Becoming a dentist: characteristics, experiences and performance of students in the early years of the Adelaide dental course

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
October 2009
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Abstract

The aim of this longitudinal study was to explore factors influencing the performance of a group of Australian undergraduate dental students during the early years of their education (1998-2001). Factors related to becoming a dentist and a selection of non-academic experiences were examined via closed- and open-ended survey questions and focus group discussions. Relationships between selected pre-admission variables and outcome variables were examined using tests of association and logistic regression analyses. Students’ perceptions of factors believed to contribute to success and difficulties were examined using open-ended survey questions and analysed using content analysis. Levels of success of dental students associated with changes in learning and teaching practices and admission practices were also investigated.

Most students had chosen dentistry as their first-career choice. Despite their demanding lifestyles, the majority of first-year students were successful. Second year was more demanding for some students however most progressed into third year. Academic failure was the main reason why some students were unsuccessful. No single factor or group of factors characterised a successful student. Good secondary school academic achievement, having previous tertiary educational experience and being a local student, predicted good academic performance in first year but not subsequent years. Performance on an admission interview had some predictive ability for subsequent academic success. In addition, academic achievement in some first-year dental subjects predicted subsequent academic success. Study behaviours, external motivating factors, having supportive peers and positive student-staff interactions were perceived to have contributed to success. Personal difficulties, a demanding workload, negative student-staff interactions and adjusting to first-year university studies, were perceived to have contributed to difficulties.

This thesis contributes to a growing body of knowledge about factors that influence academic success of university students, including those in health profession faculties. The results should be of particular interest to dental schools, both internationally and nationally, that have adopted multifaceted admission processes and/or have changed from conventional to more student-centred dental curricula.
Declaration
This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Dimitra Lekkas and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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_____________________________________________________________________

Dimitra Lekkas

Dated this…………………..day of …………………….. 2009
Acknowledgements

My PhD research has been a major undertaking over the past 10 years. I was enrolled part-time whilst also being employed as an academic member of staff in the School of Dentistry, The University of Adelaide. During this period I achieved several personal milestones ie, marriage, my first child and currently I am pregnant with my second child. I also encountered several health issues. From a work perspective, I experienced a dramatic increase in student numbers and teaching load. Both personal and work experiences contributed to my long journey as a PhD candidate. Along my journey there are many people and organisations who I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank for their contribution towards the success of my candidature.

I am forever grateful to my three supervisors: Professor Grant Townsend (principal supervisor), Associate Professor Tracey Winning (co-supervisor) and Associate Professor Gerry Mullins (co-supervisor), for their mentorship, personal support and guidance of my professional development as a researcher. I would like to thank the Adelaide dental students, from 1998-2001, for their participation in my project and providing my colleagues and I with an insight into their experiences during the early years of the Adelaide dental course. I would like to acknowledge the Australian Dental Research Foundation for financially ($4000) supporting the costs of conducting and transcribing focus groups. In addition, I would also like to thank the School of Dentistry, Faculty of Health Sciences, Research Fund for financially ($2000) supporting the ancillary costs of the PhD. I express my gratitude and thanks to Ms Emmae Ramsay, Faculty of Health Sciences, Statistical Support Service, for statistical support in relation to logistic regression analyses and Ms Vicki Skinner for her assistance in preparing and conducting student focus groups. I also acknowledge the following people for assisting with data collection: Ms Leanne Bragg, Admissions Officer, Faculty of Health Science; Ms Lisa Smith, Student Officer, School of Dentistry; Mr David Lamb, University of Adelaide, Student Administrative Services; and Mr David Hallam, South Australian Tertiary Admission Centre. I also thank Professor Deborah Turnbull, School of Psychology for her time in meeting with me to discuss results. Furthermore I would like to thank my fellow PhD post-graduate friends (Sarbin Ranjitkar, Vicki Skinner, Nattira Suksudaj) and colleagues in the Adelaide School of Dentistry for their friendship and support during my candidature.

Finally but not least, I express my deepest thanks to Alex and Luke Tsavdaridis, Dina Lekkas, Ervin and Antonia Pajor, Peter Lekkas, Julie Collins, my parents, parents in-law, John Tsavdaridis and my extended family and friends for their love, patience and support during my candidature.

‘The road to success is always under construction’ Arnold Palmer