

Smooth glide or bumpy ride?

Making the transition from student to pharmacist

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You may think that being a student is hard. Getting up for that 10am lecture — if you can make it; having to be in on time for practicals; deadlines to meet for lab reports and other assignments; and that awful swotting before exams. But there is a fair amount of freedom to organise your study to suit your lifestyle. And, if student life is not exactly stress-free, it is at least reasonably relaxed and informal, and you only spend about 30 weeks of the year at college. But what will it be like when you swap the t-shirt and jeans for a business suit, and you have to be at work at 9am or earlier, five days a week, for 47 or 48 weeks of the year? How will it feel to be the new kid in an experienced team, the novice at the bottom of the pecking order? How will you cope with that?

To find out what making the transition from student to working life feels like I spoke to some preregistration trainees and a recently qualified pharmacist working in community and hospital pharmacy. Our conversations were based on a series of points that a university careers adviser told me that students entering the world of work can find challenging, and these young

pharmacists' comments are set under those headings.

The transition from student to worker

This is not likely to be a problem for most pharmacy students, as nearly all have had previous work experience in pharmacies, either through vacation placements or part-time work, or both, before starting their prereg training.

Laura, a hospital trainee, said that she had done some work shadowing at the hospital while a student, so had met the staff and knew what was in the training programme before she started.

Sharan, a prereg in a superstore pharmacy, said that she had no problems adjusting to working life at first, but things got a bit more difficult later on when she had to start fitting in study for a project and the registration exam around the job. But her company gave her five hours per week off the shop floor as study time, which helped her cope. She had found that a big difference from being at college was being on her feet all day, which was physically very tiring at first, and after starting the job wearing shoes with two to

three inch heels, within a week she had switched to flats.

Hours, and time management

Ben qualified as a pharmacist in Nigeria in 1994, and then came to this country and had to qualify again by taking the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's overseas pharmacists' exams at Sunderland University, followed by the standard prereg training year and the registration exam. He registered in September 2001, and is now working as a resident pharmacist in a London teaching hospital. He has no trouble getting in for work in the mornings as he lives in hospital accommodation, but others I spoke to find it more difficult.

Most had either been living in university halls or nearby flats during their student days, no more than a few minutes walk from college. Now, they had quite long journeys by car or public transport, and were often held up by traffic or transport delays. They had to allow extra time for possible hold-ups to make sure they got into work on time. Some found it easier than others to get up in time for a 9am start, (8am for Sharan), but all said that it was something you just get used to.

Ben thought that time and personal management was actually easier at work than at college, because the day is structured with a scheduled start and finish. At college there are no set private study hours, and you have to depend on your own enthusiasm and motivation to get your work done. Laura agreed, saying that she was now working under the supervision of others within a set work programme, whereas at university it was very much up to her to decide if she went to lectures, and did extra work, etc. On the other hand, her prereg colleague Rajeni thought that pharmacy was a career that you cannot just leave at work. She had to do a lot of background reading all the time to keep up to date, while at college she could leave that until just a couple of weeks before an exam.

Formality

This mainly comes down to dress, and it definitely means no trainers or jeans. Although the dress code tends to be less formal in hospitals than in community, you still have to present a professional image in both. Ben said that when he went into practice he had to do a lot of shopping to change his wardrobe, although Sharan thought that it was easier for boys than girls, as they just needed a shirt, tie and trousers. Rajeni pointed out that it now takes her longer to get ready as she has to iron things before putting them on! And what happens to your student clothes? — you keep them for weekends.

Working for and with others

Laura said that at university everything you do is for your own benefit, but once you go out to work you have to be able to work with others. You need to be flexible and think less about yourself, but this should not be a problem for most students as nearly all have had previous work experience. Laura also made the point that students now are generally well prepared as they get plenty of practice of working in groups at college. Ben thought that working with and for others was beneficial, as it both enhances your own

knowledge and helps you develop a team approach to solving problems. Sharan thought that the downside of team working is that the prereg is often given the menial jobs that others do not want to do. But this is often necessary anyway as they form part of the prereg competencies that have to be achieved, and being able to do them does increase your confidence.

Sharan thought that working with older staff takes a little getting used to after being with people all your own age through school and college life. In Rajeni's hospital department there were a lot of young staff anyway, but she thought that you could learn a lot from the experience of older colleagues. For Laura it was just a matter of being professional and trying to get along with other people; she had not found it difficult.

Fewer holidays

Laura and her hospital colleagues now get 23 days annual leave plus bank holidays, which is quite a difference from the 20 or so weeks they enjoyed as students, although some of that time was spent working. The holidays is what Rajeni misses most about her student days, but it has made her appreciate her time off and her weekends are now very precious. Sharan regrets not being able to join the family holiday any more, having to split her leave, decide holiday dates well in advance, fit in with other people's arrangements and, in common with most community pharmacists, not being able to take any time off in December. But Ben, having been working for much longer, is used to it. He said that you still get holidays, you just have to organise your time and make the most of them.

Less drinking!

This is not a problem for Sharan who does not drink anyway, while for the others it is a matter of reorganisation and drinking responsibly. They all agreed that the days when they could go out drinking heavily during the week were over. Laura said that at college if you had a noon

lecture you could go out the night before, whereas when you go to work you can't really do it. You'd be too tired and wouldn't be able to concentrate. So she now reorganises to make the most of the weekends. Ben agreed that the binge drinking some students go in for is not possible once you are a professional. "You drink, maybe after work", he said, "but remember you're now carrying responsibility. So you can drink, but not as much as you might have if you know you have to go to work the next day. You can't afford to have a hangover and come into work."

Having more money

I was soon put right on the idea that leaving college and going out to earn your living means a lot more money to spend. None of the young pharmacists I talked to had much left over at the end of the month, although Sharan was managing to save a little and Ben thought that his grade B hospital salary, with London and on-call allowances, was quite good. But Rajeni said that she had

the black cloud of her student loan hanging over her, and she cannot pay it off this year as she does not earn enough. Laura said that the money she now earns as a prereg just about covers living expenses, much as her student grant did, and that she does not really feel any better off at all. Any spare money she has goes to pay off her student loan and overdraft. She felt that you should not have to start paying back loans until you are earning a full professional's salary. But she did say that her salary was enough to live on and she could get by on it.

Student expectations and the reality of practice

Perhaps the only notes of disappointment that came through in the interviews were over the status of prereg trainees, the image of pharmacists in practice, and the difference between the picture of the profession painted by college lecturers and the reality. Sharan found it frustrating that at the end of her prereg year, when she felt competent to

take on the responsibilities and decision-making of a pharmacist, she still had to refer many things on. She also felt that the public did not appreciate her skill and knowledge and just regarded her as a counter assistant. Laura and Rajeni felt that the pharmacist's work and contribution to health care were not given proper credit, either by the public or other medical staff. They felt that pharmacists' talents were not being used to their full potential. Ben said that the expectations of preregistration trainees are very high, but they are disillusioned to some extent as everything is not what they have been led to expect.

Laura summed it up this way: "At uni they tell you all about the future of pharmacy and the way it is going. But when you actually get here you realise a lot of those changes are yet to take place and still in the future. They say it will happen in your career, but you don't actually know if it will. So you are a bit disillusioned. It's not quite what they say it is." ❧