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Evidence for the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions: Dentistry March 2009

The 16 UK Dental Schools are firmly committed to the widening participation agenda. The Dental Schools Council recognises that the current student population is drawn disproportionately from the higher socio-economic classes, as evidenced by UCAS data. It is essential that talented and able individuals of any background are accepted into Dental Schools, and thus into the dental profession. The Dental Schools Council recognises the value of targeted initiatives to enable aspiring dentists to achieve their full potential irrespective of socioeconomic background. There is an array of support available to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, both from the universities and from the Dental Schools themselves. Targeted schemes include sixth form supported programmes and mentorship. Differential offers to 'compensate' for lower academic attainment relating to socioeconomic disadvantage is a contentious issue. Schools recognise that students accepted onto the course with lower entry qualifications will face a more challenging learning curve and will often necessitate additional educational, pastoral and financial support, yet without discrimination between any cohort of students. The Dental Schools Council would welcome the opportunity to work closely with the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions both to identify good practice, and to develop a UK wide approach to facilitate fair access to dentistry.

Part I: Background detail and facts

Dentistry in the UK

Dentists are required by law to register with the General Dental Council (GDC) before they are permitted to practice the profession of dentistry in the UK. A search of the GDC dentists' register in March 2009 revealed that there are 35,323 registered dentists.¹

There are 14 undergraduate and 2 postgraduate UK Dental Schools in membership of the Dental Schools Council, with a total undergraduate student population of 5,324 at the end of the 2007-08 academic year.² There are an estimated 1,600 postgraduate students at any one time.³

It is impossible to quantify precisely the number of employers and self-employed individuals in the dental profession; employer organisations can be grouped into Dental General Practices (NHS and Private); Salaried Dental Service; and Dental Schools.

¹ <http://www.gdc-uk.net/searchregister/>

² Own data collection, to be published in early summer 2009.

Education and Training

All dentists must hold a primary dental qualification, i.e. a BDS or equivalent, as recognised by the GDC. The undergraduate study is usually five years in duration, although some Schools offer four year fast-track study for graduates, and other Schools offer a pre-clinical year. There are no non-graduate entry routes into the profession of dentistry.

Six UK Dental Schools offer a foundation year of study in addition to the full five year BDS undergraduate course; Bristol, Cardiff, Dundee, Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester. The pre-clinical year acts as an automatic guarantor of a place on the five year course subject to successful conversion. Pre-clinical dental courses are aimed at academically able students who lack the relevant science background.

Five UK Dental Schools offer graduate entry fast-track undergraduate study (Aberdeen, Barts and the London, King's College London, Liverpool and Peninsula), and other Schools accept applicants who have already completed a degree onto the full five year course (for example Barts and the London and Dundee). At King's College London, applicants with a full medical qualification – the MBChB or equivalent – can apply to study dentistry in an accelerated three year course.

In most Dental Schools, prior experience in another healthcare profession does not warrant special consideration to applicants unless they also meet other minimum requirements; however some Schools do take health care experience into consideration and will consider applications on a case by case basis. Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry, as one example, considers applicants with a healthcare background, in conjunction with the GAMSAT admissions test.

UCL Eastman Dental Institute and Edinburgh Postgraduate Dental Institute enrol postgraduate students only, and as such, the composition of the student population at both Institutes is constrained by the intake of students into the fourteen undergraduate UK Dental Schools. Both Edinburgh and Eastman acknowledge the need to work collaboratively with the other Dental Schools to widen participation from traditionally underrepresented groups. At UCL Eastman, the School has removed some of the barriers to accessing taught postgraduate programmes by introducing a number of flexible, part-time programmes of study since 2000. This has increased the number of places available for dental students to study at postgraduate level from 125 in 2000/01 to 383 in 2008/09.

Selection into UK Dental Schools

Applications to study dentistry are handled by UCAS. It is within the judgement of the individual School to select the tools to assess applicants to dentistry. All UK Dental Schools use a combination of tools as part of the admissions process, including, but not exclusive to, application form, structured interview, academic predictions and academic reference. The UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) is currently sought by twelve of the fourteen universities offering an undergraduate degree – but its findings may not always be applied by the School in reaching a final decision.⁴ King's College London, in particular, cites the value of the UKCAT score in enabling the School to invite applicants who would

³ According to HESA data 2006-07.

