

# The foundation training year: How to ace the assessment

We pull together some top tips on passing the registration assessment from the experts, as well as those who have gone through the process themselves.  
**By Sasa Jankovic**



The GPhC's registration assessment tests some, but not all, of the learning outcomes set out in 'Future pharmacists: standards for the initial education and training of pharmacists'. The other outcomes are tested as part of the MPharm degree and foundation training year placement.

Set and moderated by an independent board of assessors, the registration assessment makes sure that all pharmacist trainees have reached the same minimum competence standard, no matter where they have trained in Great Britain.

As part of the overall criteria for registration, the assessment tests the ability of pharmacist trainees to perform the calculations needed to practise as a pharmacist. It also assesses whether a trainee can demonstrate an understanding of how to apply knowledge appropriately and in a timely way, in order to make professional judgements in pharmacy practice.

## Structure of the assessment

The assessment framework sets out the outcomes that will be tested and gives an idea of some of the topics that are covered, although the GPhC notes that "it is not realistic to provide a framework that covers every topic in detail".

Part one of the assessment is made up of 40 calculation questions. Candidates have two hours to complete these and may use a calculator.

Part two of the assessment is made up of 120 questions: 90 'single best answer' (SBA) questions, and 30 'extended matching' questions (EMQs), to be completed in 2.5 hours without the use of a calculator.

Candidates must achieve the pass mark or above for each paper in order to demonstrate that they have achieved the required standard for safe and effective practice.

## Preparing for the assessment

So how can trainee pharmacists best prepare themselves to sit – and pass – the registration assessment? Wojtek Mike Bereza, founder of training company PharmacyCPA, suggests some practical steps to get ready for the assessment:

- **Start revising early** – at around December/January using the BNF, Electronic Medicines Compendium and NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries
- **Refer to CPPE's** 'Effective management of over-the-counter (OTC) consultations' and 'Common clinical conditions and minor ailments' training resources. Ask your supervisor to obtain copies if necessary
- **Know your Medicines, Ethics and Practice (MEP) guide.** Although this cannot be used in the assessment itself, a thorough working knowledge of the areas covered is essential
- **Timing** is crucial in the assessments. The open book assessment needs about two minutes per question, whereas you should allow about one minute a question for the closed book exam.

A good technique is to go through all the questions at the start, answering the ones you know instinctively and leave the ones where you are unsure until later. If you find you are dwelling on one question too long, move onto the next question and return to it later

## Bryonie's story...

Bryonie Owen is a rotational clinical pharmacist at Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Trust. She qualified last year.



"It is important to remember that everyone revises differently, so what works for one person may not work well for you," she says.

"Start revising early, then you will be able to take your time and are less likely to panic. Personally, I started by making a timetable to ensure I could cover everything I wanted to within a given period. I ended up making a lot of adjustments to this, so try to be realistic about what you can complete.

"I firstly made notes using a variety of resources (the BNF, medicine SPCs, 'The Top 100 Drugs' reference book and current NICE guidelines were my top choices). Then, when I wanted to revisit things a second time, I began to be more creative to help remember things, so I made presentations, posters and flashcards. This helped me to stay motivated as it made revision more interesting."

When it comes to calculations, Bryonie's advice is: "Practise, practise, practise! Once you know the steps for each question format, you can easily apply them throughout the assessment. As the assessment approached, I completed past papers under exam conditions including the allowed time limit, which revealed my weaker areas that I could then look at again to improve on.

"I passed the registration assessment on my first attempt and achieved 38 marks out of 40 on calculations and 109/120 on the clinical paper. I was delighted with this and felt it represented all the hard work I had put into my preparation."

- **Concentrate on calculations** – by April you should have read your reference texts such as the BNF and MEP numerous times, which means you now have approximately eight weeks to hone your pharmaceutical calculations. You should aim to practise them regularly, ideally every day
- **Use as many resources as possible.** The GPhC assessment has radically changed in the past decade and at least half the questions in past papers are no longer relevant – so it is better to keep up to speed using online, updated learning resources. After each assessment, the board of assessors produces feedback on the topics that candidates found difficult, which pharmacist trainees should look at as part of their preparation and revision: [pharmacyregulation.org/cy/node/5372](https://pharmacyregulation.org/cy/node/5372).

## Managing the pressure

Pharmacist, lawyer and chair of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's English Pharmacy Board, Thorrun Govind, knows a thing or two about sitting exams.

