

CONSENSUS PAPER

Formalisation and Documentation of a Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads of European Dental Schools

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ABSTRACT

Context: The Forum of European Heads and Deans of Dental Schools (FEHDD) was re-established in 2007 to provide a means of bringing together European Dental School Deans, Heads and their deputies to explore current topics of interest. One such topic is leadership development and succession. The importance of leadership succession in oral health professional academic settings is well noted. With some suggesting leadership in this arena is facing a recruitment and retention crisis, FEHDD developed and launched in 2017, a 'Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads of European Dental Schools'. The framework was updated in 2024.

Aim: The aim of this paper is to summaries the development and updating processed that was followed by FEHDD and to raise awareness of the framework with relevant stakeholders. The 2024 framework has been further supported by an online tool to enable faculty track their development.

1 | The Role of FEHDD

The importance of leadership succession in oral health professional academic settings is well noted [1, 2]. Indeed some suggest that leadership in this arena is facing a recruitment and retention crisis [2]. With awareness of these challenges of recruitment the Forum of European Heads and Deans of Dental Schools (FEHDD) developed and launched in 2017, a 'Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads of European Dental Schools'. FEHDD has been an active forum convening at the annual meetings of the Association for Dental Education in Europe (ADEE), since FEHDD's reconstitution

in 2007. Attendees at FEHDD meetings are predominantly European oral health school or programme faculty but also include wider representation from North America, Australasia and the Middle East. FEHDD attendance targets Deans, Heads of Divisions and Heads of Departments engaged in oral health professional education, and those who aspire to fill such roles in the future. Benefiting from unrestricted support from the Colgate-Palmolive Company, each meeting of FEHDD focuses on a particular topic or topics of interest to members, tackling advances, expertise and capability building towards leadership in education. Throughout the year, the group also convenes online for interim sessions. ADEE maintains an open access

section on its website dedicated to the dissemination of documents and reports of FEHDD meetings and activities [3].

In 2014 and 2015, the FEHDD meeting topics covered leadership and followership [3]. From the feedback and subsequent discussions, it emerged that deans and heads of oral health schools saw an opportunity to standardise and formalise areas of competence in the different domains, which they had identified as important in the role of a dean [4]. As Nunn described, these competences varied, reflecting the regional structural and governance arrangements at play within dental education in different parts of Europe [4]. It was in this mindset that work began on formalising a competency framework for aspiring deans and heads of European Dental Schools.

2 | Our Historic Approach to Devising a Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads

In devising the work programme for the 2016 FEHDD meeting in Barcelona, FEHDD focussed on the feedback themes from the meetings on leadership (2014) and followership (2015). Nunn suggests that ‘the imperative, arising from this, was to develop a framework to synthesise a skillset for aspiring deans and heads of schools’ [4], which could be deployed in their day to day work. FEHDD defined competences in this context as:

The behaviours, technical attributes, knowledge, skills and attitudes that individuals must have, or must acquire, to perform effectively at work in the context of their role.

(4)

In preparation for the 2016 session, participants were invited to contribute suggestions for a set of core competencies, which, they felt, defined the qualities that make an excellent dean. The aspiration was to both assist in the recruitment and development of future leadership, and to also help with the incumbents’ own professional development. To enable this work, delegates were guided to review relevant output from the working groups at the 2007 Global Congress on Dental Education [5]. In addition, a number of questions were posed to participants in advance of the meeting, so as to gain their insight on expected behaviours, skills, knowledge areas, and the desired attitudes that were expected of a dean, and what these may look like in practice [6]. At the 2016 workshop, delegates were then asked to work together towards identifying, defining, and refining a final core set of competences.

At ADEE Barcelona in 2016, 84 colleagues divided into groups to work on the four competences represented by the questions outlined above, that is behaviours, skills, knowledge, and attitudes [4]. Attendees were asked what competences they felt an individual might be expected to possess at four different stages in their career. At the conclusion of the meeting, all output was collated by the FEHDD team.

To ensure collaboration and aid consensus-forming, additional sessions presenting the output were held over the following year (Table 1).

In the final document published in August 2017, Nunn reiterates the importance of viewing the document as a ‘signposting of the direction and competence acquisition recommended by this group’, its ‘serve as a guide for the self-assessment of competence deficits that can be addressed either in the mentoring of others or for personal continuing professional development’ [4].

