

When relevance outshines timing – Reflections from SAPHEX 2026

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YPG presenters at SAPHEX: Telicia Jobraj, Matladi Morapedi, Aisha Adam and Kevin Baloyi

At SAPHEX 2026, the Young Pharmacists Group (YPG) delivered a compelling reminder that influence within the profession is not dictated by programme placement, but by purpose. Scheduled as the final session on a rain-soaked afternoon, the YPG could easily have been overlooked. Instead, it became one of the most engaging and thought-provoking sessions of the event.

This moment reflects a broader shift within pharmacy: young professionals are no longer waiting to be invited into conversations about the future, they are actively shaping them.

What made the session particularly impactful was not only the diversity of topics, but the coherence of its underlying message. Across discussions on mentorship, digital health, and generational dynamics, a clear theme emerged: the future of pharmacy will depend on how intentionally the profession invests in people, adapts to change, and fosters collaboration.

Mentorship, often spoken about but inconsistently implemented, stood out as a critical point of reflection. Framing mentorship as a “ripple effect” challenges the profession to move beyond passive encouragement toward active participation. If one empowered individual can influence many others, then mentorship is not simply a professional courtesy it is a strategic imperative.

Yet, this raises an uncomfortable question: are we doing enough to institutionalise mentorship within pharmacy? Too often, mentorship depends on informal relationships or individual initiative. While these are valuable, they are not sufficient. A profession that recognises the importance of mentorship must also take responsibility for creating structured, accessible, and inclusive mentorship opportunities.

The discussion on digital health further underscored the urgency of adaptation. As healthcare systems become increasingly digitised, pharmacists must reconsider the boundaries of their roles. Digital health promotion is no longer a niche interest, it is an essential component of modern healthcare delivery.

The call for pharmacists to become digital health champions is both timely and necessary. Whether through social media engagement, community-based interventions, or technology-driven patient support, pharmacists have an opportunity to extend their impact far beyond the dispensary. However, this opportunity also comes with responsibility. If pharmacists do not actively define their place in the digital health landscape, they risk being sidelined as other professions and sectors take the lead.

Equally significant was the conversation around generational dynamics within the profession. The perceived divide between younger and more experienced pharmacists is often framed as a tension between innovation and tradition. This framing, however, is overly simplistic and ultimately counterproductive.

Young pharmacists are navigating a professional environment characterised by systemic challenges, including limited opportunities, evolving practice demands, and increasing expectations. At the same time, experienced professionals hold the institutional knowledge and influence necessary to drive meaningful change. The issue, therefore, is not one of opposition, but of integration.

Progress within pharmacy will depend on the ability of these groups to move beyond assumptions and engage in genuine collaboration. This requires effort on both sides: younger professionals must be willing to learn and engage constructively,

while established practitioners must remain open to new perspectives and approaches.

Importantly, the session also highlighted the need for African voices in global health leadership. Encouraging young pharmacists to take up leadership roles is not merely aspirational; it is essential for ensuring that health systems are shaped by those who understand local contexts and challenges. Representation in leadership is not just about visibility it is about influence and impact.

The closing discussions reinforced a central idea: leadership in pharmacy is not confined to titles or positions. It is demonstrated through initiative, engagement, and a willingness to contribute to the profession's growth.

In many ways, the YPG session at SAPHEX served as both a reflection and a call to action. It highlighted existing strengths within the profession while also drawing attention to areas requiring deliberate focus and investment.

If there is one lesson to be taken forward, it is that the future of pharmacy will not be shaped by circumstance alone. It will be shaped by the choices made today by individuals who choose to mentor, to innovate, and to collaborate.

The question is no longer whether young pharmacists are ready to lead. The real question is whether the profession is prepared to evolve alongside them.

Bridging the gap before it widens – The promise of “Connect and Elevate”

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The journey from pharmacy student to practicing professional is often marked by a significant and persistent gap. While academic training provides the scientific and technical foundation required for practice, it frequently falls short in preparing students for the realities of the professional environment. This disconnect between knowledge and application, expectation and experience has long been recognised, yet remains insufficiently addressed.

The Young Pharmacists' Group (YPG), through its “Connect and Elevate” Campus Outreach Project, offers a timely and necessary intervention. More than a simple outreach initiative, it represents a rethinking of how the profession supports its future members.

At its core, “Connect and Elevate” is built on a powerful premise: Exposure shapes aspiration. By bringing together professionals from across the pharmacy landscape – including industry leaders, entrepreneurs, hospital pharmacists, and academics – the initiative provides students with access to perspectives that extend beyond the classroom.

This exposure is not merely informative; it is transformative. When students are able to engage with diverse career pathways and hear directly from those navigating them, they gain a clearer sense of what is possible. Career decisions become more intentional, and professional identity begins to take shape earlier.

This raises an important consideration for the profession: should career clarity be left to develop organically, or should it be

actively cultivated? “Connect and Elevate” argues for the latter. It positions mentorship, guidance, and real-world engagement as essential components of professional development not optional extras.

The significance of this approach becomes even more apparent when considering the rapidly evolving nature of pharmacy. The profession is no longer confined to traditional roles, and career pathways are becoming increasingly diverse. Without adequate exposure, students may remain unaware of opportunities that align with their interests and strengths.

In this context, “Connect and Elevate” serves as a bridge that links academic training with professional reality. It helps to contextualise learning, making it more relevant and applicable. More importantly, it empowers students to navigate their careers with greater confidence and agency.

There is also an important equity dimension to the initiative. Access to mentorship and professional networks is not evenly distributed. Some students benefit from established connections and support systems, while others must navigate the profession with limited guidance. This disparity can influence not only career outcomes, but also confidence and participation within the profession.

By creating structured opportunities for engagement, “Connect and Elevate” has the potential to level this playing field. It ensures that exposure is not dependent on personal networks, but is made accessible to a broader group of students.

However, the success of such an initiative cannot be measured solely by its immediate impact. The true value lies in its sustainability and scalability. For "Connect and Elevate" to fulfil its potential, it must evolve into a continuous and widely accessible platform.

This will require collaboration across the profession. Academic institutions, professional bodies, and industry stakeholders all have a role to play in supporting and expanding such initiatives. Investment in early career development should not be seen as an added responsibility, but as a strategic priority.

Furthermore, initiatives like "Connect and Elevate" challenge the profession to reconsider how it defines preparedness. Academic competence, while essential, is only one aspect of professional readiness. Confidence, adaptability and awareness of opportunities are equally important, and these are often developed through exposure and engagement.

In this sense, "Connect and Elevate" represents more than a project; it signals a shift in mindset. It reflects a growing recognition that preparing future pharmacists requires a more holistic approach, one that integrates knowledge with experience, and ambition with guidance.

If sustained and expanded, this initiative could fundamentally reshape how students transition into the profession. Instead of entering the workforce uncertain and reactive, graduates could emerge informed, connected, and proactive.

Ultimately, the question is not whether initiatives like "Connect and Elevate" are valuable, their importance is clear. The real question is whether the profession is willing to invest in them long enough, and broadly enough, to create lasting change.

Because bridging the gap is not a once-off effort. It is an ongoing commitment.

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