⁴ The UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) was first used in 2006 as an entrance test as part of the admissions process used by a consortium of 23 UK Medical and Dental schools. The test is an appraisal of aptitudes and is designed with the remit to ensure that candidates have the most appropriate mental abilities, attitudes and professional behaviours for new doctors and dentists to be successful in their professional careers (Annual Report UKCAT, 2008). As such, the test scores are less subject to the effects of schooling and economic background than A-Levels, and so facilitate widening participation.

not have previously been seen as academically competitive but show ability and potential. For 2008 entry at King's College London, approximately 30 applicants from schools whose performance was below the national average were invited to interview, and over half of these received offers. Of those who received offers the majority would not have been selected for interview on pre-UKCAT criteria. In addition to these applicants, approximately 10 individuals who do not meet the entrance requirements but have mitigating circumstances or show potential are also invited to interview every year.

Work experience in dentistry gives applicants an insight into the profession. Most Schools specify that applicants must have observed a dental practitioner at work (3 – 20 days).⁵ Prospective students are encouraged to gain a variety of work experience, for example with an orthodontist, a dental practitioner, a dental technician or a hospital dentist. There is no national scheme to facilitate work experience placements and opportunities are negotiated on an individual basis.

Whilst gaining work experience is an integral part of choosing to become a dentist, the Dental Schools recognise that some students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle to gain the relevant experience. Some Schools give special consideration to applicants who are unable to obtain suitable work experience for reasons relating to socioeconomic disadvantage. Birmingham, Bristol, Dundee, Glasgow, King's College London, Liverpool and Sheffield Dental Schools take into account additional supporting evidence that would affect the strength of an application, including evidence of mitigating circumstances and the academic background of the applicant.

Some NHS Trusts and Dental Hospitals offer summer work experience placements, allocated through application forms. At least two Schools offer work experience placements – Bristol and Dundee – and all Schools liaise closely with local Dental Hospitals. For example, the widening participation lead at Sheffield sends all enquiries to the Dental School regarding work placements to the local Work Experience Co-ordinator. The *Sutton Trust* is one organisation to support fair access to work experience. The Dental Schools Council is also aware of an initiative in the Northern region to raise awareness of the role that dental practices can play in offering experience to young people who may wish to consider entering the dental profession.

Financial support for disadvantaged students

As with all undergraduate programmes financial support is available to students from low income families. Dental students who qualify for additional support do so through national schemes such as those run by OFFA in England and SAAS in Scotland. Most, if not all, universities offer a Hardship Fund for students in financial difficulty.

In addition to national schemes to support students from low income groups, some universities also offer their own 'local' awards. In Sheffield, for example, Alumni fund scholarships are awarded to approximately 30 students per year to the amount of £3,000 over 3 years. These scholarships are awarded to students who are the first in their families to go to university and/ or face particular barriers to study. In Newcastle, three bursaries up to the value of £800 per annum are awarded, which can be offset against the cost of tuition. In Glasgow 50 bursaries of £1,000 are offered per annum, as part of a Talent Scholarship scheme. In Dundee Dental School, a full bursary for the entire course is awarded to one or two students, and there are multiple smaller awards to cover the costs of books and resources. At Peninsula, UK students are eligible for a means tested award up to the value of £1,500 per annum. There, 29% of students in Year 1 receive a financial award.

Students studying in Scotland are provided with a £4,000 bursary in years 2-5 of the dental course, dependent on an NHS commitment of five years post-graduation. All students in a position to honour this commitment are eligible to the bursary (non-EU students are not usually eligible). Further, the SAAS pays fees to Scottish students.

Part II: Evidence on current issues or barriers to access to profession(s)

The major barriers to widening participation in dentistry, as identified by Dental School widening participation leads, are the cost of completing the degree; a lack of sufficient guidance and information both at school and during the university applications process, misinformed careers advice, and the limited aspirations of some students who are interested and capable but do not believe that dentistry is a profession open to them. Anecdotal evidence suggests that family dynamics and peer pressure also play a role.

Self reported data from the Dental Schools indicates a low attrition rate of students enrolled in undergraduate programmes. Typically, no more than one or two students per School per year withdraw from the course, usually citing academic or personal reasons. There are no reported instances when the number or proportion of dental students is higher than 2% of the total student population, and is typically closer to 1% in any given academic year.

