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People, Priorities and Pillars – Supporting the Dental School Mission

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Abstract

As Peter Thomson returns to the UK to commence in post of Head of Dentistry at the University of Central Lancashire, he reflects upon the Dental School's mission in the 21st Century and considers how people, strategic priority setting, and robust academic support pillars all help to underpin the delivery of modern dental education, research and clinical practice.

Introduction

In mid-2023, having spent eight thoroughly enjoyable years experiencing an exciting and rewarding international 'adventure' as a senior clinical academic in Australia and Hong Kong, I was offered the intriguing opportunity to return to the UK as Head of Dentistry, within the newly restructured School of Medicine & Dentistry, at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)¹⁻⁴. I was pleased to accept the challenge and commenced in post on the 1st of January 2024.

Launched in 2007, as one of three new schools to increase the number of UK dentists in training and to enhance the provision of local oral healthcare services, UCLan's School of Dentistry has grown significantly in recent years to provide an extensive network of educational courses including graduate-entry UK and international BDS programmes, BSc (Honours) courses in dental therapy and clinical dental technology, apprenticeship programmes in orthodontic therapy and an increasing suite of successful post-graduate clinical and research qualifications, in particular the MSc programmes in several fields of contemporary specialised dental practice^{5,6}.

We live, of course, in an era of exciting but exponential change in both science and education. Success for a modern dental school is thus influenced by our ability to balance difficult challenges and emerging opportunities. Within education these include limitations to traditional sources of finance and resource, increased public accountability, an ever-expanding knowledge base, societal demands for knowledge, information and education, and recognition of our role within an enlarging global academic community. Pertinent issues affecting modern healthcare provision include the high burden of oral disease and the resultant increased demand for care, the parlous state of the NHS and its recovery from the COVID pandemic, and the increasing influence of personalized healthcare, precision medicine, advanced technology, artificial intelligence and 'big data' upon clinical practice.

It thus seemed an appropriate moment to pause and reflect upon the mission statement for the 21st Century dental school and to consider the importance of people, strategic priorities and the underlying structural pillars that support the delivery of modern clinical education.

The Dental School Mission

Mission statements have become integral to the success of modern organisations and are generally considered most effective when presented as concise definitions that highlight cultural values and delineate an institute's purpose and goals; an ideal statement should also prove engaging and motivating to everyone working within that particular organization. In a previous FDJ article, we introduced the concept of the modern dental school's ideal mission statement and based this around the triumvirate of knowledge creation, lifelong education, and the delivery of clinical excellence; these are summarized for reference in Table 1⁷.

Strategic Priorities

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there are many challenges to delivering an organisation's mission statement and these include both difficulties in communication and, sometimes frustratingly, an underlying resistance to change. An effective means to overcome such obstacles, however, is to ensure collective agreement upon and subsequent adoption of key, strategic priorities; it is important that these are recognisable as integral to successful mission delivery. Not only do clear priorities help articulate what is important to an organisation but they may also be used to assist targeted allocation of resources for implementation.

Whilst the detail and precise order of strategic priorities will, and indeed probably should, vary from school to school and undoubtedly from time to time, Table 2 highlights four strategic priorities considered by this author as fundamental to the modern dental school mission.

1. People and Culture

First and foremost, when considering key priorities, we should emphasize paying proper attention to our people and culture. The overall success of any individual dental school is primarily delivered through the ability, ambition and motivation of its dedicated staff and students, supported by a high-performance, collegiate culture; important aspects of these priorities are listed in Table 3. Recent years have seen a substantive, and sometimes quite alarming, decrease in the numbers of dedicated clinical academic staff in our schools, both nationally and internationally, so that highlighting people as our most valuable asset is of paramount importance. Dental schools must prioritize appropriate investment in the next generation of clinical academics, ensure active recruitment and positive retention of new staff members, develop better defined and tailored clinical academic training programmes, encourage mentorship and leadership development, ensure that appropriate reward and recognition mechanisms are in place and, of course, provide comprehensive and pragmatic succession planning. As evidenced in Table 3, it is also vital to encourage a high-performance organisational culture of academic excellence within a safe, democratic collegiate environment for all learning and teaching activities and to deliver exemplary clinical training and research.

2. Education and Student Experience

Attention to educational principles, modern pedagogical techniques and the prioritisation of student experience are all central to a school's performance and require that students are placed firmly at the centre of everything we do. Important aspects of this educational experience are listed in Table 4. Appreciating the increased diversity of our students and the importance of assisting their transition into higher education are vital components of student experience. Embracing digital technology and

delivering improvements in assessment, feedback and communication are all crucially important to modern dental education, as indeed is our ability to deliver both intra- and inter-professional education and practice. In Dentistry, our over-arching aim is the successful training of clinician scientists, critical thinkers, life-long learners, innovators, and team leaders to ensure we deliver the oral healthcare workforce for the future. In this regard, attention to the student-patient relationship, provision of comprehensive dental care and the delivery of a competency-based programme become especially relevant; Table 5 outlines the important environmental and assessment components of such a learning system. We have previously emphasised the significance of ensuring programme learning outcomes accurately align with the required competencies of professional accrediting bodies, and the salient role that early clinical experience and the simulated clinic environment have in effective clinical skills acquisition during BDS programmes^{8,9}.

