy degree.

The Preparing for Pharmacy programme is summarised in Figure 1 and is part of the UEA's Access and Participation Plan, which aims to increase students from underrepresented groups to consider university and subsequent careers as an option. Students from these groups often have financial barriers limiting their participating in activities like PfP, so student participation is entirely free.

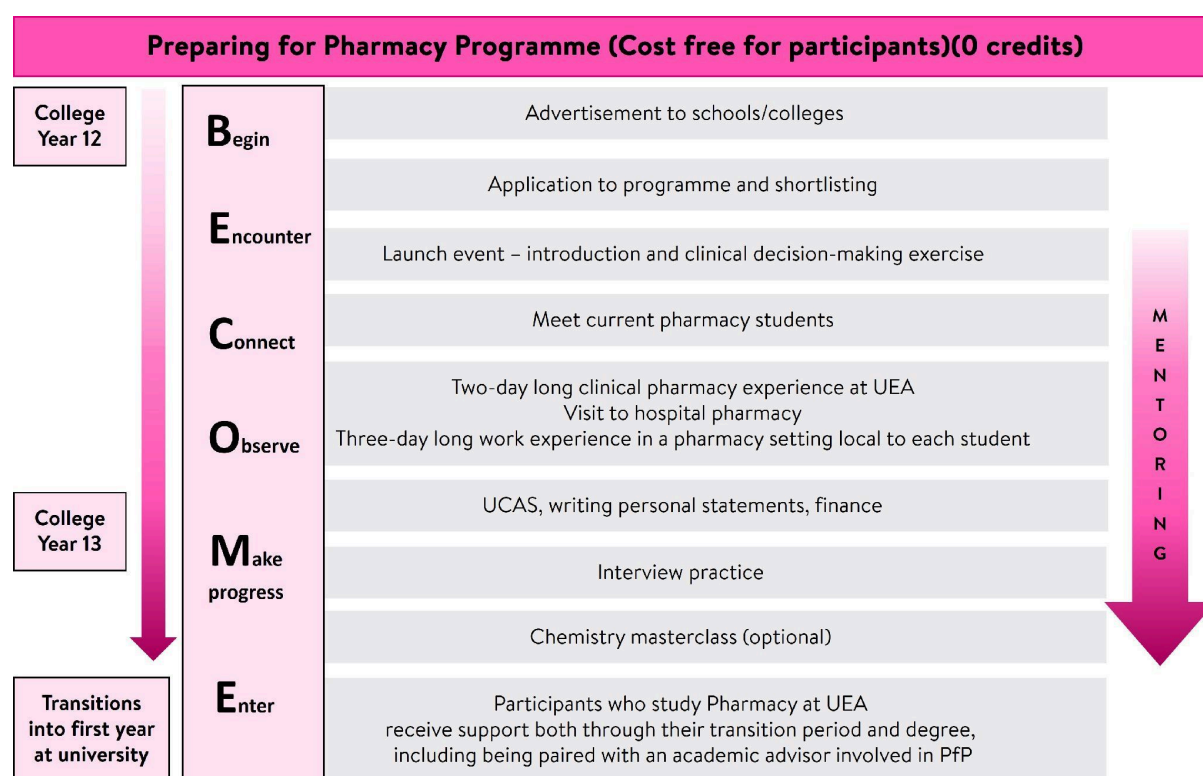


Figure 1 Diagram summarising the Preparing for Pharmacy scheme.

We created a BECOME model (Table 1) to build around PfP, which focuses on emphasizing identity, connection and supporting transition. Its flexible nature allows use across disciplines.

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Table 1 The BECOME model

Action	What does the action involve?
Begin	Raising learner awareness of opportunities through advertising and outreach.
Encounter	Launch events and discipline tasters. Students encounter the field of study and begin to picture themselves within it.
Connect	Meaningful interactions with staff and current students, relationship building.
Observe	Placements, shadowing, simulations, real-life experiences and skill development supported by contextualized learning. Students observe the discipline realities and see lived experiences of others.
Make progress	Structured support to navigate applications, finance, interviews and next steps.
Enter	Transition support into university and on their course. Students step into Higher Education having already felt part of the community.

In 2026, PfP will enter its fourth year and currently 43 students have participated in this non-credit bearing activity. Araujo et al. (2014) describe the transition into first year Higher Education as a process rather than an 'event'. The foundations of PfP were supporting student belonging and inclusion in HE to facilitate student success and retention in first year and beyond (Worsley et al., 2021). It was important to us that students' who took part in this programme were then paired with and further supported by the same mentors once they began undergraduate studies. This consistency and connection facilitated student transition and uniquely gave the mentors personal insights into the challenges students face within this transition, enabling further programme development for future cohorts.

