



## HIGHER EDUCATION AND DENTAL CARE

### Higher education funding and dental workforce shortages

Public funding to Australian universities is one-third less today than in the mid-1970s.<sup>1</sup> For dentistry, this has meant that universities are training fewer dental students than in previous generations. Graduation levels are one-third lower than in the 1970s and are at their lowest level for over 50 years.<sup>2</sup>

A lack of funding for Australian dental schools has meant Australia is unable to respond to the demand for dental care. Research shows that the supply of dentists in Australia ranks 19<sup>th</sup> out of 29 OECD countries.<sup>3</sup> Workforce shortages are mostly felt in Australia's major cities. For example, there are 56.2 dentists per 100,000 people in Australia's major cities, yet only 33.6 dentists per 100,000 people in inner regional areas, 26.6 per 100,000 in outer regional areas and only 22.9 per 100,000 in remote and very remote parts of Australia.<sup>4</sup>

### Public sector debts

At the same time that funding to Australian universities has declined, debts for dental students have grown. According to the University of Melbourne's Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis, higher education was free for the previous generation while for today's students, higher education costs are the fifth highest in the OECD. Australia is the only country in the OECD where government funding per student has fallen since 1995.<sup>5</sup>

As the table below shows, a Commonwealth-supported dental student studying at the University of Sydney will graduate with a debt of \$53,617. The equivalent student, who receives Government support during their undergraduate degree, but then pays the full upfront fee for their graduate dental degree, will graduate with a debt of \$134,409. A dental student who pays the full upfront fee for both their undergraduate and graduate studies would commence their working life with a \$173,952 debt.

While the prospect of higher student debts will not

necessarily reduce the number of students applying to study dentistry, the ADA believes that graduates – commencing their professional career with higher student debts – will be less likely to work in areas of need such as the public sector, where remuneration is lower than in the private sector.

It has been estimated that over 600,000 people are currently on public sector waiting lists for dental care throughout Australia. In some parts of the country, waiting lists extend beyond three years.<sup>6</sup> If graduates eschew the public sector in favour of the private sector, trends in the maldistribution of Australia's dental workforce will widen and public sector waiting lists will continue to grow.

### 2006/07 Federal Budget

With these points in mind, the recent Federal Budget was a missed opportunity for dental care. Of most concern to the ADA was the Government's lack of recognition of the urgent need for greater funding for dental schools to address dental workforce shortages. The Federal Budget announced funds for universities to train more doctors and nurses, as well as programs to improve access to health care for people living in rural and remote areas, yet these positive measures were not extended to dentistry.

The ADA has consistently argued for an urgent increase in funding for higher education and remedies to rectify workforce shortages.<sup>7,8,9</sup> It has been estimated that the number of graduates would need to increase by 150 students on an annual basis for the Australian dental workforce to meet growing demand in the medium to long-term.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, the solution to the problem has been identified and endorsed by government health ministers (Federal and State) in 'Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013'.<sup>11</sup> Endorsement of the Plan is not enough – action is required to ensure that basic dental care is available to all Australians.

### Student contribution to dental degree – University of Sydney, 2006

Year	Commonwealth Supported Place (\$)	Combined Commonwealth Support and Full-Fee (\$)*	Full-fee paying (both degrees) (\$)
3-Year Undergraduate Science Degree	20,937	20,937	60,480
4-Year Graduate BDent Program	32,680	113,472	113,472
Total cost	53,617	134,409	173,952

Source: Adapted from ADA NSW (2006) *Discussion Paper: Counting the Cost of Educating and Training Dentists in New South Wales*, St Leonards. Additional figures from <http://www.usyd.edu.au/student/undergrad/apply/scm/feepaying.shtml>. Accessed 19 May 2006.

\*This figure is based on the assumption that the student's first 3-Year Undergraduate Science Degree was a Commonwealth Supported Place.



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

## References

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