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Restructuring Clinical Dental Specialty Examination: A Call for National Standard

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ABSTRACT

This commentary encompassed present clinical dental specialty training and assessments in Malaysia. Specifically, no uniform examination and assessment are identified within the dental specialty training programmes provided by local dental schools. Candidates who underwent the same specialty programme might be trained and evaluated differently (depending on the institution). Despite the standard Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) guideline for dental specialty training programmes (initially published in 2019), the aforementioned standards were established as a national reference for present and future Malaysian dental specialty programmes with no indication of standardised national dental specialty programme assessments. As such, a national reference for dental specialty assessments under the guidance of dental and MQA authorities is urgently needed to ensure standard quality and competent graduates of the programmes.

Keywords: *Dental specialist, Postgraduate, Examination*

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INTRODUCTION

Although 13 local dental schools presently offer primary dental degree programmes, very few provided clinical postgraduate training. The first Malaysian clinical postgraduate programme was provided by the Faculty of Dentistry, University of Malaya to complement the national needs of dental specialists. Subsequent establishments of local dental schools presented increased possibilities through various specialty programmes (1).

Historically, most senior Malaysian dental specialists were trained in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland (2).

DENTAL SPECIALTY TRAINING

To become a dental specialist, one should undergo a minimum of four years accredited training duration offered by local dental schools followed by a period of gazetment. While it is common for overseas institution to offer 3-year postgraduate programmes,

local dental schools offered a 4-year training pathway. As such, Malaysians graduating from institutions abroad needed to undergo at least an additional year of local training and attachment to fulfil the 4-year training and gazettement prerequisites (3). Notably, the candidates must be gazetted before the professional rights and privileges of a specialist can be bestowed following successful postgraduate programme completion. Prior to Dental Act 2018, dental specialists in Malaysia are listed in the National Specialist Register (NSR) under the purview of Academy of Medicine Malaysia. Following royal assent of Dental Act 2018, a new dental specialist register will be established. Under Section 34, Dental Act 2018, dental practitioners are required to be registered and listed in the Specialist Division of Dental Register to practice as specialists. Figure 1 summarises enrolled local candidates' training pathway in local and oversea programmes.

In the UK, the registration of dental practitioners and specialist register are under the purview of the General Dental Council (GDC). The GDC is the authority that regulates and monitor the standard of practice for dentistry (4). Similar to Malaysia, dental specialist training duration in UK span across three to five years. One can only register in the GDC specialist register upon completion of recognised training period and successfully satisfy the specialist examination.

As previously mentioned, the first Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) publication of dental specialty training programme standards served to guide training delivery, exposure and scope as a national reference point. The guidelines were structured by the Dental Specialty Education Committees (DentSEdC) and subsequently recommended to MQA by the Joint Technical Committee for Evaluation of

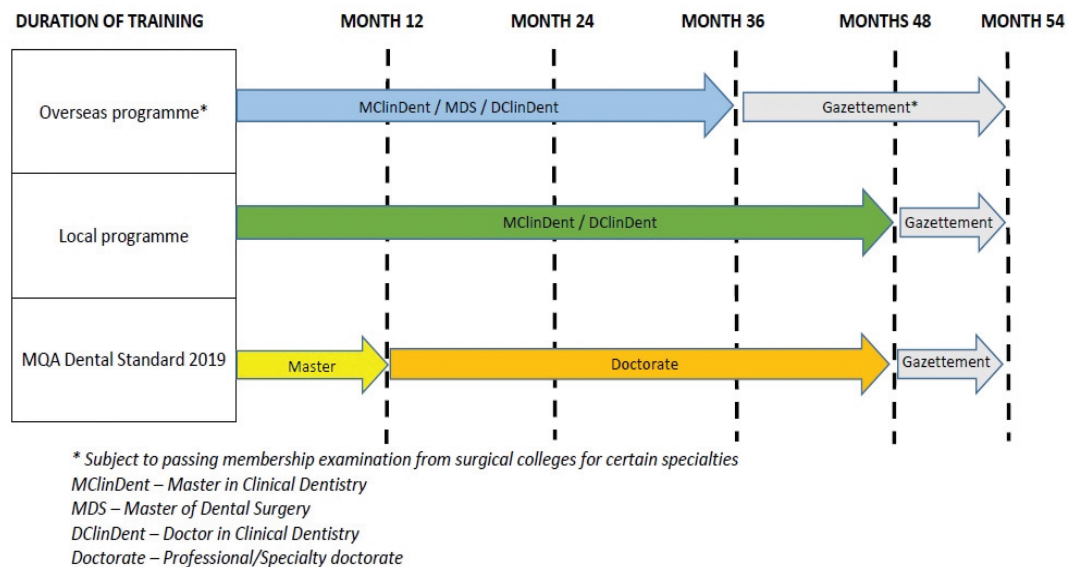


Figure 1: General pathways for dental specialty training for Malaysian.

Dental Specialty Programmes (JTCEdSP) (5). As a central committee, JTCEdSP encompassed Malaysian dental deans, the Principal Director of Oral Health, Ministry of Health, representatives from the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, Malaysian Dental Council

and MQA. Meanwhile, DentSEdC (as a peripheral committee) was appointed by JTCEdSP and involved specialists from every dental specialty. A total of 12 accredited dental specialties currently recognised in Malaysia, which are dental public health, endodontics, forensic

odontology, oral and maxillofacial radiology, oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral pathology and oral medicine, orthodontics, paediatric dentistry, periodontology, prosthodontics, restorative dentistry and special care dentistry.

Notwithstanding, the standardised assessment format was not included in the aforementioned MQA guideline. As various dental faculties adopted distinct methods in developing and delivering examinations, present local dental specialty examinations lacked content and format uniformity following the absence of standardised assessments. Local dental specialty examinations remain autonomous and institution-oriented, unlike local medical faculties that benefitted from a standard national conjoint board examination. Although every institution demonstrated specific niches area for the offered programme, dental specialty examinations could be duly standardised. For example, dental specialist trainees in the UK, Australia and Hong Kong are required to appear for a standard exit examination (normally delivered by one of the Surgical Colleges of Edinburgh, England, Glasgow, or Australasia) for eligibility to be registered as a dental specialist (6–8).

CONCLUSION

Locally, the JTCEdSP could appoint an assessment conjoint committee (encompassing relevant DentSEdC and programme directors from each specialty programme) to structure and conduct a nationally standardised assessment standard. The aim of establishing the national assessment standard is to ensure fairness and consistency for the interests of profession, candidates and the public. Forthwith, it is hoped that, with the establishment and implementation of MQA programme standards, there will be an effort to restructure and develop a unanimous standard of assessment for exit examination for the clinical dental specialty programmes across all dental faculties in Malaysia.

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