

GUIDING DENTAL STUDENTS THROUGH COVID-19

Shareena Ilyas, Chair of BDA Education, Ethics and Dental Team Working Group, on the support we've offered students in the last 12 months



Without question, the past year has been tough for dental students. The announcement that students at Dundee and Glasgow would have to repeat a year, and those at Aberdeen would not graduate until Christmas, were stark reminders of the difficulties students have faced training and getting clinical experience during a global pandemic.

We have fought hard on behalf of the profession and dental students are no exception.

In an open letter to the Scottish Government we stated that action was needed to minimise wide-ranging impacts on the future of education, training and the sustainability of the NHS workforce and warned against saddling undergraduates with unmanageable debt. Scottish dental students can already expect to graduate with over £34,000 debt. An additional year of study could push it to over £40,000.

The Scottish Government responded to our call, offering a bursary of up to £6,750 to students who had to defer graduation in light of the limited clinical contact they had over the past year. And when news spread that final-year students at Aberdeen would not be eligible for financial support after delays to their graduation, we sought urgent clarification, urging Government to avoid a two-tier support system for dental students. The Government subsequently confirmed that those in their final year at Aberdeen would be eligible to apply for the bursary on a pro-rata basis, providing some much-needed reassurance. We also received confirmation that the bursary will be offered to students from the rest of the UK and international students as well as those who live in Scotland.

We continue to speak for students across the UK, pushing for answers to your most concerning questions. Dr Colette Bridgman, Chief Dental Officer for Wales has assured us that everything possible is being done to facilitate final year students to graduate this year. In a recent letter, she points to assurances from Prof Nicola Innes, Head of Cardiff Dental School, stating that they are doing all they can to ensure as many of the final year students as possible will reach the standard of safe beginner this year. This will likely require extra clinical patient treatment sessions outside of traditional teaching times and some students may have to complete a portfolio demonstrating their competence. We are seeking further clarification however, it is encouraging news and a welcome effort.

In Northern Ireland, the School of Dentistry set up the Urgent Student Clinic (USC). This initiative is aimed at getting students the patient experience they need, in the hope that more dramatic extensions, can be avoided. Chris Irwin, Dental Dean at the

School of Dentistry, knows that students are appreciative of the extensive efforts being made on their behalf to support them at this difficult time.

In England, schools are working very hard to ensure they are in a position to graduate as many final year students as possible. Each school will be in a slightly different position and we're keeping a close eye on the situation with the support of our Students Committee reps.

So what happens after graduation?

You've worked hard, you have the clinical experience you need to be a safe beginner and you're ready to begin your Dental Foundation Training (DFT) (or Vocational Training in Scotland) with confidence.

Peter Briggs, Health Education England (HEE), met with our Students Committee in January to provide an update on the situation with Dental Foundation Training as a result of the pandemic. Peter informed the committee that scheme preferencing had been delayed due to the uncertainty around graduation. HEE need a clear understanding of how many students would graduate and when, to be able to match these to DFT places in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Peter is meeting with the Chair of the Dental Schools Council regularly to follow the progress being made for final years. It is likely that schemes will cover a broader geographical area than previously to allow HEE greater flexibility to ensure everyone gets a place.

In an ideal world, DFT would commence in September, but there may need to be a contingency for one other start date if there are some students with a delayed graduation. The arrangements for this eventuality are complex and are currently being considered. No decision has been made on this and we will keep students updated as much as we can.

We know that this is a very difficult situation. These are unique and challenging times, and we're aware some graduates may not get the placement that they had hoped for.

You will have a place to go to as long as you make sure that you are as flexible as you can, preferencing as many schemes as possible when you are invited to do so. We cannot highlight this enough; an applicant won't be considered for a place if they haven't included it in their preferences, so try to rank as many as possible.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, and we will continue to work hard on your behalf to make things as smooth as possible in your transition throughout dental school and beyond.

<https://doi.org/MissingDOI>