

A guide to entry into specialist training

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IN BRIEF

- Guides recent graduates through the process of applying for specialist training.
- Outlines the MFDS and MJDF examinations, master's degrees and other postgraduate qualifications.
- Deals with the potential financial implications of specialist training.
- Covers other aspects of CV building in preparation for application to the dental specialties.

Dental graduates have a number of career pathways to choose from, one of which is to train as a specialist. It is sometimes difficult to obtain good advice on entering the specialist training process. This paper, aimed at recent dental graduates, gives an overview of what is required of applicants who wish to obtain a specialty registrar (StR) position in one of the 13 dental specialties recognised by the General Dental Council. The potential financial implications of specialist training are outlined, along with information on dental foundation training, MFDS and MJDF examinations and postgraduate degrees. The importance of gaining experience in clinical governance and research is outlined. Advice regarding the application process and interview technique is also included. It is the authors' intention that, having read this paper, recent dental graduates will have increased knowledge of the various career paths that lead to specialisation and those interested in specialising will have improved knowledge of how to begin their journey.

INTRODUCTION

Application to the dental specialties can be a daunting process and one which takes dedication and commitment. The amount of information freely available on what is necessary to obtain entry to the dental specialties is limited and the introduction of new curricula by the General Dental Council (GDC)¹ and the publication of the dental *Gold guide to specialist training*² means significant changes to entry criteria have occurred since the previous paper on this subject was published.³ Specialist trainees are now referred to as specialty registrars (StR), rather than specialist registrars (SpR) and all dental specialist training programmes are a minimum of 3 years in length, in line with European legislation.⁴ A list of dental specialties currently recognised by the GDC⁴ is shown in Table 1.

Dental graduates will of course be familiar in broad terms with the nature of each

of the existing specialties. Some may have a clear idea of which specialty they wish to enter, or may be unsure of whether they wish to ultimately pursue specialist training, preferring to follow an initial career plan which keeps the options open.

If you are undecided, it is important to reflect on which aspects of dentistry you enjoy and which you feel you have an aptitude for. For example, if you have never enjoyed performing extractions it is unlikely that you will make a good oral surgeon. Conversely, if you are fascinated by orthodontics it is likely you will succeed as an orthodontist and your innate interest in the subject will drive you through the training process. Choosing a specialty is an important decision and the determining factors should always be your passion and interests.

With regards to oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMFS), dentists can work within this discipline at a junior level. OMFS is, however, a medical specialty and will therefore not be discussed further in this article.⁵ Those thinking of a career in OMFS will need to adopt a very different career path to those entering the dental specialties and are advised to seek advice from their OMFS colleagues.

The next step should be a discussion with an existing specialist in the field. Specialists will be happy to give advice

Table 1 List of current specialties recognised by the GDC⁴

Dental specialties currently recognised by the GDC

Paediatric Dentistry

Special Care Dentistry

Restorative Dentistry

Prosthodontics

Periodontics

Endodontics

Orthodontics

Oral Surgery

Oral Medicine

Oral Microbiology

Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology

Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology

Dental Public Health

and encouragement to any dentist interested in joining their specialty. Former lecturers and tutors from dental school are useful people to speak to, as are consultant colleagues and current specialty registrars. These discussions will provide an insight into life as a specialist and will be invaluable in deciding whether to commit not just to specialist training but also to the career that follows it.

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BUILDING YOUR CURRICULUM VITAE AND THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Regardless of the specialty you are considering there are many curriculum vitae (CV) items which are common to all specialist entry requirements. Acquiring as many of these as possible will increase the chances of a successful application. These requirements are listed in the person specification, which is always attached to the advertisements for specialty training positions. There will be some local variation but they will all share common ground. In the past it was commonplace to send a copy of your CV as part of your application, however, this is no longer the case as standardised application forms are now used throughout the UK. It is still advisable to keep a summary CV up to date to act as a basis for your applications, as you may need to apply more than once before you are successful. It is also useful to send a copy to your referees so they have all the details at hand when writing your reference. Non-UK graduates are advised to first check that all their visa documents and work permits are in place before applying for a specialist training post.