3. Research and Discovery Mission

It may well have become a familiar adage these days, but recognition that research informs teaching remains a fundamental priority for clinical education programmes. Research informed teaching enhances students' knowledge, develops skills in seeking out best evidence, offers realistic opportunities for students to develop their own research skills and assists in establishing a vibrant research culture. Balancing individual researcher-led success with the provision of robust systems and support structures within a school is necessary to increase the numbers of staff actively involved in knowledge creation. Successful research leads to discovery, an incremental growth in knowledge and understanding and, ultimately, informs clinical practice to advance contemporary healthcare. A strong research culture has been associated with clear benefits to patients, including lower morbidity and higher patient satisfaction, improved staff performance and morale, and enhanced organisational efficiency. To ensure relevance in the modern world, a dental school requires a recognisable and sustainable research and discovery mission, and this author firmly believes that it is vital that scientific investigation and advancement is initiated and guided by experienced clinical practitioners. Features of a pragmatic research strategy, together with a number of significant emergent opportunities are presented in Table 6. Whilst the availability and practicality of various scientific projects may vary, every dental school should develop proactive research programmes in education to inform pedagogical practice and to meet the ever-expectant needs of learners⁷⁻¹⁰.

4. Engagement and Partnerships

Fourthly, as explored in a recent FDJ article and summarised in Table 7, external engagement and the development of robust health partnerships with key stakeholders is also important. Partnership engagement is the process of connecting and working with stakeholders to achieve best possible outcomes. It involves keeping partners active and motivated in our programmes, nurturing mutual trust and knowledge, and in helping us to both measure and improve performance. Important stakeholders include our patients, healthcare professionals and providers in primary, secondary, and tertiary services, regulatory bodies, and government agencies. These partnerships offer opportunities to enrich our teaching and research activities and help us to contribute more fully to our wider societies. As explored in a recent FDJ article, successful partnerships can deliver inspirational professional and community engagement and build real capacity to improve population health¹¹.

Academic Support Pillars

Supporting the strategic priorities are a series of four, robust supporting 'pillars', fundamental to the dental school mission; these are listed in Table 8. In some instances, and from time-to-time, some of these may need be re-considered as priorities rather than pillars.

1. Integration with Health Sciences

Oral health can no longer be considered in isolation. Good oral health and hygiene is an integral component of general health and is increasingly recognised as essential for overall wellbeing. Recognising the important links that exist between oral and systemic disease, particularly cardiorespiratory disease, diabetes and cancer, it is clear that to flourish in the 21st Century, oral health needs to be fully aligned and comprehensively integrated with general healthcare science and clinical service provision. The inter-professional team of the 21st Century must therefore include medicine, pharmacy, nursing and other allied health professions working seamlessly alongside oral healthcare clinicians. It is essential, therefore, that we develop effective trans-disciplinary education, research, and practice for the future^{6,12}. Table 9 highlights a number of complementary approaches to integrated healthcare, including the inspirational concept of the 'learning healthcare system' in which knowledge generation is firmly embedded within day-to-day clinical practice to deliver continual improvements in patient care¹³.

2. Delivery of Clinical Excellence

Clinical excellence requires the judicious application of knowledge and clinical experience to deliver optimal patient care. The dissemination of clinical excellence and expertise is fundamental to a dental school's mission. We have previously highlighted Kapur's multifactorial model of clinical excellence that involves 15 complementary characteristics listed under three headings and comprising clinicians' technical proficiency, individual personal skills and future-orientated attributes; these are summarised for reference in Table 10. Kapur's elegant framework is useful in guiding clinically orientated teaching and training and in installing the principles and practice of patient care and clinical excellence to the next generation of healthcare professionals^{7,14}.

3. Internationalisation

Internationalisation is the process whereby an organisation strives to increase its influence and effectiveness through global networking. We live in an era of increasing internationalisation in education and healthcare, and it is therefore imperative to develop a well-defined, identifiable global academic profile for the modern dental school. Not only will this improve communication and mobilisation between different educational systems, but it also helps to broaden the academic experience for both staff and students and to offer real opportunities to influence and promote the highest standards of oral health globally. We have previously discussed the significance of internationalisation in enhancing dental education and research, and Table 11 summarizes a number of features recognisable in a successful programme¹⁵.