Raising Aspirations⁶

UCAS data indicate that in 2008 18% of successful applicants to Dental School were from Socio Economic Groups (SEG) 4-7. The Dental Schools Council recognises that the proportion of successful applicants from SEG 4-7 is lower in dentistry than the proportion of successful applicants to 'all courses' (23% in 2008). These data are best understood in the context of the number and proportion of applicants to dentistry from SEG 4-7, which in 2008 was only 19%. Further, UCAS data on school type indicate that in 2008, 70% of applicants and 67% of successful applicants to dentistry were from state schools and FE colleges, compared with 80% of applicants and 82% of successful applicants to all courses. These data highlight the necessity that more efforts need to be concentrated on raising aspirations amongst individuals from lower socio economic groups, and to raise awareness of financial and pastoral support available to them.

Information and guidance in the applications process

In the past, information and guidance during the applications process was considered to be one of the barriers for applicants to dental schools. However, thorough information is available from School websites outlining the process and how the different elements are used. King's College London is one example of good practice, whereby the college continually reviews and refines website content, and the College intends to put even greater emphasis on providing applicants with detailed information before and during the online application process. Many Dental Schools, for example, Birmingham provide additional support for applicants in low-participation groups. The university also runs a summer school to give an insight into life as a student, access to libraries and carrying out coursework.

⁵ Not a requirement for applicants to Queen's University Belfast or Birmingham.

⁶ Data classified by Socio-economic Class in 1994-2001 where 1-3 = Professional; Managerial and technical/intermediate; Skilled Non-Manual and 4-7(6) = Skilled Manual; Partly skilled; Unskilled. Data classified by Socio-economic Grade from 2002 where 1-3: Higher managerial and professional; Lower managerial and professional; Intermediate occupations and 4-7 = Small employers and own account workers; lower supervisory and technical occupations; Semi-routine occupations; Routine occupations.

UCAS data (2008) indicate that over half of applicants to dentistry are from SEG 1-3, and that these applicants are more likely than applicants from lower socio-economic groups to be accepted onto a Dental course (see figure 1). As illustrated in figure 2, in the context of expanded student numbers in dentistry, the number of students drawn from SEG 1-3 remains consistently higher than average.

Since the late 1990s however, the acceptance rate of applicants from SEG 4-7 has reflected more closely the average acceptance rate of all applicants to dentistry. Furthermore, an analysis of acceptance rates by school type also shows that applicants from Independent schools have had consistently higher rate of acceptance than those from state schools (see figure 3). These data suggest that applicants from lower socioeconomic groupings and state schools may lack sufficient information and guidance needed to prepare a competitive application to study dentistry.

Figure 1: Successful applications to dentistry (UCAS, 2008)

	Applicants	Successful Applicants	Acceptance rate
Total	3211	1209	38%
SEG 1-3	1641	756	46%
SEG 4-7	602	218	36%
SEG unknown	968	235	24%

Figure 2: Acceptance rates for dentistry by Socio- economic grade/ class (UCAS, 2008)