Generic person specifications for all medical specialties are available on the modernising medical careers website.⁶ No such specifications currently exist for dentistry. Therefore, based on the GDC curricula,¹ a reference guide for postgraduate dental specialty training in the UK (The dental *Gold guide*)² and medical specialties entry criteria⁶ we have devised a dental generic person specification, which is shown in Table 2. It should be noted that this table will not be representative of the person specification for all StR positions, nor does it have the approval of COPDEND; it is included as a generic guide only.

QUALIFICATIONS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

After BDS graduation, exam results have already been obtained and it is impossible to go back and change what has been achieved at dental school. It is the opinion of the authors that a lack of outstanding results at undergraduate level should not put off potential applicants to the specialist lists. Undergraduate prizes will enhance any application; however, postgraduate

REQUIREMENTS	ESSENTIAL	DESIRABLE
Qualifications & academic achievements	Full and current registration with GDC or eligibility for temporary registration BDS or equivalent	Distinctions, prizes, awards, scholarships, other diplomas, degrees or higher degrees for example, MJDF, MFDS, or equivalent, BSc, MSc, or PhD Presentations Publications
Training	Completed Dental Foundation Training in deanery approved training post or equivalent	Competence in pre- and post-operative management Computer skills Evidence of participation in, and understanding of the principles of audit and clinical governance Validated logbook indicating appropriate experience
Ability	Good knowledge of basic science and the ability to apply this to clinical practice General dental and 'specialty' dentistry skills. Ability to make good, legible clinical notes	Evidence of understanding and application of dental technology Evidence of general and 'specialty' skills Potential to develop
Motivation	Commitment to specialty Commitment to learning Punctual	Ability to organise own learning Shows initiative
Personal attributes	Ability to work as part of a multi-disciplinary team Caring attitude Honest Trustworthy and reliable Good time management	Outside interests
Personal skills and attitude	Organisational ability Potential to cope with stressful situations and undertake responsibility Good communications skills Be able to establish professional relationships with patients Prepared to rotate as specified	Ability to cope with stress Leadership qualities A critical enquiring approach to the acquisition of knowledge
Research	Understands principles and relevance of clinical research	Enthusiasm for and evidence of participation in research
Practical requirements	Be physically and mentally fit and capable of conducting operative procedures which may be demanding of a number of hours of close attention	

achievement and experience are equally important. It is unwise to rely solely on undergraduate distinction in the specialty application process.

MFDS AND MJDF

In the past, obtaining the Member of the Faculty of Dental Surgeons (MFDS) diploma, or the now obsolete FDS qualification, was an essential requirement to enter specialist training. However, it was felt that a single entry exam to the dental specialties was too prescriptive and that candidates should be able to demonstrate their readiness for specialist training in other ways. The MFDS qualification has now moved to the desirable column

to reflect this change. MFDS is offered by both the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow.

The Royal College of Surgeons of England now no longer offers MFDS; it has been replaced by the Member of the Joint Dental Faculties (MJDF) qualification. This represented a merger between MFDS and the now obsolete Member of the Faculty of General Practitioners (MFGDP) qualification. For the purposes of entry to specialist training, they are considered to have equivalence.

The Membership of the Faculty of Dentistry (MFD) qualification is also available through the Royal College of Surgeons

Table 3 Comparison of the MFDS and MJDF postgraduate qualifications

	MFDS	MJDF
Awarding body	The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh The Royal College of Surgeons of Glasgow	The Royal College of Surgeons of England
Eligibility criteria	Successful completion of 24 months full time postgraduate experience in dentistry required for award of the diploma	Successful completion of work-based experience and submission of Portfolio of Evidence
Exam format	Part 1: Written examination containing multiple choice questions and a separate short answer paper. Part 2: OSCE examination	Part 1: Written examination containing multiple choice questions, single best answer questions and extended matched item questions Part 2: OSCE examination
Fees (2011– UK based examination)	Part 1: £555 Part 2: £675	Part 1: £475 Part 2: £600 Portfolio: £50
Total cost	£1,230	£1,125

in Ireland. This two-part examination has full reciprocity between both parts of the MFDS qualification offered by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. The MFD qualification will not be dealt with in further detail in this paper. Full details are available through the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland's website.⁷

Although now listed in the desirable column, it would be unusual to be appointed to a specialist training position without one of these postgraduate qualifications. Therefore, obtaining MFDS or MJDF is still the first step on the road to specialisation. While closely related, there are some subtle differences between the two. A comparison of the two qualifications is shown in Table 3.