"It is a marathon not a sprint through the foundation year", she says, "but there are very few professions where you find yourself revising after putting your efforts into a full-time day job. So surround yourself with people who can help you to do that".

Her top tips for managing the very specific pressures that come with preparing for the registration assessment are:

- **Talk to other foundation pharmacists about revision topics.** In a hospital setting, a trainee might have a bigger cohort of

## Single best answer (SBA) questions

An SBA question has three parts: a scenario, a question and five answer options. For this type of question, select the single best answer from the five options. Each question has one best answer, but there may be other answers that are plausible but not the best answer – these are, therefore, incorrect.

## Extended matching questions (EMQs)

An EMQ has four parts: a theme, a list of answer options, an instruction and a number of scenarios. For this type of question, choose the single most appropriate option from the list provided. Each option may be used once, more than once, or not at all.

## Further information

Watch the GPhC's YouTube registration assessment framework video: [youtu.be/vBt0EdhfSzo](https://youtu.be/vBt0EdhfSzo)

Read up on applying for the registration assessment, including the full eligibility criteria: [pharmacyregulation.org/the-registration-assessment](https://pharmacyregulation.org/the-registration-assessment)

Use the latest feedback documents to help prepare for your attempt: [pharmacyregulation.org/cy/node/5372](https://pharmacyregulation.org/cy/node/5372)

'Community Pharmacy Symptoms, Diagnosis and Treatment', Professor Paul Rutter

Visit [pharmacistsupport.org](https://pharmacistsupport.org) for resources and support services for trainee pharmacists



foundation pharmacists they are working with who they can talk to, but it can be isolating working in a community pharmacy on your own. So keep in touch with colleagues from university and establish those support networks early on

- **Request a 'reasonable adjustment' to the assessment conditions if you need one** – and doing it early is vital. Seek advice from Pharmacist Support and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society sooner rather than later if there are any problems
- **Trainees also need to be 'fit to sit'** – so be aware of what this policy is and don't waste an assessment attempt if you are not feeling

well (three attempts are allowed). You can withdraw from a sitting at any time up until the assessment begins, but once you have decided on this course of action, you will not be able to attempt the assessment. (More information about being 'fit to sit' can be found on the GPhC website.)

## Getting your results

After the registration assessment, the GPhC will email or send a letter with the results. Candidates who have completed the foundation training year, shown by a week-52 declaration signed by their tutor, and have passed the registration assessment, are then eligible to register as a pharmacist.

The GPhC sends guidance to unsuccessful candidates with their results, explaining the appeals system, how to prepare to sit the assessment again, and information about help available from Pharmacist Support.

## Confidence boosters

Melissa Dadgar is a PCN pharmacist in London and currently training to be an independent pharmacist prescriber. Having passed the assessment and registered in 2018, she has plenty of tips and confidence-boosting approaches.

"I went from failing exams to getting 95% in my GPhC registration assessment, so I often get asked about my study tips as I've been on both sides of not achieving the results I've needed and also doing very well," she says.

Here are her top tips for dealing with the fear of failure:

- Focus on your weaknesses until they become your strengths
- Take regular breaks and prevent burnout. You don't need to do a million hours of revision and having a healthy balanced lifestyle is key to succeeding
- Don't revise the night before or on the morning of the assessment. I actually stopped revising a week before the exam!
- Stop thinking you are going to fail and start believing you are going to pass. I'd stand in front of a mirror and tell myself I had already passed the exam before I even did it!
- If things don't go your way the first time, don't give up. You'll get there in the end. Plenty of people failed the assessment the first time and are now fantastic pharmacists, so remember that your ability on a set day in the calendar doesn't define your future. Reach out and get support if you need it.

## Summary

The foundation training year and registration assessment can be stressful and demanding, but try to maintain a positive attitude if you can – it really helps. Make a revision plan, take every learning opportunity in the workplace and practise your calculations again and again.

Be familiar with the key reference sources, in particular *Medicines, Ethics and Practice*. Expand your knowledge about OTC medicines and stick to your revision schedule.

Most importantly of all, have belief in your own abilities and experience, confide in your supervisor if you feel stressed and look after your own mental health. A healthy work-life balance will leave you stronger. Good luck!

**Stick to your revision plan and practise calculations to give yourself every chance of passing the assessment**

This is the third of three articles on the on the foundation year programme (previously known as the pre-registration year). The first two in the series can be found on the Accord Partner Platform, alongside other industry news and CPD modules aimed at pharmacists.

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