

# Beyond the curriculum: the student experience at Newcastle Dental School

Kiran Jones<sup>1</sup>

## Key points

Explains how Newcastle Dental School has achieved a very strong sense of community between staff and students.

Outlines the vast array of societal and extra-curricular activities available within the School and explains how they facilitate a rich and varied undergraduate student experience.

Demonstrates how effective student representation and cultural influences have informed a number of key developments within the School.

## Abstract

The student experience at Newcastle Dental School is not only influenced by the curriculum, but also extracurricular activity, which can be shaped by changes in our students, culture and society each year. Yet it is also guided by tradition that underpins the 'Newcastle experience'. This article looks beyond the curriculum and the experience of our students as told by one of our students. From the sense of community within the School to reaching out to our local community and across the globe, the student experience beyond the curriculum is special and it is important to support the activities that underpin this to allow our students to make the most of their time at university.

## Introduction

The School of Dental Sciences was founded in 1895 and celebrated the significant 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of dental education and research in 2020. Aside from research, the School's most important output is undoubtedly its graduates, many of whom have remained in the Newcastle area or even returned to the School as members of staff. Our curriculum has seen many changes in the last 127 years, with more recent changes reflecting the requirements of the General Dental Council's *Preparing for practice* and *Standards for education*. Currently, we deliver two degree programmes: the Bachelor's in Dental Surgery degree (BDS) and the more contemporary, Bachelor's in Sciences degree with Honours – Oral and Dental Health Sciences degree (ODHS). Now, more than ever, there is greater emphasis on the development of professionalism, managing behaviour change in patients and demonstration of

excellent communication skills, along with the understanding and application of the contemporary evidence base. These details are set down in the explicit or declared curriculum and will be very similar to other dental schools regulated by the General Dental Council. What differentiates between schools, however, and perhaps the aspect of a curriculum that has changed most in the last 127 years, are those elements that are additional to the curriculum and often hidden, including the relationship between students and staff, the environment and everything contributing to the student experience. To that end, having been invited to contribute to this series of articles by the *British Dental Journal*, we considered that perhaps exploring such developments within the curriculum and beyond may be best undertaken through the eyes of one of our students.

The remainder of this article is the product of multiple informal discussions with members of the School, both staff and students alike.

and NHS Trust seeking to work together to achieve a supportive learning environment. The integrated nature of both undergraduate programmes and the clinics where students work provide varied opportunities for interprofessional collaboration between dental and dental therapy colleagues, making you feel part of a wider care family. Secondly, a key element of the School's ethos is an open door policy. All staff are extremely welcoming and successfully promote a psychologically safe learning environment, encouraging curiosity and embracing mistakes through facilitating a reflective learning process. Moreover, our clinicians are extremely approachable and are considered as colleagues rather than 'teachers'. This culture is further compounded by different types of student-staff events that take place throughout the year, such as student-staff pub-quizzes, socials and even football games.

## Student societies

Integral to this community is the vast array of peer-led clubs and societies offered, which have been subject to significant developments over the last 20 years, recognising the increasing diversity of our student population. The oldest of these is DentSoc, formed in 1897, which is a social society run by a committee of dedicated 4<sup>th</sup> year BDS students

## Sense of community

Newcastle has an incredibly strong sense of community among staff and students, one which has a vast, multifaceted nature. Both the Dental School and Newcastle Dental Hospital are highly integrated physically, with the School

<sup>1</sup>Undergraduate Student, School of Dental Sciences, Newcastle University, Framlington Place, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE2 4BW, UK.

Correspondence to: Kiran Jones  
Email address: K.Jones12@newcastle.ac.uk

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who organise a variety of socials, catering to all students. The DentSoc committee minutes from 1909 refers to the student-staff annual dinner and dance, a tradition that the society still organises to this day to celebrate the hard work and current and future success of the final year cohorts. Current examples include: DentSoc pub quizzes; barbecue and rounders socials; Halloween nights; and the famous Take Me Out DentSoc, where our undergraduate students get an opportunity to put the drills down and try some bonding of their own. Such events give us an opportunity to socialise with students from different years from both degrees, indirectly offering a substantial support network between students, with more senior students offering advice to junior peers about how to succeed in their upcoming studies and how to navigate these challenging, professional degree programmes. Increasingly, the social activities organised recognise the diversity of our student population and cater to all by having events that increase cultural diversity.

