Queen’s School takes the throne

Queen’s University Dental School in Belfast was rated as the top institution in the UK for the study of dentistry, by The Times Good University Guide 2009. Professor Donald Burden, head of dentistry at Queen’s, revealed some of the secrets of the success of this highly prestigious, ‘small and friendly’ institution to Dental Tribune.

Why do you think that Queen’s University dental school was nominated as the top UK dental university?

First of all, we were delighted to receive the recognition, especially as we are one of the smallest UK dental schools, taking only 45 students a year, which makes this achievement even more remarkable. This top ranking position recognises the dedication and commitment of the staff in Queen’s Dental School. It also highlights the high standards achieved by our dental students.

We scored very high in the ranking measures used by the Times Higher in its assessment criteria.

These include the caliber of students, which is very high at Queen’s. As we are small, we can pick the crème de la crème.

Employment prospects are excellent for graduates, which is related to their high quality and good progress during the course.

‘Again, due to our size, we have the ability to gain a good knowledge of our students and provide excellent pastoral care and support. We know all our students by their first name, which larger numbers don’t always make possible.

‘Students provide us with very positive feedback. We always make sure we listen carefully to them and involve them at every stage, if there are any changes made to the course.’

‘In addition, all our staff are very enthusiastic, hard-working and committed, and overall, this creates a friendly, educational environment. Since our top listing, there has been an increasing interest in the course from the international community.’

How does Queen’s compare to other dental schools?

‘It is small and friendly, about half the size of a traditional UK dental school, which allows good staff/student relations and produces a high standard of graduates. We are the sole dental school in Northern Ireland.

‘Visiting external examiners always comment on our high level of training.

‘The dental course is a very popular course and we are very oversubscribed, with most of our students coming from Northern Ireland and the UK and a small number from abroad.’

What is the course structure?

‘A unique feature of the school is that the first two years of the course are shared with the medical school, but taught with a dental emphasis. So there is cross-fertilization between the two disciplines. We see that as one of our strengths. The course is structured so that students learn about dentistry and human diseases in year three and start clinical dentistry in specialty areas in year four. Students are exposed to clinical dentistry throughout the course. In year five they go on to study Total Dental Care, which is also integrated at each stage.

‘We have a strong focus on teaching and the development of resources to support learning. Our local dental committees are also involved in teaching. Many of our former students come back to their alma mater, which provides us with excellent resources. We also have well-developed peer-mentoring systems in place.

‘Our first year consists of a foundation upon which the rest of the course is built. Modules include an introduction to genes, molecules and processes which enable cells to form tissues and organs. Population social settings are also introduced.

‘The central component is the systems course in which each body system is studied, with the emphasis on normal structure and function.

‘A dental attachment scheme also operates, where our students are attached to clinics within the dental school or the community dental service. Dental students also learn the principles of patient management, dental health promotion and core dental clinical skills.

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‘Alongside this, we run an introductory clinical course where students learn how to approach patients and how to undertake examinations. We also run courses on the principles of disease and of treatment, and courses on the medical social sciences.

‘The third year continues with the subjects of the previous year and introduces a greater clinical component. If a student decides not to continue, they can withdraw from the dental course after third year with the award of an ordinary Bachelor of Medical Science degree if all professional exams have been passed.

‘In the fourth and fifth years students gain further experience in all the specialties of dentistry, with particular emphasis on the development of clinical skills, before they sit the final exam.’

What are Queen’s University’s entrance requirements?

‘We look at academic achievement based on exam grades, in fact last year our entrance requirements were higher than those for medical school. We require three A-grades at A-Level, one of which must be chemistry and one A-grade at AS-Level. We also use the UK clinical aptitude tests. We do not interview all applicants, but use the interview process selectively.’

Do you help students find placements?

‘Our students are much sought after and most of our graduates will go on to work as general dental practitioners or dental specialists providing dental care for the people of Northern Ireland. We have excellent links with our local postgraduate deanery. Most go on to become general dental practitioners, but considering our size, a fair number go on to work in dental hospitals. For a small school, there is a disproportionately high number who

Education Tribune
What are the main challenges you face in delivering the University’s curriculum?

‘It is quite complicated to deliver the curriculum set down by the General Dental Council. The balance is achieved by trying not to overcrowd the curriculum. There is a strong emphasis on practical skills and contact with patients as well as some outreach teaching in community dentistry and oral surgery.’

What is the ratio of men to women on the course?

‘We tend to have more women on the course, from about 55 per cent to 60 per cent, because they tend to do better in exams. It is seen as an attractive career option in which they can control their working hours. Many applicants have the choice between applying for dentistry or medicine.’

What qualities do you look for in your students as well as the technical abilities?

‘It is possible to take most students and train them in technical skills, given that they have the required level of academic ability. In the course, we emphasize the importance of the caring professional, who wants to look after others. Professionalism and the right attitude are essential. Students need to develop a high level of effective communication and good empathy skills.’

Queen’s University dental school is driving towards the development of an international research-led dental school in the next few years. Earlier this year, the UK’s first Centre of Excellence for Public Health Research was launched at the university, with a focus on nutrition and lifestyle.

‘The £5 million centre focuses on an integrated approach to health and social services and is researching the economic, social and biological factors which cause chronic diseases as well as looking at the main causes of inequalities in health experiences. It was awarded funding following a competitive process and is the first of five in the UK to be launched. Others will open in Cambridge, Cardiff, Newcastle and Nottingham.

Queen’s also features in the top ten in the UK for several other subjects, including Social Work (2nd), Pharmacology and Pharmacy (4th), Celtic Studies (5th), Chemical Engineering (6th), Agriculture (7th), Mechanical Engineering (7th), Electrical and Electronic Engineering (8th), Aeronautical and Manufacturing Engineering and Food Science (9th) and Social Policy (10th).

Overall Queen’s University was rated 31st in the Times Good University Guide, up two places from last year.

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