



**FAQS FOR DENTAL STUDENTS
MARCH 2021**

**The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on dental
education, training and foundation training**

Introduction

Of the training clinical professions, dental education has been one of the most severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many dental students are trained in open-plan, multi-chair clinics. These clinics pose unique potential for splatter and droplets (aerosol) to be spread, especially if all chairs are in use.

Since the emergence of Covid-19, dental schools and hospitals have actively developed evidence-based approaches to minimise the risk of spread of Covid-19 in clinical and non-clinical environments. These approaches enabled dental services and dental education to resume in a safe manner after the first wave of the pandemic. Despite this, solutions have been more easily implemented in some dental schools and hospitals than others due to a variety of factors, including physical infrastructure and staffing.

In common with the rest of the university population, the impact of the pandemic on dental students and staff has been incalculable. Students and staff have experienced academic and social arrangements which would have been unimaginable twelve months ago. In addition, dental students have contended with anxiety about whether they will receive sufficient clinical experience to achieve the outcomes set by the General Dental Council required for graduation.

Throughout the pandemic, the heads of UK dental schools, who together comprise the Dental Schools Council (DSC), have had regular meetings to exchange best practice in pedagogy, funding and resources management, clinical provision and approaches to testing and isolation protocols. There have been ongoing meetings with the General Dental Council (GDC), the UK's dental regulator, as well as other relevant stakeholders such as the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Health Education England (HEE) and its equivalents in the devolved administrations, and the UK Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors (COPDEND) with respect to the impact of the pandemic on dental education and training.

It has been reasonably asked why there is such variation between dental schools and dental hospitals' ability to provide clinical training despite the strong stakeholder relationships which exist between these organisations. Yet for all UK dental schools have in common, each has its unique set of circumstances. These include: English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish regulations; small or large student populations; single or multi-campus; geographical location, local disease prevalence, staff redeployment and infection rates; pressure on local dental services; and access to local or national government testing facilities. Each dental school also has its own unique approach to the delivery of the common standards required by the GDC, and each curriculum is different

in its structure, timing and mode of delivery.

It is therefore to be expected that there are both similarities and differences between dental schools in how they have met the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, dental schools have prioritised the safety and wellbeing of staff, students and patients. Where possible, every effort has been made to ensure that dental students have been afforded the opportunity to meet the learning objectives of their programme in order to qualify as safe beginners and graduate as close to the original schedule as possible. Moreover, dental schools have committed to maintaining the integrity of the learning and assessment processes to preserve the high standards of dental education and training, and in doing so preserve the reputation of the graduating cohorts.

In light of the decision taken by several dental schools to extend their courses, the Dental Schools Council understands that students in different parts of the UK may have concerns about whether they will be similarly affected. The Dental Schools Council has therefore developed the following FAQs to highlight some of the key issues faced by the sector.

Dental education and training

Will there be an undergraduate dentistry intake as normal in 2021?

Scottish dental schools will not admit new students in September 2021 to allow current students to gain sufficient clinical experience to progress or graduate. Dental schools in other parts of the UK plan to offer a student intake in 2021.

Is it likely that teaching will be delivered online in the academic year 2021-22?

It is difficult to predict with certainty what impact Covid-19 will have on dental services in the academic year 2021-22. However, all dental schools expect the vaccine coverage to make a difference. A hybrid mode of delivery is likely to take place for the next academic year and it is expected that this will vary according to curriculum and local factors.

Could extra teaching sessions be provided outside of the standard dental course to allow dental students to catch up on missed clinical experience?

Some dental schools may determine that they can offer additional teaching sessions including on evenings and at weekends, but this should not be expected as standard practice. There are important factors which will determine whether dental schools can offer additional teaching. This includes funding considerations but also the need to protect staff and student wellbeing by not overloading them with extra work.

Could degree programmes be extended if students do not gain sufficient clinical experience?

Dentistry degree programmes could be extended if a dental school judges that students have not had the opportunity to gain sufficient practical experience to meet the learning outcomes of their course.

How are dental schools supporting student wellbeing?

Dental schools recognise that dental students, who undertake an already demanding course, have faced extra challenges and stressors during the pandemic. Dental schools invest substantial effort and resources to support student wellbeing and have endeavored to provide students with adequate information on any changes to their courses. Through the Dental Schools Council, schools are sharing best practice on supporting students from all backgrounds.