The DentSoc committee is peer-elected and has expanded in recent years in line with educational and social developments within the School. Following the increase in awareness of mental health disorders and in promoting mental wellbeing, a new committee role of Wellbeing Officer was established, aimed at helping signpost those who need support with their mental health, tackling the stigma around mental health and aiding the development of mental health initiatives to increase awareness of the complex disorders that exist. Moreover, the monthly DentSoc newsletter 'Fill'in' features articles written by staff detailing their own experiences of dental school, offering advice on how to manage your time and how to best succeed. The articles are light-hearted and grounded in the realities of their undergraduate lives, helping to breakdown the notion of a student-teacher divide, further contributing to our School's incredible sense of community. Understanding how some of our most talented clinicians had challenges during dental school can allow us to manage perfectionism, relieving internal pressures young dental professionals put upon themselves.

Our DentSoc committee's Sports Secretary oversees a variety of diverse sporting activities and competitions, including DentSoc's biggest annual sporting event 'Field Day', which regularly attracts over 100 students for a

large sports day with Dundee and Glasgow Dental Schools. The event lasts a couple of days, with the bulk of competition occurring first, followed by numerous social activities with our Scottish Dental School colleagues, for 'a perfect opportunity for networking'. Additionally, the School boasts a successful women's netball team – the 'Tooth fairies' – and the more oddly named men's football team – the 'Axe-Wielding Baboons'. Both sports teams have demonstrated great success against other university intra-mural teams and are welcome additions to our wide array of clubs and societies. As previously alluded to, activities like these contribute significantly to the sense of community and belonging we have within the Dental School, a community that has been recently challenged to its core.

### Impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of our lives, which for our generation is at unparalleled and unprecedented levels. While the pandemic had varying impacts on our learning community, it did allow us to come together and reflect on our core values. In particular, I observed staff prioritising their efforts to tackle issues, such as the lack of social interaction imposed by lockdown and our connectivity with the outside world, the impact of online learning on student direction and motivation and the support for students' mental wellbeing in the face of an ever-changing global situation.

Developing and maintaining one's mental health is vital to success as an undergraduate and postgraduate dental professional. Hence, it is paramount that an effective support network is accessible – a fact laid bare by the pandemic. The School has put into place a package of developments aimed at making mental health support resources more visible and locally available through the appointment of a Wellbeing Advisor. All students receive weekly emails from the Wellbeing Advisor about drop-in session availability and are reminded that regardless of the magnitude of a problem, the School is there to listen and help. This is extremely powerful and reassuring and I feel is something all students greatly value.

A significant amount of hard work and dedication was committed to ensuring we could return to campus as quickly and as safely as possible. Clinically, central to this was the undertaking of cutting-edge global research into the generation and behaviour of dental

aerosols within clinical environments.<sup>1</sup> From a student perspective, we sometimes forget how saturated our clinical environment is with cutting-edge researchers and world-leading speciality clinicians. However, in the advent of this research, it was exemplified to us the researching excellence of our institution in allowing us and others to return to clinics and campus, impacting on clinical environments both nationally and internationally.

### Student voice

Core to many developments within our learning experience is the student voice. Within the Dental School, we have an immensely effective student representation platform comprised of the student-staff committee (SSC). The SSC was the epicentre for the development of a student-led initiative – the DentEd society – following student feedback about increasing the availability of peer-led revision sessions. Now, four years after its creation, the society has an established structure, featuring elected stage leads for BDS and ODHS and a popular social media page, where a variety of events are posted throughout the academic year, including content-based revision sessions and Q&A events (such as sessions on managing caseloads and competencies and the introduction to clinics), as well as facilitating talks with invited speakers from dental suppliers. Being exclusively student-led, we are extremely proud of the work DentEd do. For many, coming to dental school is daunting, so for younger students to hear stories from more senior students about their first days on clinic can be immensely reassuring and powerful. The society is engaging, supportive and contributes significantly to the sense of community within the School, which was especially prominent during the height of the pandemic. The student voice is present at many of our staff-led committees. Students involved in our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee have played a significant role in developing a pledge to our Students' Union to make an anti-racist, diverse and inclusive dental school. This initiative came to fruition in our student response to the tragic murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement. Activities to achieve this pledge include cultural competency training, celebrating more varied religious festivals and decolonising the teaching content.. Inclusion

of evidence-based research regarding established variations in oral disease experiences for different minority ethnic groups and the oral and systemic presentation of such diseases in a variety of different skin tones aims to challenge the teaching culture that only healthy gums are pink.