4. Financial Sustainability

Long-term financial sustainability, defined as the ability of an organisation to continue now and into the future without a continuous rise in debt, is clearly fundamental to an effective on-going mission. Traditional income sources to higher education have fallen substantially worldwide in recent years; such sources have included Government funding, student fees, research grants, consultancy fees and investment income. In the future, we must recognise these are at risk of further reductions and dental schools thus need to embrace entrepreneurship to widen and diversify income streams harnessing innovation, creativity, and technological advances. Attention to business planning, prioritising resource allocation, disciplined approaches to expenditure and benchmarking progress and success are all integral components of efficient financial management. Table 12 lists a number of salient components that can influence long-term organisational financial stability.

Conclusions

The provision of a world class educational environment and exemplary clinical teaching and training are hallmarks of the successful dental school. Dental education in the 21st Century must balance an ever-expanding scientific knowledge base with the effective preparation of new graduates for safe and, ultimately, independent clinical practice. In this article we have highlighted the important role of people, priorities, and pillars in delivering the dental school mission. No school can thrive without the ability and motivation of people; effective engagement with staff, students and patients in a supportive, collegiate environment is fundamental. Within each school, the identification of key strategic priorities, including developing a relevant research and discovery mission or building external partnerships, together with the strengthening of academic support pillars such as exemplary inter-professional clinical practice and internationalisation have never been more important.

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TABLES

Table 1: The Dental School Mission

Knowledge Creation to Improve Global Oral Health

Lifelong Education for Providers of Oral Healthcare

Dissemination of Clinical Excellence and Expertise

Table 2: Strategic Priorities

1. People & Culture
2. Education & Student Experience
3. Research & Discovery Mission
4. Engagement & Partnerships

Table 3: Prioritising People & Culture

People	Organisational Culture
Recruitment & Retention	Collegiality
Clinical Academic Training	Unity & Common Purpose
Mentorship	Raised Ambition
Leadership Development	High Performance
Reward & Recognition	Quality Improvement
Succession Planning	Facilities

Table 4: Education & Student Experience

- Student Focused & Centred
- Effective Transition to Higher Education
- Delivery of Competency Based Learning
- Effective Assessment & Feedback
- Programme Quality Assurance

Table 5: Competency Based Learning in Dentistry

Environment	Assessment
Early Clinical Exposure	Self-Reflectance & Self-Assessment
Quality Assurance of Programme	Identification of Own Learning Goals
Training of Clinical Supervisors	Specialist-Led Learning Outcomes
External Programme Review	Basic Skill Acquisition in a Simulated Environment
Accreditation	Supportive Patient Management Software
	Specific Formative & Summative Assessment Criteria

Table 6: Research & Discovery Mission

Global in Stature, Funding & Impact

Emphasis on Research Leadership & Culture

Balance Individual Researcher Success with Emerging Researcher Support

Trans-Disciplinary, Translational Research with Commercialisation

Emerging Opportunities – ‘Big Data’ & Information Technology

Personalised Healthcare & Precision Medicine

Population Health & Healthcare Inequalities

Stem Cells, Tissue Engineering & 3D-Printing

Biomaterials & Biomimetics

Nanotechnology & Robotics

Advanced Imaging & Telemedicine

Educational Research

Table 7: Engagement & Partnership Opportunities

The Community – Public & Professional

Healthcare & Professional Regulatory Bodies

Government Agencies

Healthcare Providers – Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Care

Funding Bodies

Industry

Alumni

Table 8: Academic Support Pillars

1. Integration with Health Sciences
2. Delivery of Clinical Excellence
3. Internationalisation
4. Financial Sustainability

Table 9: Integration with Health Sciences

Oral Health Aligned & Integrated with Comprehensive Healthcare

Inter-Professional Education & Practice

Disease Prevention & Health Promotion

Evidence-Based, Patient-Centred Care

Development of a 'Learning Health System'

Expanded Role for Oral Healthcare Practitioners

Pursuit of Life-Long Health

Table 10: Delivery of Clinical Excellence*

Clinicians' Technical Proficiency	Individual Personal Skills	Future Legacy
Evidence-Based Practice	Inter-Personal Skills	Succession Planning
Professional Accreditation	Collaboration & Leadership	Teaching & Training
Decision Support Systems	Resilience & Stress Management	Innovation
Effectiveness	User Involvement	Research & Publications
Risk Management	Moral Principles	Resource Generation

**Modified from Kapur¹⁴*

Table 11: Features of Internationalisation

Recognisable Global Academic Profile

International Partnerships, Staff Recruitment & Exchanges

Alumni Global Network

Distance Learning Programmes

Table 12: Financial Sustainability

Traditional Income Sources	Innovative Income Generation
Government Funding	Widen & Diversify Income
Student Fees	Creative Opportunities
Research Grants	Embrace Technology
Consultancy Fees	
Investment Income	