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Clare Adamson MSP
Convenor
Education and Skills Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

12 February 2021

Dear Convenor

My purpose in writing is to inform you that Scottish Ministers have accepted a recommendation from the Deans of the Dental Schools at the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow that Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) controlled-entry students will not be graduating this summer. This difficult decision has been reached following an assessment of the students' access to clinical experience during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been assessed by the Deans as being insufficient to reach the level of clinical expertise necessary for General Dental Council registration, and, more importantly, for safe practice.

The significant lack of clinical experience faced by these students is a problem unique to dentistry, where severe restrictions on the use of aerosol generating procedures brought in to protect the public, dentists, clinical lecturers and students have curtailed students' ability to gain clinical competence in many dental procedures. As you can appreciate, our concern is to ensure both quality of education for our future dentists, and excellence in practice for our NHS patients.

For the BDS courses at Dundee and Glasgow Dental Schools, the decision is to defer graduation until summer 2022 with all current BDS year groups repeating the 2020/21 academic year. For the BDS course at Aberdeen, graduation for final year students will be deferred until Christmas 2021, and for all other students to repeat the 2020/21 academic year.

Whilst all other options were considered, I am assured this is the only clinically safe course of action. The universities cannot safely run two cohorts of final year students, therefore the only sensible course of action is for all students to repeat the 2020/21 academic year. Students in earlier years have also missed clinical training and laboratory work. This will also necessitate a delay in entry from 2021/22 for new students to academic year 2022/23; the Schools would take around half their normal intake in 2022/23 from applicants for 2021/22 (requiring them to defer a year), and half from applicants for 2022/23.

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In recognition of the uniquely difficult situation that controlled-entry BDS students find themselves, my colleagues in Health, with support from those in SAAS and in Education, have drawn up a student support package to help mitigate the impact on all BDS students required to repeat a full year; this includes a bursary towards living costs, and, for Scottish domiciled students, an additional 'plus one' year of tuition fee funding. Details of this scheme will be released later today, once the universities of Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow have informed their students of the situation.

I trust the Committee can appreciate the difficult situation in which the Universities find themselves, and recognise that the priority of all parties has been to ensure high quality clinical education for students, the safety of students and teaching staff, and the development of future dentists with the high standard of clinical experience that we know and expect. Dental graduates should feel able to enter the workforce as safe, confident practitioners.

Yours Sincerely

JOHN SWINNEY

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