The final consensus output suggests that the competent dean would be able to demonstrate:

1. A working attitude that encouraged a culture of openness and one of empowerment of staff, students, and those they serve
2. A behaviour that is grounded in positivity and with an appropriate leadership style, fostering integrity and professionalism
3. A skillset that demonstrates a strategic perspective, encourages engagement & advocacy grounded in strong communication & negotiation abilities
4. Professional knowledge including but not limited to that on policy & procedure and people management

The full details of the first document reporting these desirable competencies and the associated self-assessment template are available for download from the FEHDD section of the ADEE website [3].

3 | A Post COVID Era and an Updated Deans’ Mandate

ADEE has noted elsewhere the immediate impact the arrival of COVID-19 had on the delivery of oral health professionals’ education [7]. Quinn et al. identified a likely shift in the focus of dental education to a more global health perspective, and increasing inter-professional activities. These authors also highlighted the role that blended and online learning methods

TABLE 1 | Post-Barcelona 2016 activities leading to finalisation of the competence framework.

Time line	Detail	Aims
February 2017	Re-distribution of collated materials to all who had contributed to the Barcelona meeting	Clarification seeking and opportunity to add comment
May 2017, London UK	Presentation at a joint ADEE/ADEA face to face meeting ‘Shaping the Future of Dental Education’	Additional face-to-face discussion
August 2017, Vilnius, Lithuania	Presentation and discussion at the FEHDD 2017 meeting	Final presentation and approval

were having on teaching and learning practices. Such methods we know enable flexibility in, and accessibility to learning however, they also added to faculty stress by invading the traditionally private family space for some [8]. Quinn et al. did not however foresee the impact the COVID pandemic would have on the oral health professionals' education workforce itself. In particular, how it would be the impetus for many in the profession to avail of early retirement or career change [9], ultimately leading to what some have termed a recruitment and retention crisis [10].

Such concerns around staff retirements, staff morale and wellbeing as well as the need for resilience and a new leadership style featured strongly at the 2022 FEHDD meeting discussion in Palma, while the WHO Global Oral Health Strategy [11] featured in 2023 discussions in Liverpool. Feedback from these meetings in turn led in 2024 to the redrawing of the 2017 'Competency Framework' for aspiring Deans and Heads of European Oral Health Schools, in light of what the new normal had now become for deans and heads.

4 | Approaching the Updating of the Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads

Now in a post Covid-19 world, the updating of the framework in 2024 embraced a hybrid approach. Two workshops were delivered, the first online in June 2024 and the second in person as part of ADEE 2024 Leuven in September 2024 [12].

The purpose of the June session was to invite the FEHDD community to revisit the competency framework, exploring the need for an update in a post Covid, artificial intelligence (AI) and sustainability-focused environment that the changing oral health education landscape had become. Attendees were presented with an overview of key contextual changes on the topics and their impact on oral health professionals' education [13]. A recording of the session was posted on the FEHDD section of the ADEE website and made available via open access [3]. The ultimate aim of this initial session was to encourage users to make suggestions for updating the competences, the framework approach and the self-assessment template. The conclusions of the June 2024 session was that the current core competencies and self-assessment template remained relevant. Discussion on issues underlined or impacting on the dean's role in the wider academic environmental included AI, changing world politics, staffing and workforce planning, wellbeing and staff care, as well as the external role of advocacy [13]. It was agreed that the best way to take these into account within the framework would be explored them further at the in-person meeting in Leuven.

The second of the 2024 FEHDD sessions was the in person meeting at ADEE in Leuven, Belgium, September 2024. The session included presentations on staff and student wellbeing, as well as the salient points extracted from the June session [12]. Those present (again circa 80 persons) acknowledged that in an ever-changing world, leaders in oral health schools need knowledge of 'evolving environmental factors'. However, this was perceived as an unrealistic expectation, and it was considered appropriate that individuals would be better positioned to be able to identify gaps in their personal knowledge which could be addressed by

other members of their academic team or by external support. It was ultimately concluded that it would be helpful to combine 'staffing and workforce planning' with 'world politics' under an alternate heading of 'new integration models', as this better reflected the changing landscape. Wellbeing also featured strongly in their discussions [13].

Working in groups the attendees then progressed to explore and discuss, in more detail, the evolving environmental factors and the concept of wellbeing [13]. The consensus points attained from each of the focus group discussions are summarised below.