Assessment

Will assessment be standardised for all dental schools?

Dental schools run different assessments at different stages of their courses and at different times of the year. Assessments of clinical skills will continue but the detail of exactly how and when these assessments take place may change if required. Your dental school will keep you updated on how your assessments will be run but these, like clinical placements, may be prone to enforced change.

Dental schools, through the Dental Schools Council, meet regularly to share best practice on matters that affect dental education and training, including assessment. However, universities remain autonomous bodies and can therefore choose how to deliver their exams. Dental schools must follow their wider university's policy with regards to assessment.

Will dental schools carry out final exams in the event that they cannot be delivered in person?

Yes, individual dental schools will develop contingency plans for final exams in the event that they cannot be delivered in person. It is important to note that dental courses have been exempted from Government restrictions on in-person teaching and assessment. This is because dental students are training for vital public sector roles which may require some in-person teaching and assessment.

Safe beginners

How does the GDC define a safe beginner?

A safe beginner is a rounded dental professional who, in addition to being a competent clinician, will possess a range of professional skills required to begin working as part of a dental team and be well prepared for independent practice. They will be able to assess their own capabilities and limitations, act within these boundaries and know when to request support and advice.

What requirements must students meet to qualify as a safe beginner?

The GDC's Standards for Education sets out the requirements that education providers must meet in order for courses to be accredited and therefore allow registration with the GDC. The GDC also provides details of the learning outcomes that must be achieved prior to graduation. Dental schools must be able to evidence that all students have demonstrated attainment across the full range of learning outcomes at the level of a safe beginner, and that they are fit to practise. Evidence must also be provided that demonstrates this assurance, which should be supported by a coherent approach to the principles of assessment referred to in these standards.

Why are there different targets in dental schools as to what quantifies a safe beginner?

The standards of a safe beginner and the learning outcomes that underpin that standard are set by the General Dental Council and are the same for all UK dental schools. However, students at different dental schools have experienced different levels of exposure to clinical environments since the outbreak of the pandemic. This means that some dental schools have taken the decision to graduate students later in order to give them time to catch up on the lost time in clinical placements necessary to meet the degree requirements.

How far can simulation teaching replace direct patient care?

To ensure patient safety, there is a large amount of clinical simulation teaching and compulsory assessment of students before they begin treating patients. The ways in which clinical simulation is used to support progress to the GDC safe beginner standards continues to develop. However, there are limits to the level to which simulation can prepare a student to deliver direct patient treatment. Students must have exposure to an appropriate breadth of patients and procedures and should undertake each activity relating to patient care on sufficient occasions to enable them to develop the skills and

the level of competency to achieve the relevant learning outcomes set by the GDC. It is incumbent on each dental school to monitor the clinical experience students have gained throughout the programme against each of the learning outcomes.

Is it still appropriate to maintain target numbers for treatments to be achieved at the point of graduation?

Placements are important as they enable students to develop the clinical and professional skills they need to practise dentistry. Individual dental school curricula are tightly mapped to the learning outcomes set by the General Dental Council required for graduation. While there is not usually a discrete quantitative target for each treatment for students to achieve, it may sometimes be necessary for students to make up lost time on placement to ensure they are able to meet these outcomes.

Why does the GDC not change the standards to reduce the stress on students?

The primary role of the GDC is to protect patient safety and maintain public confidence in dental services. It does this by maintaining a register of qualified dental professionals; setting standards for the dental team; investigating complaints about dental professionals' fitness to practise and working to ensure the quality of dental education. Within its overarching role as regulator, the GDC has a statutory responsibility to quality assure dental education leading to registration and to set the learning outcomes for all categories of dental professionals to enable them to enter their register. The purpose of setting these standards is to ensure that the public can have confidence that newly qualified dentists are competent. For this reason, it is important that the GDC maintains the agreed standards and does not undermine the public's trust in the profession.

What disqualifies a student from beginning Dental Foundation Training (DFT) in September?

Undergraduates who have not reached the competencies of a safe beginner will not be able to graduate, but will have additional opportunities to reach that level before graduating and entering DFT. These opportunities are still being confirmed.

Delay to graduation and foundation training

What needs to be achieved to commence DFT and who is responsible for making this decision?

Dental students must meet the standards for safe beginners set out by the General Dental Council. Dental schools must provide evidence to the General Dental Council demonstrating how students have met the learning outcomes of their courses.

