

## SDG COLUMN

# Quality education through an unfamiliar lens: representation



Continuing with our cover series on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we reach SDG 4: Quality Education. The aim of this goal is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In this issue's cover, we aspired to illustrate the importance of inclusion, accessibility and diversity for an all-encompassing dental education, and by extension how crucial this is to all the ways in which we learn. **Tanaka Kadiyo**, a foundation dentist based at HEE South Yorkshire, discusses the implications of this, and how a diverse workforce translates to better oral healthcare for all.

**T**he downstream impact of quality education imparts benefits that are not often easily quantifiable and typically escape conventional measurements. The essence of dentistry is rooted not only in technical expertise, but also in understanding the intricate tapestry of cultural, societal, and individual nuances that dictate oral health practices and outcomes.

Within the context of dentistry, quality education dictates the trajectory of professionals' careers, the quality of care provided, and ultimately, the oral health status of our nation. The transformative power of excellent education is seldom viewed through the prism of accessibility, inclusion, and diversity, which has profound implications for the future of dental healthcare in the UK.

Access serves as the first stepping-stone in creating a diverse and competent pool of dental professionals. Accessible dental education implies the eradication of financial, geographical, and ethical hurdles that often barricade the journey of aspiring dental professionals. To truly foster accessibility, it is crucial to reassess and reform these barriers, paving the way for a more representative cohort of dental students. For example, while student loans are means-tested and a limited number of bursaries do exist, a 2017 study highlighted the strong dependence on family financial support, with 77% reporting family contributions towards student expenses. It is important to consider how this fact may impact accessibility to dentistry as a degree.<sup>1</sup>

Inclusion in dental education goes beyond merely admitting diverse students. It means making all students feel valued and ensuring their voices and experiences are integrated into the learning process.<sup>2</sup> Inclusion fosters a learning environment that respects and celebrates differences, enhancing the educational experience for all students. An inclusive dental curriculum is more than just a stage where diverse voices perform; it's a symphony where each note, each voice, harmoniously blends to create a powerful narrative. Many specialties show under-representation of Black dentists with endodontists at 0.3%, prosthodontists at 0.2% and restorative dentists at 0.7%. If the profession was truly inclusive, there remains a beacon for further explanation of these statistics.<sup>3</sup>

Diversity – in both student bodies and faculty – enriches dental education by bringing a range of perspectives, experiences, and ideas to the table. By diversifying our educators, we ensure that a variety of backgrounds and experiences are represented in the curriculum, which in turn, provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of oral healthcare. Today's education still transcends historical textbook knowledge. In dentistry, the unique manifestations of various conditions across diverse ethnic backgrounds are still lacking.<sup>4</sup> For example, how we perceive conditions like anaphylaxis or lichen planus in diverse skin tones can significantly influence diagnosis and treatment.<sup>5</sup>

Picture a classroom filled with students and faculty from various races, cultures, and backgrounds, each bringing their unique experiences and perspectives to the dental

learning environment. This diversity isn't merely aesthetic; it enriches the curriculum and empowers students to provide culturally appropriate care. The GDC believe that a diverse workforce reflects the local communities, draws on a broader range of talent, and becomes more efficient and productive.<sup>6</sup>

Embracing diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in dental education, therefore, translates directly into improved oral health outcomes for our population. It ensures that dental professionals can provide culturally competent care, addressing the unique needs and concerns of every patient they encounter. Achieving quality dental education necessitates a shift towards more accessible, inclusive, and diverse practices. By doing so, we can ensure a future where every UK citizen, regardless of their background, can receive high-quality oral healthcare. ■

## References

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