1. *Artificial intelligence (AI)*: Given the rapid and transformative growth in AI in dental education [14, 15], those present concluded the deans/heads needed to have a solid understanding of AI as an educational tool, its potential and limitations. Leadership style plays a key role in AI implementation strategies, and this should encourage user involvement [16]. It should also provide evidence-based guidelines and recommendations [17]. For those present, the view was very much that AI should supplement traditional education, not replace it.
2. *New integration models*: Recognising no one person can have expertise in everything, several attendees stated that they are already sharing teaching resources both locally and internationally to access or provide expert knowledge. International collaboration and global partnerships are noted in the literature as being key drivers to global trends in oral health professionals' education [17]. This emphasises the need for a 'global networking' competence [18] with enhanced understanding of global changes and changing team structures, dynamics, scopes of practices and accountabilities.
3. *Lasting impact of Covid-19*: Dentistry has to some extent become mainstream as a result of Covid-19 due to greater working with, and embracing of, other health professions. The pandemic also demonstrated that an open-minded, adaptable and flexible workforce is required to adopt new ways of working, including the use of new technologies [19]. Such positives should not be lost as we move further from a time of pandemic crisis.
4. *Sustainability*: The workshop's consensus on sustainability was that the deans/heads should be role models by promoting sustainability and integrating it into their policies and practices. The use of university policy as a positive enabler to sustainability has been identified elsewhere in the literature [20]. It covers a vast array of activities from product choice, waste management, reducing paper and transportation in the delivery system. The workshop also recognised that deans/heads have a responsibility to be advocates for the inclusion of sustainability perspectives within wider government policies. They should use this opportunity to promote an oral health preventive approach, as disease prevention will have a considerable impact from a sustainability perspective [21].
5. *Wellbeing*: Discussions highlighted the importance of cultural awareness of students and staff, including improving awareness of gender equality and diversity to ensure

an inclusive attitude. They concluded that deans/heads must prioritise physical and mental health of staff and students. The literature discusses the important role academic institutions play in enabling resilience of staff and students [22–24]. Leadership styles should empower the senior team members to promote wellbeing across their workplace and seek external help as required [25]. There was acknowledgment in the discussion that students and younger staff may have a different work-life balance need, and deans/heads must have awareness of these generational differences.

5 | Reframing the Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads

Following the September 2024 workshop, the FEHDD team met to consider the collated views and incorporate these in an updated competency framework. In line with ADEE's approach to the updating of its undergraduate curriculum framework, the ethos was one of incorporation within existing domains, where possible. FEHDD leadership considered this incorporation ethos as appropriate for two reasons:

1. As outlined earlier, the June and September 2024 workshops both confirmed that the existing core competencies, the self-assessment template, and approach remained relevant; thus, any additions would be best incorporated within this framework.
2. Given that the expanse and variety of factors at play within the 'evolving environmental factors', are contextually dependent, it would perhaps be reductionist to itemise these as individual competences.

The updated narrative that evolved for the 2024 update of the desirable competencies for deans/heads now suggests that deans, heads and those aspiring to such roles should be able to demonstrate competence as detailed below, with the updates highlighted in bold:

- A working attitude that encouraged a culture of openness and one of empowerment and **wellbeing** of staff, students and those served
- A behaviour that is grounded in positivity and with appropriate leadership, fostering integrity, professionalism **and one that enables the wellbeing of staff and students**
- A skillset that demonstrates a strategic perspective **including evolving environmental factors**, and that encourages engagement and advocacy grounded in strong communication and negotiation abilities
- A working professional knowledge including, but not limited to, that on policy and procedure, people management, **and of the evolving environmental factors**

The finalised document and self-assessment tool, together with a new interactive assessment tool, are available on the FEHDD section of the ADEE webpage [3].

6 | Concluding Remarks

The aspirations of the FEHDD 'The Competency Framework for Aspiring Deans and Heads' is to provide a simple yet effective tool for self-assessment for those engaged in, or interested in, become academic leadership within Oral Health Professionals' Education in Europe. It acknowledges that local and regional variation in these roles exists and that a 'one size fits all' concept is not appropriate. As we approach the 10-year anniversary of the framework's first iteration, this update provides useful new insights, grounded in regional leader's insights and experiences. Being an oral health professionals' educator has evolved considerably over the last decade in response to global and regional contextual change. Enabling and empowering the next generation of leaders to discharge this responsibility with integrity and accountability is paramount for ADEE and FEHDD. For this reason, we share this publication and its associated re-launch of the competency framework, as a means of continuing the debate around academic leadership in anticipation that it will be of considerable benefit to the academic community. Comments on the framework are welcomed and its use is encouraged.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest; however, for transparency, they note that ADEE receives an unrestricted support from the Colgate-Palmolive Company to facilitate the delivery of the FEHDD session, this support is provided towards logistic and administrative activities only.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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