

Why do general dental practitioners become involved in clinical teaching? A pilot study exploring the views of part-time practitioner teachers, King's College London

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IN BRIEF

- Highlights the vital role part-time practitioner teachers play in delivering clinical teaching.
- Shows that although a majority sees clinical teaching as a long-term career, a significant minority are not satisfied with their current position.
- Demonstrates that formal training in teaching skills is considered to be vital in order for practitioner teachers to fully meet their required obligations.

Introduction Dental schools in the United Kingdom are becoming increasingly reliant on the services of part-time teachers to deliver the clinical educational component of the dental course. Their background is predominantly from general dental practice but the opportunities to progress in the system are limited. The aim of this study was to ascertain the views and perceptions of such teachers at a dental school. **Materials and methods** An anonymous, non-incentivised online survey was used to obtain both qualitative and quantitative views of the part timers. **Results** The department has $n = 40$ part-time teachers and there was a response rate of 78%. Overall 73% were satisfied with their current teaching position, whereas the remaining 27% of teachers were seeking higher rewards both in terms of recognition and status. **Conclusions** This study demonstrated the need for formal teaching skills and training to be made available to part-time clinical teachers. Allied to this is the requirement for a clearly defined and achievable career pathway.

INTRODUCTION

UK university medical and dental schools have well established career pathways for full-time academic and clinical staff,¹ leading ultimately to appointment at either consultant or professorial level.

However, the potential for career progression for the part-time general practitioner who contributes one or two days per week to clinical teaching is limited. In the institution where the authors teach, grades are currently confined to clinical teacher and senior clinical teacher. If the teacher is on a specialist list then the grade senior specialist clinical teacher applies.

In addition, the requirements for promotion from clinical teacher to senior clinical teacher are onerous, including a minimum of three days per week clinical teaching, demonstrable leadership within the undergraduate syllabus and possession

of a relevant postgraduate qualification and a teaching qualification.

Dental education in the UK has experienced a period of unprecedented growth over recent years. There have been huge increases seen in the numbers of both undergraduate and postgraduate students² together with an accompanying growth in diversities,³ new pedagogic advances,⁴ higher all round expectations and of late, a funding squeeze.⁵

Current dental educators face a bewildering array of complex challenges and issues. The constant drive for personal professional and public accountability is ever set against the growing needs and demands of a sophisticated student body.⁶

Integrated primary patient care drives a plethora of research and development activity, which in turn feeds into the general milieu of dental education. The standard of education is regulated in accordance with the 1984 Dentists Act and the relevant regulations through the guidance published by the General Dental Council (GDC), the current one being *Preparing for practice: dental team learning outcomes for registration*.⁷

Within this guidance, the GDC, *inter alia*, places much emphasis on communication skills for the dental team, teamwork

and professionalism, and the management of the clinical and working environment for individual patient care.

Primary dental care is perhaps the most significant area of clinical activity in the UK and where the majority of practising dentists are to be found. Committed part-time teachers drawn from this sector form a hugely important resource for any dental school, supporting as they now do the majority of the undergraduate clinical curriculum⁸ and a growing share of responsibilities in the post graduate sector.

AIMS

This subject area is poorly reported with very little targeted research published. There are many widely held and differing opinions as to why general dental practitioners teach. Some are incorrect, incomplete or based on assumptions and perceptions that have no evidence base. This study attempts to address some of these shortfalls by exploring, through qualitative methodology, issues that affect the practitioner teacher. It is hoped that this work will stimulate a forum for debate and discussion for clinical educators from the rest of the UK and beyond. The authors believe it is timely to look into this important but long neglected

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area in order to better inform practice and to address some of the needs of part-time practitioner teachers.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The cohort (n = 40) identified from the department's e-mail list were sent an anonymous online questionnaire (via www.surveymonkey.com) that had been developed, piloted and modified. They were invited to express their views as current clinical teachers. A follow-up reminder was provided two weeks later.

The survey was anonymous and designed to elicit both mixed qualitative and quantitative data. The questions are displayed in Table 1.