Can dental schools graduate their final year cohort at different times to other schools?

Due to the varying local impact of the pandemic across the UK, some dental students may have gained more clinical experience than others. To confer degrees, dental schools must be assured that students have demonstrated attainment across the full range of learning outcomes, and that they are fit to practise at the level of a safe beginner. Dental schools may therefore graduate their final year students at different times to other schools if it takes longer for students to gain the clinical experience required for graduation.

Will there be any changes to the intake for Dental Foundation Training if some students graduate later than usual?

It is hoped that as many students as possible will graduate to begin Dental Foundation Training in September. Dental schools are in regular contact with COPDEND about their anticipated timelines for graduation and the associated arrangements for DFT if there is any delay to graduation this year. Ongoing discussions are taking place with COPDEND about whether it is feasible to offer two intakes for DFT, in September 2021 and a later one in 2022.

If dental students are required to stay at undergraduate level for another six months/year what is the suggestion for funding this extra time at university? Will dental students be funded by the NHS/HEE/SFE (or their equivalents in the devolved administrations) for tuition fees and maintenance costs?

Universities are working with the relevant government bodies to ensure funding is available for dental students that have had their course extended. Scotland's dental schools have actively explored mechanisms for the mitigation of additional costs with key stakeholders and funding bodies. The Scottish Government has announced that a bursary of up to £6,750 will be offered to dental students who will have to repeat a year. The Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow will continue to provide support to dental

students navigating the complex consequences of the extension of their courses.

How confident are you that we will have a September start for DFT?

It is hoped that as many students as possible will graduate to begin Dental Foundation Training in September.

Is there an approximate date for when we will be able to rank schemes for DFT placement? How will subsequent dates be affected, i.e. length of window to rank them and when we find out results?

HEE has announced that the opening of the system for preferencing of DFT schemes will take place later than usual this year amid uncertainty about the number of graduates requiring places for 2021-22. It is yet to be confirmed when preferencing will open, but HEE and DSC are working closely together to allow for this as soon as possible.

It seems different dental schools have different levels of technology and are operating at different levels. How are you ensuring that we are on a level playing field, and able to graduate at the same time despite technological differences?

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on dentistry in all parts of the UK has been severe. Some parts of the UK and some sectors have been more affected than others by the pandemic. In addition, schools have different curricula, facilities, physical infrastructure and staffing. As a result, dental schools and hospitals have actively pursued and developed evidence-based, locally appropriate, approaches to minimise the risk of the spread of Covid-19 in clinical and non-clinical environments to enable both dental services and dental education to resume and continue in a safe manner. These solutions have had to be bespoke for each dental school and hospital.

National governments are working to support dental schools with their recovery through funding to help ensure all dental schools can continue to deliver high quality education.

Will final years have sufficient time to prepare for their Dental Foundation Training (DFT) placements?

Undergraduates who have not reached the competencies of a safe beginner will not be able to graduate, but will have additional opportunities to reach that level before graduating and entering DFT. In some cases this will require an extension of their programme and this will reduce the break between finishing the undergraduate degree and commencing the DFT programme.

It is understandable that graduates might want to extend the break between graduation and DFT especially with the potential for some undergraduate programmes to be extended. A graduate in this situation is not obliged to enter in September 2021, and can take time out and apply for entry at a later date. Meanwhile, they might wish to work

in private practice. While it is compulsory for all graduates of British dental schools to complete foundation training before they can become a Performer on an NHS contract, graduates can still practice in private practice without this certification.

Graduates may be offered the opportunity to participate in the DFT through a second intake in Spring 2022. It should be noted that due to the nature of the training trainees are not usually permitted to take annual leave within the first few months of the programme.

For current year 4 students, will DFT application be based solely on SJT as with this year or will interviews be re-incorporated again?

Due to the ongoing restrictions associated with the pandemic, the 2020 DFT application process consisted of the Situational Judgement Test (SJT) only. It is not yet clear if this will be carried forward for 2021 applications.

Why are Universities in Scotland and the rest of the UK differing in their plans for Foundation Training?

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on dentistry in all parts of the UK has been severe. Some parts of the UK and some sectors have been more affected than others by the pandemic. Dental schools are working with the regulatory and training bodies to ensure students meet the competencies required in order to graduate and begin foundation training. However, due to the impact and variation of local Covid-19 disruption, the timeline for this will differ between different regions and countries.