

CED Statement

Safe and effective Dental Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

NOVEMBER 2020

I - INTRODUCTION

The Council of European Dentists (CED) is a European not-for-profit association which represents over 340,000 dentists across Europe. The association was established in 1961 and is now composed of 33 national dental associations from 31 European countries.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, European dentistry faced a series of challenges that affected oral health professionals, delivery of patient oral healthcare, dental offices, dental education and research.

Regular and adequate basic dental education and training is a key point in the preparation of the future dentist to providing safe and high-quality oral care to the European population. The main objective should be to have a well-trained, skilled and fully competent dentist, using the latest and most appropriate technology in an evidence-based approach¹.

With this statement, the CED wishes to raise awareness regarding the disruptions to dental education caused by the ongoing public health crisis, as well as suggest measures to be taken to safeguard the shaping of the future dentists.

II – DENTAL EDUCATION CHALLENGES

The COVID-19 pandemic had an immediate impact on the dental education. Since March 2020, most European academic dental institutions have closed their teaching clinics and moved didactic learning to the virtual environment, in line with the measures by national governments, aimed at lowering the risk of infections in dental settings². Didactic courses, teleconferences, virtual lectures, group discussions, presentations, hands-on workshops, and seminars have transitioned to online instruction, while patient care was suspended or restricted to dental emergencies.

The need of a sudden shift has proven to be challenging for many. Teachers and students had to adapt to the online teaching rapidly and transition to teledentistry consultations to minimize the interruption of the learning process. In addition, patient triage reduced the need for in-person appointments and mitigated the risks of disease transmission. However, students were deprived of an essential part of their education – providing clinical dental care.

Dental universities (or academic institutions) are now facing many challenges, from when to resume clinical activities, to how to ensure the safety of staff and students, and - most importantly - how to safeguard the continuity of clinical education. Despite dental educators' efforts to produce an online curriculum and adhere to strict regulations and requirements for undergraduate and postgraduate students, many challenges persist.

Course and examination attendance may become difficult for students who live in different time zones or have to care for family members. Moreover, preclinical simulation activities are difficult to conduct in an online format and have been suspended in many institutions³. Equally important, students are at increased risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety

¹ CED Resolution on Profile of the Dentist of the Future
<https://cedentists.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?id=3051>

² Quinn B, Field J, Gorter R, et al. COVID-19: The immediate response of European academic dental institutions and future implications for dental education. *J Dent Educ.* 2020; 00:1–4.

³ Meng L, Hua F, Bian Z. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): emerging and future challenges for dental and oral medicine. *J Dent Res.* 2020; 99(5): 481- 487.

precipitated by worries about their return to school, academic performance and financial situation⁴.

With patient care coming to a halt, major concerns of academic institutions include the uncertainty that graduating students are clinically competent and will satisfy clinical requirements imposed by accreditation bodies, as well as future professionals' preparedness to provide dental care in the post-COVID era.

III – DENTAL EDUCATION PATHWAY

In this sense and in order to accomplish their tasks, European dental education institutions should invest in suitable infrastructures for online teaching to enable appropriate quality of online education, while exploiting the power of information technology for learning.

There is also a need to safeguard the continuity of clinical education ensuring the safety of staff, students and patients. To achieve this purpose, the curriculum might need to be adapted, assessment methods to identify key areas in clinical work where more support is needed should be implemented and tutorials that ensure progress throughout the current or following training years must be considered.

As new challenges arise due to the pandemic, students should be given support (financial, instructive, counselling, etc.) that would allow them to acquire or develop better skills in digital health/teledentistry, communication, resilience and well-being, advocacy and Public Health. Universities should promote interprofessional education and link with other institutions through an appropriate platform and environment to share experience and best practices.

Equally important, examination formats need to be restructured, to adapt to the current reality and to assess clinical skills reliably and accurately, with a particular focus on the assessment of clinical judgment and decision-making.

IV - CED POSITION

CED believes that European academic institutions and the dental education community must work together to provide a safe, inclusive and welcoming learning and working environments for all members of our community during this challenging time. Therefore, the following should be taken into account:

- European dental education institutions need to adapt their curriculum to current issues and generate clear guidelines, while ensuring a high-quality and appropriate clinical training.
- There is a need to find a balance between in-person (necessary to develop the students' clinical skills and competences) and online (safer) teaching.
- Regardless of the teaching settings, online, hybrid or in-person, dental education institutions need to define a set of minimum requirements to be fulfilled by students, in order to ensure adequate European dental education.

⁴ Vergara-Buenaventura A, Chavez-Tuñon M, Castro-Ruiz, C. The Mental Health Consequences of Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic in Dentistry. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep.*2020; 1-4.

- Teaching settings should be in line with the minimum training requirements expressed in the Professional Qualifications Directive⁵. The following should be considered:
 - Theoretical courses (online or in-person)
 - Hands-on workshops (online and in-person)
 - Clinical practice hours
 - Clinical cases
 - Continuous Professional Development

Adopted at the CED General Meeting on 20 November 2020

⁵ DIRECTIVE 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32005L0036>. Accessed 9 October 2020.