



Gaining work experience to study dentistry: an overview

2022 update

Purpose of this document

Work experience has always been something which raises many questions for prospective dental school applicants. Dental schools have recognised for some time that gaining useful work experience in healthcare is becoming increasingly difficult. The Dental Schools Council (DSC) is aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated concerns and made it all the more difficult. DSC has, therefore, produced this guide as a one-stop-shop to answer your questions and alleviate your worries.

DSC is the representative body for dental schools across the UK and Ireland. Information has been approved by our membership and therefore can be taken as appropriate for all dental schools.

What is work experience?

Work experience is an opportunity for a prospective dentist or dental care professional to gain experience of the world of work within an organisation or practice. It is an opportunity both for you to gain skills and prepare for professional study, but also to understand the demands of the career and find out if it is suited to you.

Work experience does not, however, have to be shadowing in a dental practice. Any activity or life experience that helps you prepare for professional study in the area is beneficial. Any public-facing role, for example, is valuable as interpersonal skills are an important part of being a dentist.

Setting up work experience

When and how long?

Work experience can take place at any time in the year. It is worth considering, however, when you will be submitting your dental school applications, so that you can reference your experience and what you've learnt in your personal statement. Some schools may build time into your year for work experience. If not, school

holidays may be a good time so that your experience does not interfere with your usual studies.

Any length of work experience is helpful. If in a dental setting, two to three days should give you enough time to understand the work that goes on in the practice and gain insight into the profession to help inform your future career decisions.

It is important to remember that it is not how much work experience you have done which is important, but rather how you reflect on it and the learning you take.

Eligibility for work experience

Eligibility for work experience placements may vary from organisation to organisation. In general, dental practices will be looking for individuals who:

- Are aged 16 years or older
- Are interested in working within oral healthcare
- Have not received any other practice based experience elsewhere

How to find it

When looking for work experience, a good starting point is to directly approach practices and healthcare settings you would like to gain experience in. Prepare a short CV and hand this into places in your area which relate to healthcare, saying that you are willing to volunteer.

Your school or college may already have connections with providers who have offered work experience to students in the past. Talk to your careers adviser and see if they can put you in touch.

Alongside your schools and colleges, there are a range of other organisations that can help you find work experience opportunities. These include:

- Jobcentre Plus and the Prince's Trust
- Universities and their dental schools

- Charities

Beyond local dental surgeries, there are a range of other settings you can gain meaningful work experience in that you may not have thought of. These include:

- Orthodontic Practices
- Community Dental Services
- Dental Technician Labs
- Clinical Dental Technician Practices
- General caring experience at a care home

What to expect during work experience in a dental practice

You should be given an induction when you begin any work experience, no matter how long it is, at a dental practice. This should include the themes listed below:

Health and safety

On work experience you will not undertake any clinical activity such as cleaning teeth or taking impressions. Your mentor will have primary responsibility for your health and safety so it is important you make them aware of any conditions or needs they should be aware of. You should be informed of how to raise any health and safety concerns.

Confidentiality

You should not share any information about patients, including that a person is a patient of the practice. That means you should not tell anyone outside the practice any patient names or details.

Insurance

You should be insured for any work within a dental practice by their existing insurance policy. For more information, please visit the [Association of British](#)

[Insurers](#), who agree that individuals on work experience should be treated as employees for the purposes of insurance against bodily injury where the employer is legally liable for a loss.

Safeguarding

If you are under 16 your supervisor may be required to obtain a DBS check if you will shadow them unsupervised. However, if you are 16 or 17 years old the practice staff are not required to obtain a DBS check.

How to act around patients and the team

You are representing the practice and should behave in a professional, respectful and responsible manner. You should exhibit the values as listed in the [NHS constitution](#).

Practical arrangements

You should enquire about arrangements for lunch and refreshments and breaks, what to do if you cannot attend for ill health or other reasons, and what to wear.

What to do afterwards

Reflecting on the preparation you have done will provide vital insight into your potential future career, which you should draw upon throughout the application process, especially in your personal statement and interview.

The ability to reflect on what you have learned, both about yourself and about working in dentistry and healthcare, through your experiences is the key thing dental schools are looking for when they assess your application. Remember: it is what you learn about yourself, about other people and about how effective care is delivered and received that counts. What you did is only a small part of the story; it is how you have used the opportunities available to you that matters.

What to do if you can't find work experience

Dental schools have recognised for some years that gaining useful work experience in healthcare is becoming increasingly difficult. During and following

the COVID-19 pandemic, applicants to dental school will find it difficult, if not impossible, to gain work experience in dental practices and hospital departments. The Dental Schools Council would like to reassure applicants that dental schools will take into account the change in circumstances caused by the ongoing pandemic when considering applications to study dentistry.

As before, we will continue to look for knowledge of the profession and investigation of the realities of being a dentist or dental care professional (DCP). There are a number of ways applicants can learn about what a career in dentistry will involve and develop the necessary values, attitudes and behaviours. Engaging in paid or voluntary work which involves caring for and interacting with different people, or which develops the skills you will need as a dental professional, can be just as good a source of experience as shadowing in a practice.

Students are also encouraged to investigate studying dentistry through e-Learning resources offered by dental schools such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Other useful activities might include reading dental journals (many have articles that are free to access) or following news about the National Health Service. You could also consider writing a journal about online posts from dental care professionals during the pandemic. Remember that some media sources are more reliable than others and that sometimes 'political spin' is put on articles to help create a headline. These things will emphasise an interest in a healthcare career and willingness to research.

If you do know any dentists, including your own, then arranging time to speak with them would provide you with material to use in the interview, as well as demonstrate motivation and initiative.

Further reading

[Health Education England Work Experience Toolkits](#)