Sink or swim
In a new series, recent graduate Sarah Armstrong offers final year students essential tips for survival, coping with the workload, getting ahead and most importantly, staying sane

This autumn, hundreds of dental students across the country have returned to university, their electives a mere distant memory, ready (or not) to commence their final year. It’s a daunting time, and a huge amount of pressure rests on the shoulders of those taking their final steps through dental school. Although the format of teaching/examinations ranges widely across dental schools, their goal is the same – to make sure every graduate is a safe, professional, competent dentist by the time summer arrives.

Inevitably, as term begins there will be abundant pep talks (some more terrifying than others) from senior members of the dental school, designed to motivate you into getting organised early. Occasionally these can cause the reverse response, evoking panic and dread to the private into getting organised early. Occasionally these can cause the reverse response, evoking panic and dread to the listeners, but try to look past the shock tactics and listen to what senior members have to say, after all the staff are your exams and what subjects they have – do not underestimate their importance. You can use them to perfect exam technique, find out what you strengths and weaknesses are, get a feel for how questions are asked, and if you work for these – it makes revising for the exam techniques, meet targets for designated procedures, and pass clinical assessments. It’s often wise to pass some patients on to colleagues to enable you to focus your attention, benefitting everyone concerned.

Gain an understanding
Now is the time to get your written work in order. Organising your files and countless scribbles of lecture notes now will reap benefits later, helping you realise what’s missing and what you didn’t understand first time round. It’s worth remembering there isn’t a finite amount you need to know to pass, dentistry is an ever-expanding subject and there is no guarantee of what you will face in your exams. You can’t solely rely on lecture notes, it’s important to read around topics to gain a greater understanding.

Most dental schools arrange mock exams throughout the year. These are probably the single most useful revision aid you will have – do not understate their importance. You can use them to perfect exam technique, find out what you strengths and weaknesses are, get a feel for how questions are asked, and if you work for these – it makes revising for the real thing that little bit easier.

Consider your future
As if passing finals wasn’t challenging enough, there’s also the small matter of what to do next. It’s wise to start considering your options now as from January onwards you need to apply for a vocational training or general professional training position. Start asking around within your dental school, and investigating Deanery websites to find out what is available and where. If possible get in touch with dentists from the year above – they are likely to be most familiar with the application processes.

Time to relax
All this said, it’s vital to have some time off too. It’s common for final years to live with five or six other dental students and inevitably when pressure starts to build, stress levels rocket and tempers become frayed. Try to spend some time with non-dentist friends to keep yourself sane – final-year dental students have an incredible ability to wind each other up into a frenzy. Get organised now and work steadily through but remember, this is your last year of student life, so try and enjoy it too.

About the author
Sarah Armstrong qualified from Newcastle University in 2008 and is currently working as a vocational dental practitioner in Brampton, Cumbria.