

# The Paradigm Shift: Transforming Undergraduate Dental Education In Pakistan through National Curriculum Reform



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## INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate dental education is at the crossroads. The traditional model, largely rooted in 20th century, has now become a risky undertaking as it is resulting in graduating technicians skilled in repairing teeth rather than dental clinicians equipped to manage complex, person centered health. This is compounded by a fundamental lack of skills training and a significant lack of cross-border standardization. We must adapt to changing trends and train dentists who are competent in leveraging technology, capable of treating the human being attached to the teeth, and possessing uniform skill set regardless of the place of training.<sup>1</sup>

The Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) curriculum in Pakistan is more than two decades old. During this time dental education and clinical dental practice has undergone a paradigm shift that ranges from the advancement in technology to introduction of advanced materials revolutionizing oral healthcare. The curriculum in practice is based on discipline-based teaching and training with a prolonged preclinical phase before any patient exposure and a focus on quantitative procedural skill requirement rather than qualitative and holistic patient centered care. The world has revolutionized the way dental surgery and dental medicine is viewed and taught and especially practiced with emphasis on prevention, minimum invasive procedures, digitization, oral systemic connection, and special needs dentistry. Restorative sciences have evolved, and the manual dexterity alone is not enough for holistic treatment planning. Driven by the shift to Competency-Based Education (CBE) and the rapid evolution of technology, dental education across the USA (CODA)<sup>2</sup>, UK (GDC)<sup>3</sup>, Canada (NDEB)<sup>4</sup>, and Australia (ADC)<sup>5</sup> is undergoing continuous curriculum reform to graduate future-ready clinicians. Key updates focus

on embedding digital dentistry (CAD/CAM, AI, 3D imaging), integrating oral-systemic health principles, and elevating professional skills like communication, social responsibility, and the management of medically complex and vulnerable populations. Accreditation bodies are moving away from rigid procedure counts to outcome-focused assessment, ensuring that graduates not only possess theoretical knowledge but also demonstrate the critical thinking and practical proficiency necessary to provide safe, evidence-based, and person-centered care that meets the demands of a modern, globalized healthcare environment.

The fundamental shift towards competency based dental education (CBDE) is still a dream for the educators and curriculum planners in Pakistan. CBDE is a paradigm that is geared towards demonstration of predetermined graduate attributes instead of just focusing on the list of predetermined courses. The gap is such that till now the dental profession has not been able to develop a comprehensive list of dental procedures or skills that are to be mastered for a dental graduate in Pakistan, let alone a system for standardization of these competencies.

PM&DC has given guidelines and competencies for undergraduate Medical Education, but it is still missing in case of dental education.<sup>6</sup> To fill the gap, various universities in the country have started revamping their dental programs. Most of the effort, however, is focused still on the theoretical underpinning with less focus on dental public health and clerkship based clinical practice. This effort needs to be streamlined at a national level if any reform is to become sustainable and acceptable to all along with its ability to address the challenges of dental education and training that can result in better oral health outcomes for the population. Taking up this responsibility, the Pakistan Dental Association (PDA), central advocacy body in the country has decided to light the flame for national curriculum reform. The idea is to develop a dental curriculum that addresses the local needs and is also at par with the recent advancements in the field of dentistry. Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) curriculum

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is planned to be of five years total duration, which includes four years of academic study and one year of a mandatory rotating internship (house job). This aligns with all the international regulatory requirements and ensures global recognition to the graduates. Preferable the fourth year in the dental college will also be based on Clerkship model just like the last academic year of MBBS program to ensure adequate clinical exposure for all dental students so that they feel ready for independent dental practice after a total of five years.

The curriculum is being designed with the input of all stakeholders that includes educationists, students, alumni, general dental practitioners and academia. This is planned to undergo a public launch at the 34th National and 15th International Dental conference being held from 26th to 28th December 2025<sup>7</sup>. The academic partner for the National Dental Curriculum launch is the University College of Medicine and Dentistry, The University of Lahore. The finalized curriculum will be presented to the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council for dissemination and implementation after due process.

The BDS program in Pakistan has the potential to produce world-class dental professionals. However, this potential can only be achieved through bold and comprehensive curricular reform. The move to a Competency-Based Dental Educational Model, driven by Integration, digital Literacy, and a robust focus on EBD and Dental Public Health, is not a luxury but an existential necessity for the dental profession in the country. The regulatory authorities, academic leadership, and dedicated faculty must collaborate to overcome the inertia of traditionalism and the constraints of resources to implement a curriculum that truly prepares a "seven-star" dental graduate-one who is competent, ethical, scholarly, and community-focused. The time for deliberation has passed; the time for decisive action is now.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare

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