Education for Foreign-Trained Dentists in the United States: Currently Available Findings and Need for Further Research


Abstract: Foreign-trained dentists interested in seeking employment in the United States face numerous challenges, starting with the fact that their degrees are often not valid for U.S. practice because of international differences in the style of education and clinical practice. A small number of North American dental schools have offered modified predoctoral programs for graduates of foreign dental schools since the 1970s, and currently, numerous U.S. dental schools offer such educational programs. The purpose of this literature review was to investigate what has been reported about barriers encountered by foreign-trained dentists in seeking professional opportunities in the United States, focusing especially on factors affecting the admissions process into predoctoral and residency programs, the learning process, and employment of foreign-trained dentists in the United States. This study concludes that published findings do not support the generalization that all foreign-trained dentists seeking employment in the United States have had the same barriers, and the authors conclude that there is a need for further research on this topic. Supplemental information can improve the transition of foreign-trained dentists into a culturally diverse environment. In addition, with greater availability of data, the need for the establishment of assistance programs for this population can be assessed.

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Dental professionals from all over the world and from different backgrounds come to the United States to further their education with the main goal of seeking employment in this country. Foreign-trained dentists are not allowed to practice in the United States without first attending a North American dental school for further education. The purpose of the additional training is to ensure that the public is protected from unacceptable dental practices. To help these professionals achieve their goal, a small number of North American dental schools have offered modified predoctoral programs for graduates of foreign dental schools since the 1970s.

Currently, a large number of U.S. and Canadian dental schools offer educational programs for foreign-trained dentists. Some foreign-trained dentists complete their undergraduate and professional education in their home countries, practice there as licensed professionals, and then seek graduate training in U.S. universities, while others enter mainstream graduate programs just after completing dental training in their home countries. Moving to the United States and enrolling in a graduate program entails cultural and emotional challenges for international graduates. In view of that, it is important to learn about the experiences of foreign-trained dental professionals and how they deal with such challenges during their education and employment in the United States.

The purpose of the literature review summarized in this article was to identify what has been reported so far about barriers encountered by foreign-trained dentists who seek professional opportunities in the United States. This review will be used to determine the need for further studies that will add to the body of knowledge available in order to facilitate a smoother transition for future foreign dental professionals seeking opportunities here.

The United States has long been a destination for education and research for generations of foreign students and scholars. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), the United States is the host country with the largest number of international students. Graduate and undergraduate students have
come to the United States to study science and medicine since the mid-1950s. For these reasons, most U.S. professional schools have culturally diverse student bodies. Moreover, the number of new foreign students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities increased 8.3 percent from 132,000 in 2004-05 to 143,000 in 2005-06, as reported by the Migration Information Source, an online publication of the Migration Policy Institute. The IIE reports that the number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities increased to a record high of 623,805 in 2007-08.

The IIE also reported that nearly 96,900 foreign scholars were engaged in research and teaching in the United States in 2005-06. This number represents a 63 percent increase from 1995-96. While the United States receives the largest absolute number of foreign students, the global education market’s share of all foreign students studying abroad dropped from 25.3 percent in 2000 to 21.6 percent in 2004. The number of doctorates in science and engineering earned by foreign students at U.S. universities decreased by 3.5 percent in 2009, the first drop in more than five years. This decrease may be related to tightened immigration procedures and entry conditions for international students after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The atmosphere of heightened national security and restrictive immigration processes has affected the perceptions some prospective foreign students have about the United States, while at the same time other countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom have eased routes for permanent immigration after graduation in efforts to attract foreign students. The United Kingdom’s policies, for example, include providing an easily accessible electronic information system in other countries for potential students. This makes it easier for foreign applicants to enter legally, acquire a visa, and overcome work restrictions. These accommodations enable foreign students to work and pay for school, while also increasing their eligibility for scholarships. Eligible international students who graduate from Australian universities have the choice to obtain permanent resident status through a point system, while Canada and some European countries allow eligible foreign students and their spouses to work to offset tuition fees.

Dentists trained outside of the United States create a highly qualified, diversified, and motivated pool of applicants for education and licensed practice in this country. These professionals offer a combination of characteristics that include high level of technical skills, current knowledge, English language proficiency, past dental practice experience, and keenness to integrate into a foreign country with a different educational culture.

The field of dentistry continues to be affected by foreign-trained dental graduates who look to the United States for promising professional opportunities. However, obtaining a license to practice dentistry in the United States involves numerous agencies, each with its own responsibilities for education and licensure. These include the American Dental Association (ADA), the Joint Commission on National Dental Examinations (JCNDE), and individual state licensing bodies. The Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), established in 1975, is the nationally recognized authority for accrediting dental and dental-related educational programs at the post-secondary level. Of the sixty-five CODA-accredited dental schools that offer D.D.S./D.M.D. degrees, thirty-two have an international dental studies (IDS) program, defined as a two- or three-year educational program designed for foreign-trained dentists who wish to receive an accredited dental diploma in the United States.

