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The need of establishing specialised dental education departments: Road to champion

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We are writing to express our strong support for a crucial initiative aimed at improving health profession education, particularly in dental education. Dental education, like all healthcare fields, evolves continuously due to advances in research, technology, and patient expectations (Wong et al., 2020). Dental schools have a pivotal role in shaping the future of oral healthcare professionals, and the absence of such departments may hinder their ability to prepare competent, patient-focused dental professionals. Currently, curriculum development in dental education often faces challenges in keeping pace with the rapidly evolving landscape of oral healthcare. While dental schools are renowned for their rigorous curriculum and comprehensive clinical training, the development of effective teaching methods, curriculum enhancement, appropriate assessment, and faculty development often receive insufficient attention. This can lead to a gap between the skills and knowledge imparted to students and the demands of modern dental practice. Similarly, assessment practices may lack the sophistication needed to adequately evaluate students' competence in areas beyond technical proficiency, such as communication skills, ethical considerations, and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, faculty development initiatives, while crucial for ensuring teaching quality and staying abreast of advancements in educational techniques, may be sporadic and lack a coordinated approach. In most countries, obtaining a professional dental qualification is a prerequisite for becoming a dental lecturer, without the need for an academic qualification in education. Therefore, it is essential to establish dedicated dental

education departments with full-time academic members and to define job scopes (Nafea, 2021).

Historically, dental education may have been perceived as a part-time commitment for full-time dental academicians or dental specialists in the teaching fraternities. Some dental schools also established dental education committees comprising representatives from various departments within the dental schools. However, it has become increasingly evident that the dedication to progress within these committees is in jeopardy. This is mainly because each staff member carries their own teaching and administrative duties within their respective dental disciplines. The effective functioning of a dental education department necessitates a multidisciplinary team comprising individuals with diverse expertise and academic qualifications, encompassing dental sciences, educational sciences, and information technology. This diverse team is fundamental to the department's ability to undertake various responsibilities, including curriculum development, assessment, evaluation, and faculty development. While the responsibilities of dental education departments may involve academic roles such as serving as workshop trainers and providing guidance to dental specialists in module design, it is crucial to distinguish their primarily academic nature from administrative functions. Unlike administrative roles that involve managing events for other trainers or handling paperwork for modules, dental education departments primarily contribute to the academic advancement of dental professionals.

Undeniably, establishing dental education departments within dental schools will foster innovation in teaching and learning methodologies. These departments can serve as hubs for researching and implementing effective pedagogical approaches, ensuring students receive the most up-to-date knowledge and skills. By integrating evidence-based educational techniques, dental schools can improve education quality, encourage active student engagement, and cultivate more competent and compassionate dental professionals. For instance, consider the implementation of team-based and case-based learning in dental education. A specialised department could spearhead research into the effectiveness of this methodology, develop protocols for its integration into the curriculum, and assess its impact on student outcomes. By doing so, the department contributes not only to the enrichment of teaching methods but also to the optimisation of the learning experience.

Furthermore, the dental education department can serve as a cornerstone for supporting faculty development. Recognising the indispensable role of faculty in educational excellence, these departments can facilitate tailored training programs, workshops, and collaborative research endeavours which would have a direct impact on the teaching quality (Irby et al., 2015). They empower educators to stay abreast of the latest teaching methods and scientific advancements. This, in turn, translates into an enriched student learning experience, with educators equipped to effectively inspire and guide the next generation of dental professionals. Consider a scenario where a dental education department collaborates with faculty to implement a novel assessment tool that evaluates not only technical proficiency but also communication skills and ethical considerations. This multidimensional approach not only aligns with the evolving expectations of the dental profession but also contributes to the holistic development of future dental practitioners.

