

RECOVERING FROM THE PANDEMIC

SUPPORTING THE FUTURE WORKFORCE



*Student Committee
manifesto 2023-2025*

Recovering from the pandemic

The last two years have seen disruption to dental undergraduate education without precedent in peacetime and this Manifesto responds to context that is extremely different to that of previous iterations. The priority of all involved in dental education is necessarily recovering from the pandemic, restoring clinical teaching and rebuilding clinical experience, but also to begin to deal with the toll that this intense period has had on wellbeing and mental health.

While some of the current circumstances are unique, there are also areas of long-standing concern that remain a priority for dental students. The cost-of-living crisis inevitably brings issues of student finance to the fore, but the fundamental issue of ensuring that dental students have adequate financial support during their studies and aren't burdened with debt upon graduation aren't new. Nor is the desire for guarantees around Dental Foundation Training in terms of places, pay and a fair recruitment process.

Where this Manifesto does develop a new theme is on equality, diversity and inclusion. This has rightly been an area that the Students Committee and the BDA more generally has sought to place renewed emphasis on tackling discrimination and inequality, accepting difference, and celebrating diversity.

It represents dentists working in all spheres of practice and dental students studying in the UK. The BDA Students Committee includes representatives from all UK dental schools and works on behalf of students to promote the interests of dental students.

This Student Manifesto sets out the Committee's priorities for 'recovering from the pandemic, supporting the future workforce' in six areas:

1. Clinical experience
2. Stress and wellbeing
3. Equality, diversity and inclusion
4. Student finance
5. Dental Foundation Training
6. Student voice



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Clinical experience

The pandemic caused substantial disruption to clinical teaching and this has had knock-on consequences over a number of years, as schools seek to ensure that final years have sufficient experience and competence to graduate.

This impact has brought a new aspect to long held concerns regarding clinical experience. Over the last five years, the Students Committee has regularly discussed the subject and has explored the differences between the approaches taken at each dental school to targets and clinical skills assessment. This has highlighted the complexity of seeking standardisation in this area, and instead the Committee has looked toward consistency of outcome, rather than focusing on the means of achieving a given outcome.

Recommendations

- a. All dental students should graduate with sufficient clinical experience to allow them to practise confidently and competently
- b. Dental schools must ensure they have sufficient senior and specialist academics and sufficient dental nursing staff to provide high quality education
- c. Student:staff ratios should be maintained at a level that allows for the quantity and quality of clinical teaching needed to gain sufficient clinical experience
- d. Students should gain a range of experience, including working as part of a multidisciplinary team, and in a variety of clinical and professional settings.

Stress and mental wellbeing

The pandemic casts a long shadow in terms of the effects on dental students' mental wellbeing. For the whole population, the isolation, uncertainty, disruption and grief took its toll, and dental students also contend with the pressure and strain of catching up on lost clinical experience. The expansion of clinical teaching to meet this need is obviously welcome, but comes with the risk of burnout.

BDA [research found](#) that prior to the pandemic there were high levels of stress, burnout and psychological distress among dental students, which generally increased as the course went on. As well as ensuring that there is support in place for those who do experience mental ill health during their studies, there must also be a preventative approach that seeks to reduce stress proactively.

Recommendations

- e. Dental schools should take a preventative approach to mental health – seeking to design teaching, assessment, timetable and other aspects of the student experience so that they reduce stress wherever possible
- f. Dental schools, and universities, should ensure that student wellbeing and counselling services are appropriately resourced.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Given the ongoing disparity between the profile of the dental workforce and the profile of the patient population that workforce serves, efforts to encourage a more diverse applicant base to dental schools are critical. More broadly, alongside a renewed focus on equality and inclusion in dental training, delivering effective care to all patients necessitates a sustained focus on working with difference effectively, including through communicating across cultural barriers.

Recommendations

- g. Dental schools should work to break down barriers that cause inequalities in admissions to study dentistry
- h. Academic and clinical teaching should prepare students to provide care to a full diversity of patients
- i. Dental schools should foster an environment which acknowledges and accepts difference among students, staff and patients .

Student finance

As with all students, finances are a core day to day concern for dental students. This applies to both having enough financial support during studies to meet basic living costs and to not being burdened with debt upon graduation. While dental students are supported by the NHS bursary, the combination of a five-year degree and longer academic years means these issues are even more acute.

Recommendations

- j. Student finance should provide sufficient levels of support to meet the cost of living
- k. All dental students should be entitled to an NHS bursary
- l. All governments of the UK must jointly produce information resources which allow prospective students to easily find out what support is available to them
- m. Interest should not be applied to student loans during studies and the interest rate should be linked to the Bank of England base rate
- n. Graduate-entry dental students should be entitled to the same overall level of student finance support as first-degree students.

Dental Foundation Training

Dental Foundation Training (DFT) has dominated the agenda of the Committee's meeting and will continue to. Many of the positions on this, such as around places and pay, will be long-standing.

The Advancing Dental Care review recommended the creation of a new 'early years' training programme that would effectively combine DFT and DCT1. The development of this programme will take place through the Dental Education Reform Programme. This will reshape the postgraduate training landscape and it is vital that students have a strong voice in the development and implementation of these proposals.

Recommendations

- o. Every UK dental graduate should have the offer of a DFT place
- p. Foundation Dentists' pay must be maintained and should increase in line with DDRB recommendations
- q. The national recruitment assessment should be timed to avoid exams and allow plenty of time for the allocation of places. Significant changes to the timing should be subject to consultation with the Students Committee.
- r. The national recruitment process should consist of a balance of assessment elements, with a communications assessment remaining a major component
- s. There should be a standardised process for progression within DFT to ensure consistent operation across deaneries/HEE regions
- t. The Students Committee should have an input on the development of the 'early years' training proposal and the wider work of the Dental Education Reform Programme

Student voice

Dental students have unique and hard-won insights into the challenges facing those preparing for a career in dentistry. On a day-to-day basis, they have direct experience of the challenges and opportunities offered by the current configuration of dental training; experience that, understandably, is not readily available to those more advanced in their careers. While no dental student believes their perspective alone is cardinal, the Committee is clear that its members - and dental students more widely - have considerable expertise and lived experience that is of benefit to a range of stakeholders.

Recommendations

- u. Dental schools should have established and open channels for students to provide feedback and this should be acted on appropriately
- v. COPDEND, if necessary through statutory formal means via Health Education England (and its successors) and deaneries in the other UK nations, must engage with and consult the BDA about any change to DFT
- w. The Students Committee should have strong input into the development of the Early Years Programme specifically and the Dental Education Reform Programme in general.