All U.S. and foreign-trained dental school graduates who wish to obtain a license to practice in any state must begin the process by completing the National Board Dental Examination (NBDE) Part I administered by the JCNDE. Domestic dental students have to take this exam while they are enrolled in their dental degree program, while foreign-trained dentists have to pass this exam to be able to gain admission into an IDS program in the United States. Successful completion of the NBDE Part I allows foreign-trained dentists to seek admission into an advanced standing program in a CODA-accredited dental school to obtain a dental degree or certificate. The advanced standing program may take two to three years to complete. Completion of these programs allows foreign-trained dentists to participate in U.S. licensing examinations.

The NBDE Part I is not only a requirement for acceptance into an advanced standing/supplemental program, but it is also required for licensure. As part of the application process and to determine eligibility for taking the NBDE Part I, foreign applicants’ credentials are evaluated by the Educational Credentials Evaluators, Inc. (ECE). These applicants apply to an accredited dental education program with advanced standing to earn a D.D.S./D.M.D. degree. Advanced standing programs allow foreign-trained dentists to be admitted into the dental school at either the sec-
ond or third year of the regular four-year predoctoral program.2 Candidates then take the NBDE Part II during their educational program or after completion of it, followed by the appropriate clinical licensing examination administered by a state or regional testing agency.9 Sweis and Guay reported that 24,113 dentists took the NBDE Part II from 2002 through 2005, and, of those, 4,136 were identified as foreign-trained.8 Nevertheless, not all foreign-trained dental school graduates who complete the NBDE Part II wish to practice dentistry in the United States. A number of foreign-trained students who complete a program return to their country of origin, while others may elect to practice in a country other than their own.8

In a study of North American programs for foreign-trained dentists, Boorberg et al. reported that the academic performance of international students is affected by factors such as psychological and sociocultural adjustment in addition to assimilation into a new environment.2 These individuals’ transition into a dental community and practice requires more than just dental training. They often require assistance to facilitate their adaptation to a new culture and, in many instances, a different way to practice dentistry.2 Komabayashi et al. suggested that history and culture should be taken into consideration when designing U.S. dental education programs for foreign-trained dentists so that their educational needs will be addressed.10

A report on the University of Pennsylvania program noted that foreign-trained dentists differ from regular four-year dental students in terms of cultural values and previous life experiences, both professionally and personally, and most of them are older and have a family.11 It has also been hypothesized that cultural influences may have a significant bearing on a foreign-trained dentist’s ability to cope with a U.S. dental school environment, so that foreign-trained dentists require alternative preparation for the practice of dentistry in combination with guidance to facilitate their adaptation and acceptance of cultural differences.2

Pitigoi-Aron et al.’s 2011 article highlighted the predictors of academic performance of foreign-trained dentists in the United States. Based on the criteria for admission into the IDS program at the University of the Pacific Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, they concluded that the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and NBDE Part I exams had a strong influence in evaluating foreign-trained dental applicants for their program. Since English is the language of instruction in the United States, it is important for a foreign-trained dentist to be proficient in that language to be able to seek admission into this type of program.12

Donaldson et al. noted that some of the barriers currently limiting the implementation of standardized global dental education are national differences in accreditation and licensure, dental education models and curricula, and required competencies, as well as the slow implementation of technological advances in dental institutions around the world.13 Additional barriers that affect foreign students have been reported to include differences in language of original instruction, reputation of a country’s education system, lack of scholarships and financial support to offset tuition and cost of living, an unwelcoming environment, and limited postgraduation opportunities.5 The United States offers no direct path to permanent immigration for foreign students unless they obtain sponsorship by an employer or a U.S. citizen spouse. In the United States, neither foreign students nor their spouses are allowed to work off-campus.5 A study conducted in 2007 by Itaya et al. found that cultural norms, measured through validated multinational surveys, played a limited role in students’ academic success in a program for foreign-trained dental graduates.7 Miller suggests that, in most instances, foreign-trained dentists are unaware of the challenges they will encounter if they decide to apply for admission to a U.S. dental school.14 Therefore, he suggests that since a vast number of criteria must be met before a foreign-trained dental professional can practice in the United States, it is important for advisors to make contact with international students as early as possible in their academic careers to begin a discussion about challenges they may face during their education and after graduation.

As the number of graduates of foreign dental schools applying for admission to U.S. dental schools increases, it is becoming important for these schools to adapt their curricula to cater to these diverse student populations. This issue was recognized by Berthold and Lopez in their article back in 1994, when they noted the importance of schools’ acknowledging that the ethnic and educational background of these foreign-trained dentists plays a role in their “reeducation” in a U.S. dental school.15

Although some research has reported on the dental education of foreign-trained dentists or predictors of their success in an IDS program, little attention has been paid to their experiences in U.S. dental school programs. Furthermore, there is no record of
studies that determine the strength and significance of cultural influence on foreign-trained dental students’ success after entering U.S. dental schools. A search we conducted on Ovid and PubMed produced only a handful of articles on the experiences and barriers encountered by foreign-trained dental students upon enrollment in dental schools in the United States. This literature review confirms that further studies are needed to determine the challenges encountered by foreign dental professionals seeking opportunities in this country. The literature review did not provide enough information to generalize about the barriers faced by foreign-trained dentists seeking employment in the United States. Additional information can improve the transition of foreign-trained dentists into a culturally diverse environment. With greater availability of data, the need for assistance programs for this population can be determined.

REFERENCES