

**BDS STUDENT COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT POTENTIAL COVID-19 IMPACT
ON 2020/2021 ACADEMIC SESSION**

Question and Answer Briefing

Q. Why are we being given this information now?

A. Dentistry is severely affected by the precautions that are being taken to control transmission of SARS-CoV-2. In addition to social distancing, the measures that must be put in place to permit safe performance of aerosol generating procedures in dentistry have reduced patient throughput by up to 80% across all sectors. These precautions are likely to be in place for many months to come and will reduce the opportunities available for dental students to gain face-to-face clinical experience, a critical component of BDS programmes.

The unpredictable future course of the pandemic invokes uncertainty about when we will be able to return to a significantly higher patient throughput for safe delivery of both clinical service and teaching. Any further surges in COVID-19 cases, particularly during the Winter months when the risks are perceived to be greater, may result in further local or national lockdowns and a corresponding interruption to clinical care opportunities. We are looking at multiple mitigations, but are taking the view that we must be open and transparent with all Scottish dental students about the challenges we face over the next academic year.

Q. What is the level of risk that the course may have to be extended?

A. This is impossible to estimate accurately because of the multiple uncertainties around the future course of the pandemic and the ongoing requirement for additional infection control measures in dentistry. For example, the recommended one-hour fallow period between patients who have been treated with an aerosol generating procedure in a closed surgery has a massive impact on patient flow.

Bearing these factors in mind, together with the outcome of multiple discussions with key stakeholders and infectious disease experts, the considered judgement of many senior dental academics is that the risk is sufficiently high that students need to be forewarned of possible course extension.

Q. When will a definite decision be taken about the requirement for a programme extension?

A. All UK dental schools have been asked to provide the General Dental Council with a date at which a definite decision about course extension is likely to be made. The Scottish schools are agreed that the most likely estimate is December 2020 / January 2021. This will allow us to take account of the behaviour of the pandemic through the Autumn and into Winter, and to judge the effectiveness of all the mitigation procedures we are planning for the first semester. By assessing the clinical experience and progress of our students up to that point in time we will be able to estimate with some degree of accuracy the possibility of achievement of the required learning outcomes and clinical skills by the end of the academic session.

Q. If we need to undertake an extended programme, how will the costs be covered?

A. Detailed projections of the additional costs that may be incurred if the courses have to be extended are currently in preparation. Discussions are underway with the multiple funders of dental education so that the economic underpinnings will be in place, should course extension be required in 2021.

It is recognised that the living costs incurred by students during an extension of the programme would be considerable and mechanisms for mitigation of those costs are being explored.

Q. What activities would dental students undertake if an extended programme duration became necessary?

A. Work is already underway to map out the possible timetabled activities for all years of students should it become necessary to extend the courses by up to one year. For students in the earlier years, a range of additional academic and clinical simulation activities would be available. For students in the later years, there would be a strong emphasis on gaining as much hands-on clinical experience as possible. Opportunities for additional student-selected modules in areas relevant to healthcare would be offered, with the potential to accumulate credits towards an additional qualification.

Q. Why can't additional opportunities for clinical experience be made available to dental students?

A. All options are being explored to identify additional ways of providing clinical experience for students. However, it is important to recognise that dentistry is facing severe challenges in all branches of delivery, across both primary and secondary care facilities. Furthermore, many of these possible additional activities would be observational rather than operative, which on their own would not help to fulfil the GDC requirements around operator skills for a 'safe beginner'.

Q. Why can't students just do more simulated training?

A. We are building additional simulated teaching into the 2020/2021 BDS curricula. However, there is a limit to the level to which simulation can replace patient treatment, including consideration of the viewpoint of the General Dental Council, our regulator. An additional complication is the need to maintain social distancing in clinical simulation facilities, which reduces overall capacity. Simulation is, therefore, part of our solution to the problem, but not the complete answer.

Q. Are dental schools in other parts of the UK taking the same approach?

A. The challenges faced by Scottish dental schools are common to all dental schools across the globe. Within the UK the Dental Schools Council, which includes the heads of all the dental schools, has been meeting virtually on a regular basis since March, sharing ideas on mitigation and producing an agreed position statement. The options within that position statement are in complete concordance with Scotland's approach.

Q. Would an extension to the BDS programmes affect access to Vocational Training?

A. No. Through all the discussions the Scottish dental schools have engaged fully with NHS Education for Scotland and the Postgraduate Dental Dean. Delivery of VT faces similar challenges to undergraduate

dental education in achievement of satisfactory completion for trainees during the 2020 / 2021 session. Key stakeholders will work together to ensure that there is a seamless transition into VT from the final year of the Scottish BDS programmes, regardless of their completion dates.