RESULTS

The data derived from the questionnaire are presented in Tables 2-5.

The total number of completed electronic questionnaires received was 31, giving a response rate of 78%.

Information in relation to the post-qualification experience, the length of service and the relative amount of teaching undertaken by the part-time clinical teachers in the department are collated in Table 3.

The two main thematic responses arising from the qualitative questions are collated in Table 5.

The respective quantitative findings for teachers expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction are collated in Table 6.

The typical qualitative themes identified from teachers expressing overall satisfaction (73% of the cohort) or dissatisfaction (27% of the cohort) is collated in Tables 7 and 8.

DISCUSSION

The use of an electronic questionnaire to gather data for this study offers many advantages. It has enabled an entire cohort of part-time teachers working on different days to be anonymously surveyed with relative ease and convenience. This approach is both cost effective and efficient compared with other more resource intensive methods.

The overall response rate of 78% is broadly in line with other similar non-incentivised surveys.⁹ However, there may have been a degree of selection bias within the respondent group. It is reasonable to assume that those who were more enthusiastic about

Table 1 The questionnaire used in the survey

What year did you qualify as a dentist?
How long have you been teaching in the department?
How many sessions do you teach in the department per week? (1 day = 2 sessions)
Are you content with your position as a part-time clinical teacher?
Do you see this as a long-term career for you?
Please rank in order of importance why you choose to teach in the department (1 = most important, 7 = least important) Remuneration/Status/Lack of current career direction/Keeping up-to-date/Professional contacts with colleagues/As a vocation/As part of your general career development
Are you positively encouraged to develop your career as a clinical teacher? – please elaborate.
Do you feel it is necessary to acquire formal teaching skills and training in your role?
How should part-time clinical teachers be best rewarded for their input and support to the department? Please elaborate.
Would a viable career pathway encourage you to continue as a part-time clinical teacher? Please elaborate.

Table 2 Response rate for the survey

Number in cohort	Number of responses received	Response rate
40	31	78 %

Table 3 The cohort structure and identification of key teaching attributes

Mean number of years of post-qualification clinical experience	18.5
Mean number of years of teaching experience at the department	5.8
Mean number of days taught per week at the department	1.3
Total number of full-time staff equivalent contributed by the part-time clinicians	10.4

Table 4 Main quantitative findings of the cohort

	Quantitative findings (%)
Staff in the first year teaching at the department	23
Staff in the first five years teaching at the department	61
Staff teaching over 10 years at the department	23
Staff teaching over 15 years at the department	3
'Content with current position as a part-time clinical teacher'	74
'Seeing clinical teaching as a long-term career'	68
Main reasons for teaching in the department:	
As a vocation	35
Career development	32
Professional contact with colleagues	26
Lack of current career direction	16
Remuneration	6
Status	3
To keep up-to-date	3
'Being positively encouraged to develop a career as a clinical teacher'	48
'Feel it is necessary or desirable to acquire formal teaching skills and training in my role'	97
Part-time clinical teachers would best be rewarded by:	
Further careers opportunities and development	58
Being appreciated	29
Better remuneration	26
Better training opportunities	26
Involvement in research	6
'A viable career pathway would encourage me to continue as a part-time clinical teacher'	
Yes	80
No	10
No preference	10

Thematic characteristics identified by the qualitative questions	Representative responses in respect of the identified themes:
Whether they are positively encouraged to develop their careers as clinical teachers (Two main views have been identified)	Affirmative: 'The head of my unit has been very supportive going out of his way to make sure I have been given meaningful opportunities to develop my career' Non-affirmative: '...there does not seem to be any formal career progression'
How clinical teachers should best be rewarded (Four main themes have been identified)	Parity with full-timers: 'A viable career pathway alongside the full-timers and the appropriate title to go with it is important' Structure and title: 'A structured pathway with appropriate designations or grading would help reflect the worth and status of the individual teacher' Financial reward: 'Whilst not the main motivation for teaching, financial reward is important, as we leave our private practice to dedicate the time and travel four hours a day to teach' Expect nothing: 'I think this is a privilege to teach at King's and whoever loves teaching does not expect to be rewarded'

