Dental Workforce Oversupply policy

Background
The Australian Dental Students’ Association (ADSA) is the peak representative body for dentistry and oral health students in Australia.

Increasing student numbers
Since 2005, 4 new dentistry schools have opened up offering courses leading to registration as a dentist. This means that there are now 9 dentistry courses offered in Australia which has dramatically increased the number of students graduating with dental degrees. Over a ten year period the number of dental graduates has increased 3 fold from 230 in 2005 to an expected 650 in 2015 [i, ii]. However the 5 existing dental schools have also increased their dental school enrolments [ii] which has contributed to an increasing number of dentistry graduates. Recent graduates have found it increasingly difficult to find employment, and with an extra three dental schools having their first cohort of students graduating in 2013, competition for work is at an all-time high.

Dentistry is a highly specialised profession with dentists gaining a specific set of skills. Most dentistry courses are at the undergraduate level with many students having gained little to no work experience and would find it difficult to find work in another field. Tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars and health system resources go into training dentistry students, and aside from the personal time and financial costs of this training, if these students cannot find employment it is an enormous waste of these resources.

Increase in allied oral health professionals
There has been a dramatic increase in the number of allied oral health professionals who now make up about 30% of the total oral health labour force [iii]. This includes dental prosthetists, dental therapists, dental hygienists and oral health therapists. Since 2000 there has been a 60% increase in the number of practicing allied oral health professionals [iv]. This reflects the increase in new training places with Universities and TAFE developing bachelor and diploma programs for oral health therapists and dental hygienists in particular.

Overseas trained dentists
Over the past 7 years there has been an increase in the number of overseas trained dentists who have been accepted to practice in Australia [iii]. Overseas trained dentists may need to undertake an Australian Dental Council (ADC) examination in order to have their qualification recognised, or if their qualification is from a University from New Zealand, United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland or Canada, they may automatically receive recognition for their qualification. Overseas trained dentists may seek either a permanent visa or a temporary 457 visa. Currently, dentistry and the allied oral health professions are on the Department of Immigration and Citizenships skilled occupation list (SOL) which encourages overseas trained dental professions to work in Australia.

Health Workforce Australia (HWA) Health Workforce 2025 – Oral Health report
HWA are currently undertaking a review of the oral health workforce to determine how many people we need in the oral health workforce to best meet the need of the changing Australian demographic. The final report is expected to be released in early 2014. It is likely that this report will focus on increasing the demand for dental services rather than decreasing the current supply.
All of these factors have led to an oversupply of the dental workforce with rising unemployment rates in all dental practitioner categories. While the whole dental workforce is affected by this oversupply problem, often new graduates are affected the most as they have the least work experience so their job prospects are slim. While we do encourage an increase in demand by providing funding for sub populations at risk such as over 65s, children, low socioeconomic status, Indigenous people and rural areas (as identified by HWA [ii]; this would require government funding and policy change which can often take a number of years to implement. In the interim, we suggest that Universities and the Federal Government should decrease student enrolments to a sustainable level. We would like the Federal Government to remove dentists, dental therapists, dental hygienists and oral health therapists off the SOL. These actions would halt the increasing dental workforce so that we can create a dental workforce that meets the needs of the Australian population.

Position Statement
With an increase in the number of graduating dentists, dental therapists, dental hygienists and oral health therapists, there should be no new dental courses established in Australia and Universities and the Federal Government should regulate dental student intakes so that they are at a sustainable level. The Federal Government should remove dentistry practitioners from the SOL and increase demand of dental services through increased funding for dental programs.

Policy
ADSA believes that:

1. Australian Universities, TAFEs and the Federal Government should cap and then decrease the number of students enrolled into dentistry and oral health therapy courses;

2. No new dental schools should be built, and none should be shut down

3. The department of Immigration and Citizenship should remove dentists, dental therapists, dental hygienists and oral health therapists from the Skilled Occupation List and remove mutual recognition for dental practitioners from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland; and

4. Governments should develop policies and increase funding to increase service delivery to populations most in need.

Actions
ADSA committee directs the Executive to:

1. advocate to the Federal Government to remove dentists, dental therapists, dental hygienists and oral health therapists from the Skilled Occupation List;

2. support the Dental Board of Australia to remove mutual recognition for dental practitioners from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland;

3. advocate to the Australasian Council of Dental Schools and Australian Universities to Australian Government to decrease the number of enrolments into dentistry and oral health courses;

4. work with the Australian Dental Association and Health Workforce Australia to advocate an increase funding to areas of need and to address the oversupply of the dental workforce; and

5. assist willing Dental Students’ Societies to advocate to Australian universities to decrease or cap the number of dental and oral health enrolments.
References


