

Foundation degrees

— building on the foundation of experience

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A new course which enables pharmacy technicians to build a formal qualification using their previous experience is now available. This article describes the benefits and challenges of the foundation degree, and how it will help equip technicians with the skills they will need for the future



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As the role of the pharmacist evolves, so too must the role of the pharmacy technician. To help provide the necessary skills and knowledge for this enhanced role, a new qualification, the foundation degree, is now available.

Foundation degrees are “on-the-job”, higher education qualifications designed to encourage participation by individuals who are in full or part-time employment.¹ They are equivalent to the second year of an honours degree and combine academic study with work-based learning.²

Foundation degrees for pharmacy technicians are available at several academic institutions across the UK (see Panel 1, p312).

— Benefits for employers

NHS employers need to secure a highly trained, flexible workforce, working across professional boundaries. The workforce

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needs to be focused on the needs of patients and responsive to change, as outlined in the NHS Plan (2000).

Foundation degrees for pharmacy technicians help meet the needs of hospital pharmacy managers by creating skilled personnel that provide high levels of service in a safe and competent manner. This provides scope for technicians to develop their skills in technical, clinical and managerial areas of practice, increasing skill mix, and enabling more rational use of resources. This not only benefits employers, but all members of the pharmacy team.

— Benefits for technicians

Foundation degrees can enhance technicians' confidence and improve their personal and professional satisfaction. The degree offers an opportunity for development beyond that of traditional in-house training. It is a flexible, higher education programme that acknowledges prior academic and vocational achievements by granting exemption from studying some modules of the course.

Team working is encouraged and sharing of expertise between technicians from different settings is promoted to achieve a holistic understanding of patient care.

Through sharing experiences students are exposed to different ways of working which benefit their own practice.

Completing a foundation degree has enabled technicians to be promoted to jobs with higher Agenda for Change bandings, recognising their commitment and effort towards delivering high quality and innovative services.³

— Challenges to technicians

Academic demands Foundation degree students are often mature students, very competent in their roles but with few academic qualifications. In some cases, the

Further information

Additional information about foundation degrees can be found at the following websites:

- www.foundationdegree.org.uk (general information about foundation degrees)
- www.port.ac.uk/foundationdirect (the foundation degree at Portsmouth)
- www.fdf.ac.uk/courses/Health/ (courses offered across the UK)

Panel 1: Academic institutions offering foundation degrees for pharmacy technicians

- **University of Portsmouth**
Foundation degree in medicines management
- **University of Greenwich**
Medicines management foundation degree
- **Aston University** Foundation degree in pharmaceutical technology
- **Kingston University** Foundation degree in pharmacy services
- **Birbeck, University of London**
Foundation degree in pharmacy
- **Liverpool John Moores University**
Foundation degree in medicines management
- **University of Huddersfield**
Foundation degree in medicines management and pharmacy services
- **University of Central Lancashire**
Foundation degree in pharmacy services
- **Leeds Metropolitan University**
Foundation degree in pharmacy and dispensing

prospect of studying for a higher education qualification can seem challenging. As foundation degrees are work-based programmes, students are required to demonstrate relevant experience through coursework and assessments, and academic abilities are not expected to be above those needed within their sector of practice.

Family commitments Another common perceived difficulty is fitting work and family commitments around studying for the foundation degree.

Finance Prospective students may be worried about how their course will be funded.

— Portsmouth course

One option for prospective students is the foundation degree in medicines management at the University of Portsmouth. The course had its first intake in 2004, and its first cohort will graduate in November 2007.

Course details The course content was developed after local NHS organisations approached South East Medicines Management Education and Development and the University of Portsmouth, with the aim of designing a pharmacy technician education programme tailored to service needs.

The course is predominantly work-based and takes prior learning into consideration (eg, regional checking technician or medicines management qualifications can be credited towards the degree). However, students must attend an average of eight study days per year at the university, to bring “hands-on” experience into an academic context and underpin skills and knowledge.

Course content is delivered using lectures, group work, one-to-one tutorials and an online learning tool. Entry criteria for the degree is an National Vocational Qualification level 3 (or equivalent) in pharmacy services and two years relevant pharmacy experience. Examples of topics covered in each year of the course are listed in Panel 2.

Overcoming challenges The University of Portsmouth offers students a number of resources to overcome academic barriers encountered during the course, including a personal tutor. A practising pharmacist or senior pharmacy technician is also nominated by the student to give support and guidance, and to act as a work-based facilitator. Additional academic assistance is available from Foundation Direct, a centre of excellence in teaching and learning.

The flexible delivery of the University of Portsmouth degree enables it to fit with existing work patterns. Coursework is assigned to align with the student's workplace schedule, and study breaks are available to accommodate personal circumstances.

Financial cost has not been a barrier in Portsmouth as local strategic health authorities have been funding course fees and providing salary support. Prospective candidates should enquire with their employer as to the availability of funding in their area.

Developing the degree The content of the foundation degree at Portsmouth is under constant review to keep up with developments in pharmacy. Rapid changes in pharmacy technicians' practice and the NHS agenda suggest that it is likely that the course content may change annually.

Future plans for the course include an increase in the number of optional modules, allowing students and employers to tailor course content to their specific needs. Research is being undertaken to evaluate the impact on pharmacy practice of studying and completing a foundation degree, with feedback being used to plan future development.

Currently, registration with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain is not required to enrol on the University of Portsmouth course. However, this is likely to change with the forthcoming statutory registration of technicians.

— Conclusion

The role of pharmacy technicians has changed radically in the past decade. Technicians have demonstrated a will to take on additional responsibilities and push boundaries as part of a team. They complement the role of the pharmacist and are now an essential component of the pharmacy team.

If the pharmacy profession is to meet the challenges of delivering quality health care in the modern era, and pharmacists are to develop more clinical roles, it is crucial that the technicians role is developed simultaneously. Foundation degrees help ensure that pharmacy technicians are highly trained and competent, and capable of delivering enhanced technical services.

— References

1. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education foundation degree qualification benchmark. Gloucester: the Agency; 2004.
2. Foundation Degree Forward. Information for employers. Available at http://www.fdf.ac.uk/home/information_for_employers/what_are_foundation_degrees/ (accessed 15 August).
3. Helen Knipe (guest editor). Foundation degrees bring benefits. *The Pharmaceutical Journal* (Registered technician suppl March) 2007; 278:S2.

Panel 2: Examples of topics covered in the foundation degree in medicines management at Portsmouth University

Year one

- Patient-centred care
- Continuing professional development
- Scientific principles and teamwork
- Monitoring of drug treatment
- Multidisciplinary working
- Intermediate medicines management (including patient consultation skills)
- Dispensary checking
- Primary care role in medicines management

Year two

- Therapeutics and pharmacology for medicines management
- Advanced medicines management (including interprofessional working)

Year three

- Practitioner audit
- Strategic and professional development
- Teaching and facilitation within the workplace