Curriculum development and evaluation represent another critical sphere that stands to benefit profoundly from the establishment of dental education departments. In an era marked by transformative trends, dental schools must adapt to changing healthcare landscapes, incorporating digital dentistry, teledentistry, and cultural competence into their curricula. Dental education departments can lead curriculum reform efforts, ensuring graduates are not only well-versed in traditional dental practices but also adept in navigating the complexities of modern oral healthcare. For instance, envision a dental education department driving the integration of artificial intelligence applications into the dental curriculum. This would prepare students to leverage cutting-edge

technologies, ensuring their readiness for a technologically advanced dental landscape (Islam et al., 2022).

In addition, these departments can also play an essential role in assessment and accreditation. In maintaining high education standards and ensuring that graduates are adequately prepared for licensure, dental education departments become custodians of public safety. They serve as a quality assurance mechanism, safeguarding the integrity of dental education and, by extension, the well-being of patients. Consider a scenario where a dental education department collaborates with accreditation bodies to develop robust assessment criteria that encompass not only clinical competence but also ethical considerations, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication skills. This holistic approach not only ensures the competency of graduates but also aligns dental education with the broader goals of promoting patient-centred care.

Dental education departments can also catalyse interdisciplinary research initiatives, fostering collaboration between dental and other healthcare disciplines. This approach encourages the development of holistic healthcare professionals who can work seamlessly within multidisciplinary teams (Yusoff et al., 2014). For example, the department can initiate research projects exploring the intersection of oral and systemic health, thereby promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of dental care on overall well-being. Establishing these departments also encourages global collaboration with dental institutions, benefiting students and the wider dental community by sharing and exchanging knowledge and best practices. This exchange benefits students and the wider dental community by providing exposure to diverse perspectives and approaches to dental education. For example, international partnerships between dental education departments, lead to collaborative research projects, student exchange programs, and shared educational resources, enriching the educational experience for all involved.

The dental education department can lead educational initiatives by actively engaging in student enhancement programs. Through strategic leadership, the department can orchestrate initiatives beyond dental schools, collaborating with the broader university and healthcare communities to address learning issues among dental students. For instance, the department can organise learning-to-learn or peer-assisted learning workshops, providing diagnostic and interventional programs to academically at-risk students. By forging partnerships with external organisations, dental education

departments can contribute to the development of outreach programmes that broaden dental training initiatives. This leadership includes advocating policy changes that prioritise the affective domain of dental training agendas and fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to dentists' professionalism. Hence, dental education departments not only enhance the visibility of dental training within the community but also contribute significantly to society's overall well-being.

Nonetheless, establishing dental education departments necessitates collaboration among various stakeholders, including governments, dental associations, and educational institutions. Adequate funding, infrastructure, and faculty support are imperative for the successful realisation of these departments. This is not merely an investment in dental education; it is an investment in the future of dentistry itself. To underscore the urgency and significance of this proposal, it is essential for relevant authorities and stakeholders to engage in earnest deliberations and collaborative efforts. Dental education departments with a multidisciplinary team of full-time and academically qualified members should be considered as a requirement for accreditation. The establishment of specialised dental education departments is not a mere augmentation of existing structures; it is a forward-thinking move towards aligning dental education with society's changing needs. It represents a collective commitment to nurturing a generation of dental professionals who are not only technically proficient but also adaptable, empathetic, and attuned to the complexities of modern healthcare. By customising dental programmes to include modules such as diversity, equity, and inclusion in dentistry as well as communication skills, this department can instil in future dental professionals a greater understanding of patient experiences, fostering empathy and comprehension within the dental profession.

In conclusion, the establishment of specialised dental education departments within dental schools is a transformative initiative that holds the potential to reshape the landscape of dental education. One approach is to send academic staff within the dental schools for postgraduate training in health profession education. By

addressing the nuanced aspects of teaching, curriculum development, assessment, and faculty development, these departments can contribute to the holistic preparation of dental professionals. This is not just a need; it is a strategic imperative for championing progress in dental education and ensuring the delivery of high-quality oral healthcare to communities worldwide.

Notes on Contributors

Galvin Sim Siang Lin conceptualised and wrote the manuscript. Chan Choong Foong edited and revised the manuscript.

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Declaration of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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