The usual pathway for candidates wishing to obtain MFDS or MJDF is to undertake 2 years of dental foundation training (DFT). This will involve completion of vocational training and then one year spent in a dental hospital, a general hospital undertaking a job in oral and maxillofacial surgery or working in the community dental services. During DFT, candidates for MJDF can build their portfolio of evidence⁸ by undertaking additional projects under the supervision of their consultants and educational supervisors. Alternatively, candidates can fulfil the requirements for MJDF while working in general dental practice.

Choosing which examination to take is somewhat difficult and there is little to

firmly recommend one over the other. It may be that one sounds easier to obtain, one is more convenient in terms of the location of the college, or the cheaper of the two diplomas may seem the most attractive. Further information regarding MFDS and MJDF exam syllabuses, sample questions and examination timetables can be found on the respective Royal College websites.^{9–11}

TRAINING AND ABILITY

Following DFT there is the additional option of undertaking a 1 or 2 year Dental Career Development Post (DCDP) to gain additional experience in a specific specialty. Further information on DFT and DCDP can be found on the COPDEND website.¹² Simply by undertaking DFT, or DFT plus a DCDP, many candidates will acquire the items listed in the desirable column in Table 2. However, it is in the completion of the application form and at the interview where these skills are demonstrated, so be sure to include all your experience in these areas.

Particularly relevant in this section is audit and it is worthwhile undertaking additional audit projects to flesh out this section of your application. Completion of an entire audit cycle is an advantage as it shows that not only has an audit been completed but also that changes have been implemented as a result. A well-presented log book also makes a good impression. Inclusion of details of any specialist skills acquired, with reference to your log book, will demonstrate an interest in the specialty.

Emphasise that although you are primarily interested in one specialty, you have a wide range of experience. This is an advantage when undertaking multi-disciplinary care; something which is of particular importance in a secondary care environment. Attendance at conferences or courses related to your chosen specialty will enhance and demonstrate your knowledge and be sure to mention your most recent basic life support course and other core CPD.

Membership of specialist societies is an advantage as it not only shows willingness to learn but also affords an opportunity to meet others with shared interests and to build on their knowledge base. Although membership is not free, many offer reduced membership rates for recent graduates. Any lectures or seminars you have given, or posters you have presented, will add the finishing touches to this section of the application form.

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES, SKILLS AND ATTITUDE

Some of the criteria listed in these sections are difficult to demonstrate on an application form or at an interview, such as having the ability to establish professional relations with patients. Much of this information will come from your referees. However, the application form may contain specific fields such as:

- Give a recent example of a situation where you used your initiative
- Tell us about a recent difficult situation you have managed
- Give a recent example of when your communication skills were tested.

These often have a strict word limit. In some respects the actual scenario you choose to describe is less important than how you structure your answer. Firstly, the scenario should be briefly outlined. Secondly and most importantly, your role in how the situation was successfully resolved should be described. Finally, what you learned from this experience should be stated. There is no need to feel your scenario is trivial or may compare unfavourably to other applicants. These fields are designed to demonstrate your ability to describe a scenario succinctly and show you have learned and grown as a result of your experiences. These questions may

also come up at an interview so be prepared to expand on what you have written on your application form.

This section also deals with teamwork and it is therefore useful to mention any multi-disciplinary clinics you have attended to demonstrate this. Any additional responsibilities you have undertaken, such as committee membership, management experience and organisational roles, should also be mentioned here.

PUBLICATIONS

Publications are a useful way of demonstrating motivation, knowledge and organisational skills. Writing a book review or a letter to a journal can be an effective introduction to the publication process; this can be achieved by contacting popular dental journals. While book reviews and letters are not equivalent to peer-reviewed articles they are recognised as publications and do show initiative. Case reports are another useful way of gaining a publication and it is recommended that as soon as you see an interesting case, take it to your educational supervisor and ask if it is suitable for publication. Educational supervisors are there to support you and are generally delighted to help with such projects.