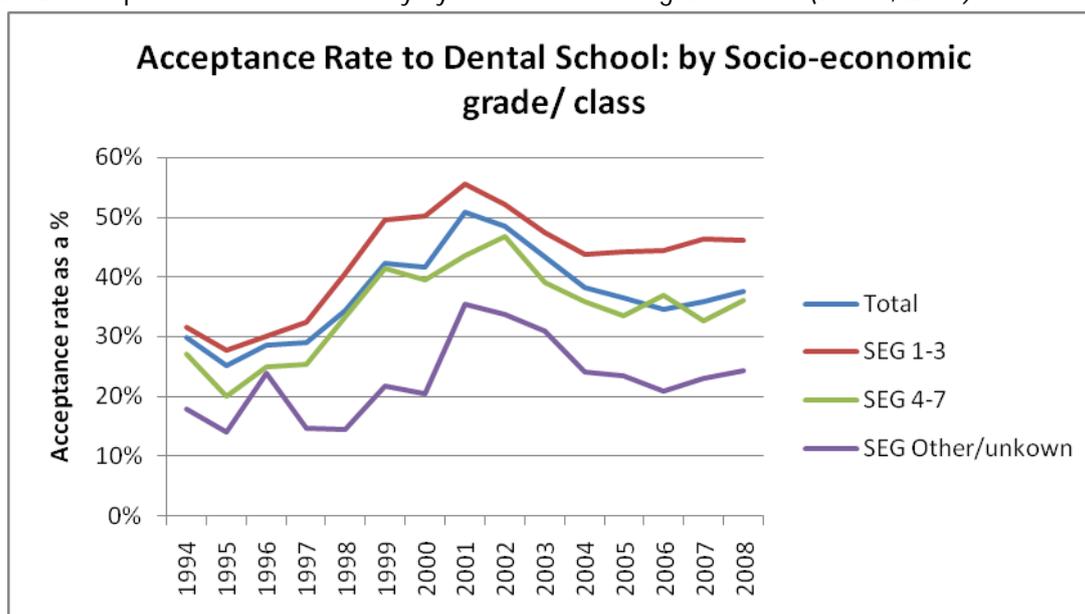
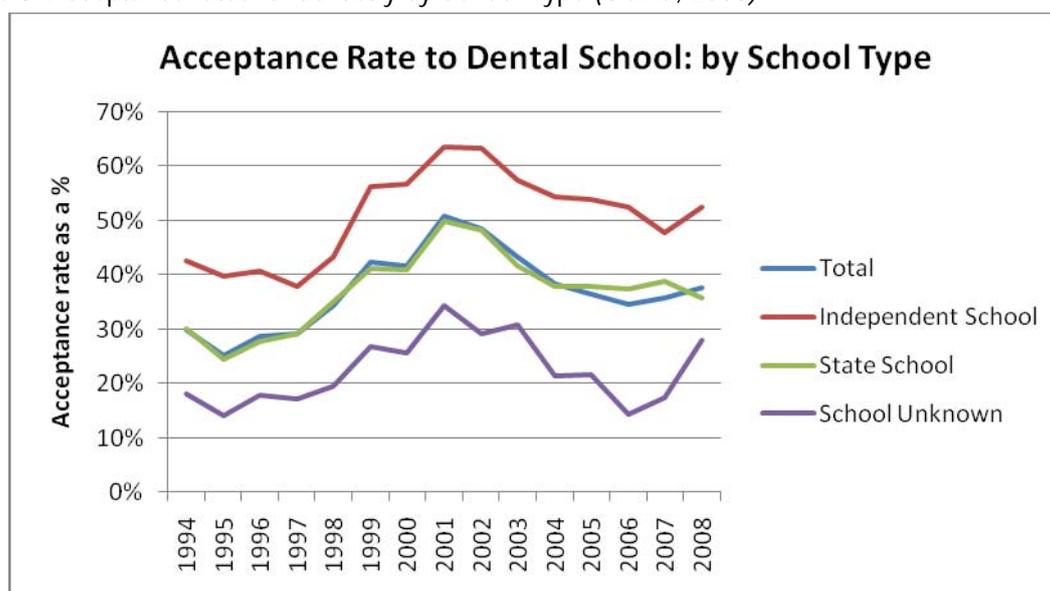


Figure 3: Acceptance rates for dentistry by School Type (UCAS, 2008)



Part III: Current initiatives, programmes and policies to ensure fair access to the profession(s)

All Dental Schools are committed to enabling and achieving fair access to the profession of dentistry. Different programmes are delivered across the country: some schemes operate exclusively within the Dental School, including Glasgow, Peninsula and Sheffield; at other Schools schemes are university-wide, for example at Birmingham, Liverpool and Peninsula. Many programmes are run in collaboration with outreach teams, and include local school-university partnerships, staff and student led school visits, summer schemes, taster days and mentorship.

At least five Schools consider differential offers to students from a non-traditional background, notably Barts and the London, Birmingham, Bristol, King's College London and Newcastle. Other requirements differ – for example, at Newcastle lower offers may be made to students within their *Partners Scheme* and will also be required to undertake an assessed summer school as part of the programme. Eligible students tend to live in a government-defined 'Low Participation Neighbourhood' and may be in receipt of an Education Maintenance Allowance.