## Community commitments

With reference to the School's connection with the wider community, many significant developments have occurred. Most prominent is the establishment of BrushUp (another student-led initiative) and the need for developing dental education within the community. BrushUp strives to improve the oral health of the North East. They provide a range of interactive educational sessions for all ages, exploring the importance of the oral hygiene and dietary aspects of the contemporary preventative dental strategy. With an established social media presence featuring an education oral health mini-series of videos, the society has grown to a membership of over 100 volunteers, even attracting students completing non-dental studies. Additionally, their activity was officially recognised at the University's celebrating success awards, where last year's BrushUp president won the student leadership award, and the society won the student for health award and were runners up in the youth volunteering award categories, respectively. BrushUp went onto the Pride of Newcastle awards and was further awarded the outstanding contribution to lifelong health and wellbeing award (the most prestigious of all). These successes are a direct product of the dedication exhibited by the BrushUp volunteers and exemplifies the commitment the students have to developing community oral health. Furthermore, the BrushUp organisation has worked closely with the SSC to ensure that the preventative activity completed can be logged officially through our clinical output system 'iDentify'. As well as BrushUp, Newcastle Dental School has established strong connections with community dental services. All students, during their latter clinical studies, have opportunities to work within one of four centres within Newcastle. The sessions provide students with a wealth of experience working within primary care high-needs areas of the city. These significant developments within community are greatly welcomed and markedly enrich our student experience.

## Charitable fundraising

In addition to the aforementioned volunteering opportunities, the Dental School has a strong commitment to charitable fundraising. On 13 April 2021, we, as a Dental School, mourned the tragic and momentous loss of one of our most beloved students, Connor King. Connor was an incredible man anyone could have the pleasure of meeting. He had an extremely vibrant, warm and generous personality and was an immensely talented individual. He had the most tremendous manner with patients, which many of us would aspire to emulate and had all the aspiring qualities of a dentist in abundance. In his honour, his family established the Connor King Foundation, a charity contributing to the many things Connor was passionate about, most notably with the aim to create their own scholarship scheme in dentistry, giving students from underprivileged backgrounds a chance to forge a career in dentistry by paying for their university tuition. Consequently, we have held multiple fundraising events throughout the year, raising in excess of £2,000. With these donations, among many others in combination with the Foundation's hard work and dedication, they aim to have their scholarship scheme up and running by the end of the year: a fantastic achievement. The Connor King Foundation will always be close to the School's heart and we will continue to organise and raise money for them so they can help as many people in Connor's name as possible.

## International developments

Historically, at the end of 4th year BDS and 2nd year ODHS, Newcastle offered a two-week elective opportunity for students to travel overseas and perform a wealth of community-based dental work at specific centres in places such as Southeast Asia, Southern Asia and South America, while exploring the landscapes and cultures of their destination. Due to the impacts of COVID-19, these have not gone ahead for the last three academic years. Instead, a virtual elective (VE) alternative was organised, offering students the opportunity to collaborate internationally with students from partner institutions in Fiji, Indonesia, India and the USA. As part of the VE, student groups would complete a presentation on a topic of their choice based around the idea of global innovation. The VE was initially unique

to Newcastle University; however, following the first year's success, Dundee Dental School joined the endeavour, exemplifying the VE's benefits. Moreover, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dental School strengthened its established international relations by embarking on an articulated degree programme with Brunei University. The Bruneian undergraduate students are a phenomenal asset to the School and have allowed Newcastle undergraduates to learn about the Brunei culture.

## Conclusion

The concept of the 'sense of community' has been famously defined as 'a feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together'<sup>2</sup>. Hopefully, after reading this article, an understanding of how Newcastle Dental School has comprehensively achieved this has been demonstrated. Despite the degree curriculum forming the majority of the undergraduate student experience, the richness of this experience is truly developed through the variety of available opportunities that go around this curriculum and beyond. Whether that be engaging with student representation through the SSC and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committees, participating in society-led activities, playing sports or by completing volunteering and charitable fundraising activities, respectively, Newcastle Dental School has something to offer to all. Therefore, for this reason, in combination with the wealth of developments outlined, I am proud to be a student here.

### Ethics declaration

*The author declares no conflicts of interest.*

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