RESEARCH

Research has been defined as 'performing a methodical study in order to prove a hypothesis or answer a specific question'.¹³ It is difficult for recent graduates to get involved with large research projects. Junior staff generally undertake one year rotations and research projects often take a year to plan and approve before they even begin. Analysis of results, writing up and preparation for publication are all time consuming processes. It is not therefore realistic to complete a substantial research project as a DFT. However, this does not mean you cannot get involved in research. Volunteering to help with some of the more labour-intensive aspects of the research process, such as the ethical approval process, will often be welcomed by senior staff and will give you exposure as to exactly what goes into a research project and something to talk about at your interview. Involvement in critical review or journal club meetings will also increase your insight into research methodology.

Table 4 Estimated average cost of undertaking a clinical masters degree at a UK dental school

Course duration	Average tuition fees	Average living expenses	Total
One year full-time/ two years part-time	£19,617	£9,000	£28,617
Two years full-time	£39,233	£18,000	£57,233

We strongly advise that you publish any research you have done. Publications are an important method of contributing to the profession's knowledge base, to the specialty of your choosing and for the benefit of patients and the public. Indeed, research is only useful if it is published as it is only through disseminating knowledge that the profession can benefit. Do not be discouraged if you feel your research project is not a large, groundbreaking study; these are few and far between. Instead draw satisfaction that you have contributed to the overall knowledge of your chosen profession; not to mention enhanced your job prospects.

You will undoubtedly be asked a question about the principles and practice of research in your interview. Make sure you have familiarised yourself with different types of research methodology, the hierarchy of scientific evidence and keep in mind a specific paper you have read in case you are asked to give an example. Reading one of the many books available on critical appraisal technique will be advantageous. Those candidates who have completed a master's degree or PhD will have had research experience and are at an advantage in this area.

POSTGRADUATE DEGREES: MASTER'S DEGREES

Most specialty trainees are expected to undertake a master's degree as part of their training. It is a mandatory requirement for some specialties but not others; although there is usually an expectation that one will be undertaken. For example; restorative dentistry has no specific requirement for a master's degree, whereas specialist training in orthodontics will always involve a master's degree.

Master's degrees available include Master of Science (MSc), Master of Clinical Dentistry (MClinDent) and Master of Dental Science (MDentSci). Research-based master's degrees are also available in the form of a Master of Philosophy

degree (MPhil). Potential applicants have the option of obtaining a master's degree before applying for a speciality training position. This is of particular relevance to those specialties where a master's degree is an expected, as opposed to a mandatory, requirement of the training. A master's degree will undoubtedly enhance your CV although it will require significant personal and financial commitment.

Master's degrees vary in subject, duration and design (full-time, part-time or distance learning). Thirteen UK dental schools offering clinical postgraduate taught master's degree programmes were contacted and asked to supply details of their tuition fees. Ten schools responded. For EU graduates, total fees ranged from £14,000 to £50,000 depending on the programme. It should be noted that non-EU citizens usually pay a higher rate of tuition fees. Non-clinical master's degrees are also available; for example, in dental public health. Tuition fees are considerably lower for non-clinical master's degrees. Specific details of the courses available at each university can be found on their respective websites.

Full and part-time master's degrees will involve taking time out of full-time employment. Therefore, living expenses must be taken into account when calculating the total cost. It is difficult to obtain exact figures; £9,000 per year has been quoted as an average, although this relates to undergraduate living expenses.¹⁴ Many postgraduate students' living expenses may be significantly higher than this, with additional outgoings such as mortgages to consider. For the purposes of this paper, we have used the figure of £9,000 and the estimated average cost of undertaking a clinical master's degree in the UK is shown in Table 4.

One look at this table may be enough to put many young dentists off a career in the dental specialties. The figures involved are indeed daunting. The average debt from BDS courses was £25,545 in 2010 and this

will certainly rise in the coming years as tuition fees increase.¹⁵ It remains to be seen whether this will have an impact on the number of dentists choosing a career in the dental specialties. Conversely, undertaking a master's degree as part of your specialist training programme can be financially less arduous, although there is additional work involved in balancing your clinical training with your academic study.

There is no doubt that undertaking a master's degree will greatly increase not only your knowledge base but your clinical skills as well. This is a great advantage in applying for a specialist training position. If having undertaken a Master's degree you decide specialist training is not for you then the degree will equip you with the skills necessary to enjoy a successful and fulfilling career in general dental practice.