The placements in community and hospital pharmacy during the first year of my degree offered early exposure to healthcare professionals. Having completed a three-day community placement through the Pfp programme, I became familiar with the processes involved, which allowed me to learn rapidly in the workplace. Additionally, my half-day hospital placement, which I had already visited on a tour during the Pfp programme, helped me connect the dots regarding potential career opportunities and better understand the department. The financial support for travel to placements on the Pfp programme was particularly beneficial, removing financial barriers I faced and demonstrating the programme's commitment to widening access to HE.

From previous qualitative research with UEA Pharmacy students, we identified experiential learning prior to university as important for contextualising undergraduate learning. Post-covid many students reported challenges in gaining relevant work experience. By embedding these in the Pfp we can support students to gain experiential learning that supports their applications but also motivation once on the course to contextualise their learning during the first year and thereafter (Harrington & Norton, 2024).

During Semester 1 of my first year, I referred to the booklet from the budgeting session during the Pfp programme on several occasions. This resource provided clear guidance for managing my finances effectively, reminding me of key expenses which has eliminated the stress of forgetting anything important. This allowed me to focus on my studies without financial worries.

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Students face multiple challenges in first year transition (Mulaudzi, 2023), and finances is a particular challenge. We incorporated transferable and practical skills for success at university in PfP and these workshops made a tangible difference to students' first year experience.

In my second semester, I had the opportunity to take blood pressure readings on my peers, a skill I had practiced during the PfP programme. Although I initially forgot the procedure, remembering my previous experience reassured me. It was comforting to know that I had already navigated this before and the staff were always there to help clarify any uncertainties. The workshops on hypertension mirrored what I had learned in the PfP programme. Lab work has also been a key part of my first-year experience. My prior experience with lab equipment during another UEA biology outreach event for 16-17 year olds called DNA fingerprinting, made me feel comfortable and confident when using micropipettes. This familiarity alleviated any anxiety I might have felt in the lab, enabling me to focus on the tasks at hand.

During the first year of my degree, we had to create a presentation in our Problem-Based Learning group. This experience taught me a lot about leadership and teamwork, building on the skills I developed through the PfP programme. PfP gave me first experiences of pronouncing complex drug names, and while I mispronounced a few, the supportive environment made it easy to learn from my mistakes. Now, as a first-year student, I don't find it awkward anymore. I realised that practice and constructive feedback were essential for my growth, and I embraced every opportunity to improve. I was also already familiar with key pharmaceutical resources. Despite the time gap since the programme, recalling how to use these resources has been crucial. I now use them regularly and continue to deepen my understanding, utilising them to the fullest.

To appropriately support first year students, we intentionally built PfP with workshops to develop the same skills, using identical teaching and assessment methods, and introducing appropriate professional resources that all students embarking on a pharmacy course would encounter (Fellingham et al., 2024). This provided students with an advantage of familiarising with these methods and developing the cultural capital to support first year success (Leese, 2010). Students often experience anxiety in making mistakes during unfamiliar environments or assessment strategies which differ to previous educational experiences, but supporting students to appreciate the importance of getting it wrong and learning from it is key to their professional development (Veza et al., 2024).

Overall, the PfP scheme has been key to my first year academic and social journey, broken down barriers and clarified my career path. I've learned that resilience and support are key to overcoming obstacles. As I move into my second year, I have a significant advantage thanks to the unique opportunities provided by the PfP programme. My communication skills have developed greatly and I have become Vice President of the UEA Pharmacy Society. I am also now a student ambassador for the PfP programme. This role allows me to help out in person during sessions and offer advice as an e-mentor, which also provides me with a paid job opportunity. I also had the chance to speak at my former sixth form when applications opened for the new year of the programme. This experience was not only rewarding but also allowed me to share my journey and insights, helping others make informed decisions and navigate their paths, which I found very fulfilling. I felt proud and confident of how far I've come and that I can support students effectively

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so they don't have to go through the same things I have experienced as the first in the family to go to university.

Our aim throughout is to provide students an opportunity to engage and interact with professionals and other undergraduate students to support first year success. Peer to peer support and learning is hugely important, and students on PFP have benefitted from continued mentoring by current pharmacy students. As PFP students progress in their studies they are also able to gain skills and become mentors for future cohorts, meaning the programme continues in a cyclical fashion to support first year success. Seeing students who have been supported by the programme, flourish and succeed in HE is hugely rewarding, and the richness and quality of these partnerships ensure we continue to learn together the barriers and enablers to first year success. As academic leads for PFP, we've worked closely with students like Akshika to co-create a programme that not only prepares students academically but also nurtures their sense of belonging in their first year and beyond.

Biographies

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Akshika Yogarajah is a dedicated first-year pharmacy student and Vice President of the UEA Pharmacy Society, passionate about widening access to education. She aims to emphasise diverse career opportunities within pharmacy, demonstrating that there's more than one path. She aspires to make a positive impact in healthcare and inspire others. a.yogarajah@uea.ac.uk
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