In Sheffield, the Dental School uses two schemes to provide extra support. The first is the University wide COMPACT scheme, whereby participating Schools can select students with academic potential to be assessed with special consideration. These students may be made an offer to reflect the circumstances they have overcome. Secondly, the Outreach and Access Team, in conjunction with the Dental School, run the ADOPT Scheme. Approximately 25 students are selected at the start of Year 12 and enrolled on a two year programme of taster days, team building, communications skills development, revision sessions, personal statement writing, interview techniques and a university study topic. These students are guaranteed an interview for either the BDS Programme or the Hygiene & Therapy programme.

King's College London Widening Participation Team receives core funding from King's for Gifted and Talented activities. King's WP Team is also a partner of *Aspire* (Aimhigher South East London), and the *CLP* (Aimhigher Central London Partnership). Previous funding has also come from *The Advice Clinic* (Aimhigher healthcare strand, now defunct). Student Ambassadors, trained by the WP Team, undertake generic activities in schools which mainly involve university life talks and workshops. The

WP Team run a Year 11 Gifted and Talented summer school which attracts students interested in health/science subjects as well as humanities, and also hold health/ science Taster Days which include workshops on dentistry. One day of the summer school also focuses on health/science subjects in general. There is also one Dental student is involved in a science mentoring scheme in a local secondary school, working with Year 11 students.

Other examples of good practice include Glasgow, which was the first School in the UK to set up an Access Course under the Scottish Wider Access Programme, which is for mature students. In Liverpool, the University operates the *Scholars Scheme* for applicants from low participation groups, which entitles students to 40 UCAS points towards entry at the University of Liverpool and an enhanced bursary entitlement. In Manchester, a foundation year in medicine and dentistry is run jointly with the Xaverian Sixth Form College, seeking to attract applicants from non-traditional backgrounds. It has been designed to meet the needs of a broad range of applicants by combining core modules and options to provide appropriate learning opportunities for a diverse range of students. The 'skills escalator' at Peninsula is a relatively recent initiative, but it is anticipated that the multiple entry/exit model will facilitate widening participation.

The Dental Schools Council recognises that there is currently a small evidence base with which to compare the efficacy and outcomes of different programmes to widen participation across the socioeconomic groups. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these schemes are having an effect at local level, for example at Sheffield, where between three and five of the 25 students participating in the ADOPT scheme went on to enrol at a Dental School in the past two years. The other participants gained other skills, including teamwork, communication, and a greater knowledge of the profession – but the impact is understandably small in the grander scheme.

Part IV: Suggested actions to extend fair access to the profession(s)

Raising aspirations among potential applicants is at the root of why some individuals do pursue a career in dentistry, and others do not, and should be the primary aim of any action to extend fair access to the professions. For those individuals who may be the first in their family to go to university, or for whom the expectation is that they will leave school to find a job, there may be social expectations that contradict the reality of five years study followed by a career in dentistry. Many of the most effective programmes to raise aspirations and attainment do so through higher education more generally; and within these programmes, awareness of different professional careers including dentistry can be addressed.

Better careers guidance in schools, and an improved understanding among careers advisors in schools, are two ways of helping to raise awareness of the variety of careers in dentistry. Promotional DVDs of different health care professionals at work which could be targeted at secondary school pupils, may give potential applicants a flavour of what it would actually be like to work as a dentist, a doctor, a hygienist, a nurse or a therapist. In the first instance, such promotional material could be targeted at schools with socially disadvantaged students.

The *Realising Opportunities Project* currently involves 11 research-intensive universities (Birmingham, Bristol, Exeter, King's College London, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Southampton, Warwick plus DIUS). Participating universities will also recognise each others' COMPACT schemes. The project will pilot ways to identify students from groups currently under-

represented in higher education. It is anticipated that around 10,000 pupils each year will benefit from the programme which aims;

- To identify 'most able least likely' students and raise their awareness of HE;
- To add value and encourage applications to research-led universities through a progressive programme of interventions;
- To support entry and encourage successful progression; and
- To ensure continuous improvement in the development of the project.

It is hoped that there will be agreement from universities involved on the use of nationally available and reliable contextual data when shortlisting for competitive courses such as dentistry.

For further information about this submission, or about any of the initiatives mentioned above, please contact the Secretariat on:

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