(n = 30)	Teacher seen as overall satisfied	Teacher seen as overall dissatisfied
Prevalence	73 %	27%
Mean post qualification experience	16.5 years	20.8 years
Average time spent in department	4.5 years	7.6 years
Average no. of days per week in the department	1.3	1.4

Representative comments reflecting main areas of discontent from the teachers
'Just an acknowledgement of positive input would be good'
'Promotion to higher grades which reflect qualifications, experience and specialist status'
'Status and titles to reflect the levels of responsibility and contributions made to the department'
'With some form of training long term followed by certificates for new teachers and money for senior teachers'
'More support from the full time staff. Reduce the workload by employing more teachers. Increase remuneration and a more defined career pathway'
'A viable career pathway alongside full timers... PDC would simply not survive without their contributions... a proper title and a viable pathway cost the institution very little'
'Better career development opportunities, at present we can't be absent to attend courses or committees. More chance to become involved in research.'
'...recognition of their work-pay is too poor at a junior level'

their work would be more likely to respond than those who were not.

The design of the questionnaire allowed respondents to answer the questions honestly and in privacy, thereby potentially increasing the validity and reliability of the study.

Although comparatively small in terms of overall numbers, the survey covered an entire cohort of part-time teachers and provides a useful insight into the reasons

behind their continuing involvement in clinical teaching as well as their professional aspirations.

Tables 5, 7 and 8 summarise the recurring themes identified throughout this study. They were arrived at by immersing the data and scrutinising the text responses in order to develop collective generalities, thereby confirming the theme.¹⁰

From this study two principal cohorts of teacher were identified. In the first the

majority of the head count belonged to staff with five years or less teaching experience (61%) with almost a quarter of these (23%) in their first year of teaching. This is similar to the findings reported by others.¹¹ The mean post-graduation experience was 16.5 years in the first group rising to almost 21 years in the second. Both cohorts contained practitioner teachers with advanced training and experience in primary dental care. The amount of time spent in the department was almost identical in each case, being on average a little over one day per week.

Nearly two thirds of the overall group appeared satisfied with their current position with a similar number seeing clinical teaching (part-time) as a long-term career option. However, one significant and striking observation was the virtually unanimous recognition across both groups of the need to acquire formal teaching and training skills¹² in order to fulfil the role of a present day clinical teacher.¹³

This finding alone has potentially far reaching consequences for those who organise and employ part-time clinical teachers.¹⁴ It is becoming an inescapable fact that teaching (delivered at a dental school) should conform to a core of knowledge and be within a framework that demonstrates that required professional standards have been met.¹⁵

This institute currently offers its teaching staff free access to an extended teaching programme, which has enabled increasing numbers of part-time staff to further develop their contextualised skills and understanding of clinical teaching and education, mapped to the UK Professional Standard Framework in accordance with the guidelines from the Higher Education Academy.¹⁶

Of the 27% of teachers identified as not satisfied with their position, the numbers were principally (but not exclusively) drawn from those who had spent significant amounts of time in the department (Table 6). On average this cohort had spent 69% more time in the department as compared with those who stated they were satisfied with their position.

The key issues raised by many of these experienced teachers appear principally to be associated with perceived lack of status, title and career progression. The survey also reflects the fact that the current

part-time teaching workforce stays with the department on average for 5.8 years, with 25% of them within the first year of their appointments. This level of dissatisfaction tends to reinforce the case for a coherent career pathway in order to improve quality, retention and job satisfaction for part-time clinical teachers, in line with observations reported by others.¹⁷ There are also echoes in this study that link to the known economic pressures on healthcare, dental schools and recruitment.¹⁸ The reliance on part-time clinical staff¹⁹ and the conflicting demands of research, service, teaching and practice commitments for part-time teachers,²⁰ together with perceptions of the student clinical experience²¹ all add further support for the case for more work in this area.