POSTGRADUATE DEGREES: RESEARCH DEGREES

For those interested in dental academia, a postgraduate research degree is an essential requirement. Postgraduate research degrees usually take the form of a Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD). Like masters degrees, PhDs can be obtained before or during specialist training. Those undertaken before entry into specialist training can be self-funded, or funded as part of a junior lecturer's position, such as a clinical fellowship. After obtaining a PhD, academic specialty registrar positions are available, whereby you complete your specialist training while undertaking the research and teaching responsibilities of a dental academic. This pathway may sound attractive; however, undertaking a PhD as your first major research project is extremely challenging and will be doubly so if you have no previous research experience at all. Some involvement in research during your foundation training is therefore advised if you are interested in an academic career. Those who have already completed master's degrees will be at an advantage due to the research component that master's degrees contain.

Alternatively, 7 or 8 year StR posts with integrated PhDs are also available. Although these posts are salaried it is up to the trainee to secure research funding for their PhD from external sources, such as the Wellcome Trust, with the support of their supervisors. The criteria for entry to these academic positions are often similar

to non-academic training posts, although tailoring your application by placing more emphasis on any research and teaching experience you may have is advisable.

In many respects it is very difficult to ascertain when and where these academic StR positions will appear and as such it is often difficult for aspiring dental academics to plan their career with any certainty. This is something to be mindful of before committing to an academic career. Further information on academic StR positions can be found on the Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors (COPDEND) website.¹²

SHORT LISTING

We recommended that as soon as you decide specialist training is right for you, apply for any and all positions that become available. Your first application or interview may not be successful so be prepared for this and do not be disheartened. You will gain useful experience of the application and interview process which will stand you in good stead for your next opportunity.

Great efforts have been made in recent years to make the interview short listing process as transparent as possible. Applications are passed to a short listing panel and each application is scored according to certain pre-set criteria based on the person specification. The scoring system will vary and some deaneries will publish it alongside the person specification. It is absolutely invaluable to have this information as it allows applicants to tailor their application to score as many points as possible. If the short listing criteria are not available, try to obtain a copy from another deanery or a colleague so you at least have a general idea of what will be expected at the short listing panel.

A potential pitfall is to rely solely on the more substantial aspects of your CV. If you have a master's degree, this may only be worth the same amount of points as any and all of the other criteria; for example, shows initiative or has computer skills. Do not assume that you do not need to spend as much time on these other criteria as you may fall foul of the short listing scoring. This means that those without postgraduate degrees have an excellent chance of being short listed providing they fulfil the other criteria outlined in the person specification.

THE INTERVIEW

Most people only undergo the arduous process of a formal interview a handful of times in their working lives. However, giving a good interview is a skill and as such can be honed and improved with practice and preparation. When you receive the news you have been short listed, arrange a mock interview with a consultant colleague with experience of the specialist interview process. This will provide an invaluable insight into what sort of questions you are likely to be asked and some immediate feedback on your performance. The interview format will vary from deanery to deanery; some may have more than one panel and some will expect candidates to have prepared something in advance. This could take the form of a short presentation or simulated seminar/lecture. Clearly asking a senior colleague to help rehearse the presentation will be of benefit.

Reading one of the books available to our medical colleagues on interview technique is strongly recommended. Many of these books can be applied to the dental specialties and contain much invaluable information on interview technique as well as detailed information on favourite interview topics, for example, clinical governance.

There is an enormous amount of material available to the potential interviewee; to outline it all in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. We would direct candidates to the World Wide Web and to bookshops in order to make the most of the wealth of information that exists in this area. In summary; the better prepared you are for the interview the more likely you are to succeed.

CONCLUSION

Healthcare by its very nature is in a constant state of re-organisation and reform. It is impossible to predict the future in terms of the number of hospital and community specialist positions, training pathways, the economy and job opportunities. This should not put off those wishing to specialise; rather those seeking a specialist career should be flexible with their overall career aims and recognise that dealing with reform and change is part of being a specialist. This should be seen as an opportunity rather than an obstacle.

Many qualities are needed to obtain a specialist training post. However, the most important is motivation. The motivation to work on additional projects when everyone else is not, the motivation to undertake additional qualifications, to make financial and personal sacrifices, to keep applying even if you are initially unsuccessful and to ultimately see the training through to its end. Those who lack this motivation will not succeed. For those who have it, the authors' advice is simple: go for it. There will be difficult moments along the way but in the end, it is worth it.

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