

## **Press Release of the Dental Council of Hong Kong**

### **Response of the Dental Council of Hong Kong to the media reports on the remarks made by the former Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry of the University of Hong Kong**

In response to the recent media reports on the remarks made by Prof. Thomas FLEMMIG, the former Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry of the University of Hong Kong (“the Faculty”) regarding the accreditation exercise on the Faculty’s Bachelor of Dental Surgery (“BDS”) programme conducted by the Dental Council of Hong Kong (“the Council”) and the proposed internship arrangements introduced in the Dentists Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024, the Council considers it necessary to make response, clarify the facts and set the record straight, thereby maintaining public confidence in the dental profession of Hong Kong.

#### **Statutory Functions**

The Council has all along been a statutory body established under the Dentists Registration Ordinance, Chapter 156 (“the Ordinance”) since 1959, which is responsible for registration of dentists in Hong Kong, conducting the Licensing Examination, and maintaining the ethics, professional standards and discipline of the dental profession. Pursuant to section 8 of the existing Ordinance, the Council may specify any recognised dental undergraduate programme offered by local universities in the Schedule therein. Graduates of such recognised programmes are exempted from taking the Council’s Licensing Examination and allowed to become registered dentists.

In view of this, the recognition of programme is within the statutory power of the Council, reflecting the principle of professional autonomy. Once the Council decides to remove a programme from the Schedule of the Ordinance, the respective dental graduates must pass the Licensing Examination of the Council for registration. Those who fail to pass the Licensing Examination will not be eligible to become registered dentists.

Similar to other healthcare professions, any reputable institutions that value the prospects of their students will undoubtedly take the accreditation work of statutory regulatory bodies seriously. This is to ensure that their students can successfully become registered healthcare professionals in Hong Kong in accordance with the law.

### **Accreditation Exercise**

As a statutory regulatory body, the Council is responsible for accrediting the local undergraduate dental education. Since 2012, the Council has been conducting accreditation exercise of the BDS programme of the University of Hong Kong (“HKU”) every five years and issuing accreditation reports with recommendations to the Faculty.

Different from the external review of the work of the Faculty which focuses on the academic level and world ranking, the Council’s accreditation exercise aims at assessing the Faculty’s implementation of the curriculum, including the overall training of students’ clinical skills. The accreditation exercise has been assisted by a Visiting Team comprising experienced local dentists and overseas experts, who would conduct on-site visits and exchange views with the Faculty’s management, teaching staff and students.

To ensure the professional standards of dentists in Hong Kong, the Council has all along required the Faculty to ensure that all local dental graduates have adequate clinical experience to treat patients with different conditions. The Council had clearly indicated in its second accreditation report issued to HKU in August 2019 that the Faculty must enhance the training of clinical skills and clinical experience of the BDS students; and set out the requirements of clinical experience, namely all graduates must (i) have been taught, assessed and examined in respect of all basic dental skills; and (ii) have treated an adequate number of clinical cases for various groups of patients. The Faculty has the responsibility and must provide quantitative account timely to show that all its graduates have met the requirements of clinical experience as proof for the effective implementation of the curriculum.

The Council reiterates that the above requirements of clinical experience are not unilaterally or arbitrarily imposed by the Council, but rather were developed in consultation with the Faculty. This process took into account overseas literature, the experience and accreditation philosophies in different

places as well as the design of the local curriculum, to ensure the requirements would be achievable. In addition, the Council points out that the accreditation requirements require both quality and quantity, which are contradictory to the quoted remarks as reported in media coverage. The quantitative requirement of clinical experience is not the only assessment criterion in the accreditation exercise. The Council will also assess the effectiveness of the curriculum based on other accreditation requirements.

The Council fully acknowledges the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic on the clinical teaching of the BDS programme. Therefore, the Council resolved to maintain the specified status of the HKU on conditions so as to offer an opportunity for the Faculty to rectify the non-compliances. In fact, the Council has been communicating with the Faculty in the various accreditation exercises since 2012 by reviewing and explaining the issues related to clinical training to facilitate the Faculty to take follow-up actions. Since there are no significant revisions to the relevant requirements in terms of the structure and content, the Council is confused and puzzled by the remarks made by Prof. Thomas FLEMMIG, the former Dean that COVID-19 pandemic was a defence for the failure to meet the requirements as quoted in the media reports.

Besides, regarding the claim of Prof. Thomas FLEMMIG, the former Dean that the clinical requirements had already been met by all local BDS graduates in class of 2023, the Council had publicly clarified, including explaining it to the Legislative Council earlier that the claim is untrue. To safeguard the interests of dental students, Dr LEE Kin-man, the Chairman of the Council also took the lead to issue a letter to HKU and met with dental students of different years on 6 June 2024 through the arrangements of the Faculty. During the meeting, the Chairman introduced to them the work of the accreditation exercise and the results of the previous accreditation exercises. The said explanatory work should in fact be performed by the Faculty to enable its students to appreciate the core value of study and practice under the dental undergraduate programme so as to enhance their professional competence.

## **Way Forward**

Nevertheless, the Council acknowledges that internship can provide real-life setting experience, allowing dental graduates to deal with unscreened patients

with different conditions and offer opportunities to collaborate with other dentists and dental care professionals with a view to strengthening the real-time, on-site and practical capabilities. Accumulating these practical experiences is crucial for dental graduates to address the growing demands of the public, improve service quality and ensure patient safety.

The Council Chairman met with the Acting Dean of the Faculty yesterday (3 July 2024), communicating with him the various aspects of the accreditation exercise. As in the past, the Council will continue to maintain close communication with the Faculty and ensure proper implementation of the recommendations of the accreditation reports, ensuring that graduates of the BDS programme of HKU meet the required professional standards. The Council will continue to work closely with the Department of Health, the Faculty and HKU BDS student representatives to optimise various aspects and arrangements of the internship programme, with a view to laying a solid foundation for the professional career of dental graduates.

The Council appeals to the dental professionals to work wholeheartedly to enhance the professional standards, maintain the reputation of the dental profession and provide high-standard and quality dental services to the public.

4 July 2024