With more graduate entry students found in dentistry, including those from parallel disciplines such as medicine and pharmacology²² it is suggested that their differing outlooks and demands, in part reflecting new fee structures will need to be addressed by an increasingly effective teaching workforce.

An encouraging trend seen in this study was the positive ranking of vocation, career development and professional contact, ahead of such attributes as lack of career direction, remuneration or status. Furthermore, professional contact with colleagues was considered important for a sizeable proportion (26%) of the survey; perhaps reflecting in part the often isolated nature of general dental practice. Indeed 91% of dentists on the GDC register according to the Faculty of General Dental Practice are described as general dental practitioners.²³ An interesting observation reported from the respondents confirmed that on average part-time teachers spend 1.3 days per week in the department and deliver approximately 85% of the overall clinical teaching received by the students.

Part-time clinical teachers bring with them a wealth of experience, knowledge and expertise from precisely the area in which most dental graduates will practice. Their continuing contribution remains vital for the department to function as a viable teaching entity. A recent advance towards investment in educational development by individual teachers themselves now means there are already practitioner teachers at masters level with others to follow.

Table 8 Respective findings for higher aspirational teachers seen as satisfied overall n = 22 (73% of cohort)

Representative comments reflecting main areas of teaching satisfaction from the teachers
'...I am drawn to teaching for so many reasons such as my desire to pass on my experience to students...'
'...I enjoy my position as a clinical teacher, especially feeling rewarded when my students give good feedback'
'...multiple teachers suggest I should look into a career in teaching and I am given help and support from all staff to develop this aspect should I wish'
'There is definitely lots of help and encouragement from colleagues'
'I have learnt a lot and am keen to pass on my knowledge to up and coming students...'
'I think this is a privilege to teach at King's and whoever loves teaching does not expect to be rewarded'
'I can't think of any reward I need beyond the job satisfaction itself'
'...having more time with senior people to help career planning'
'Yes, GCAP (teaching) programme'
'whilst not the main motivation for teaching-financial reward is important'
'...not many part timers will want or be able to go beyond senior clinical teacher. However, I would suggest the title of Senior Clinical Teaching Fellow'
'Currently enrolled on the PG CAP course'
'...postgraduate training and development is encouraged in the form of courses and education training'
'Rewards are not necessary. Annual get together-perhaps funded by department'
'I feel very privileged as rewarded anyway-I personally don't have any further need for reward as I enjoy giving something back'
'I thoroughly loved my time at KCL and wishes to give back as much as possible'
'Remuneration is not usually the prime motivator for clinical teachers. A structured pathway with appropriate designations or "grading" would help reflect the worth and status of the individual teacher'
'Yes, I really enjoy it'
'Simple appreciation works for me'
'...Dr A and Dr B have harnessed my desire to progress in my career and I will be studying the PGCAP this year'
'Positive reward is not my aim. My reward is imparting my skills to the new generation of dental surgeons and seeing them qualify'

Allied to this there is significant growth in outreach teaching and its attendant need for additional high quality primary care practitioner support.²⁴ This picture of increased part-time teaching activity contrasts sharply with the shrinking number of career academics now to be found within dentistry.²⁵ To date there are no signs of any current changes to this trend.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Part-time teachers have a very strong influence on the success or otherwise of the modern clinical curriculum. In our view they remain a vital but largely overlooked resource. To quote directly from one respondent:

'The Dental School would simply not survive without their contributions... a proper title and a viable career pathway would cost the institution very little.'

It is clear from our research the majority of part-time teachers do not seek remuneration as their main reward. It is our belief that job satisfaction, career enhancement and, in appropriate cases, a title befitting of status along with a viable career pathway

are the likely main drivers. It is not known if other UK dental schools have similar experiences to report and what career structures are in place to encourage and reward teaching excellence and leadership.

These findings challenge the traditional *ad hoc* approach to clinical teachers that for so long has underpinned the system both in the UK and elsewhere. It is difficult to see how high teaching standards will be maintained when more and more reliance is placed upon part-time teachers, many of whom may have difficulty accessing appropriate teacher training and whose efforts are often insufficiently accredited or recognised.

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