

South Africa's Dental Assistant Dilemma: Closing the Gap Between Training and Practice

SADJ JUNE 2025, Vol. 80 No.5 P237

Mr KC Makhubele – CEO, South African Dental Association

South Africa's decision to formalize dental assistant training under the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) was intended to standardise education and elevate the profession. However, unintended consequences have emerged, including concerns about the quality of training, employability of graduates, and accessibility of programmes for those in underserved regions.

Accredited Institutions and Their Output

The HPCSA accredits several institutions to train dental assistants, including: Central University of Technology, Free State; Durban University of Technology; Tshwane University of Technology; Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Collectively, these institutions graduate hundreds of dental assistants each year, yet clinics – particularly those in remote areas – struggle to fill positions. This suggests a geographic mismatch, where graduates prefer staying in urban centres, leading to oversaturation in some regions and shortages in others.

Declining Practical Skills Among Graduates

SADA has also observed that newly qualified dental assistants often lack essential practical skills, despite having completed formal training. While they grasp basic theoretical concepts, up to date knowledge and hands-on expertise seems limited in some cases, raising concerns about whether current training sufficiently prepares them for real-world clinical environments.

Outdated Curriculum and Industry Alignment?

Dental practices evolve rapidly, yet questions remain about whether training institutions have updated their curricula to reflect modern technology and best practices. If course content has remained unchanged since inception, it may no longer align with industry needs. Institutions must regularly revise their programmes to ensure relevance.

Are Training Institutions Recruiting the Right Candidates?

Another concern is whether institutions attract students genuinely interested in the profession or those seeking a quick certification. If students enrol without a true commitment to the field, it contributes to high professional attrition rates and an underwhelming skill set in the workforce.

Breaking the Training-to-Employment Disconnect

Despite an annual influx of graduates, many dental clinics struggle to find competent assistants. Key reasons may include:

- Insufficient Practical Training – Many graduates lack real-world experience, making their transition into employment difficult.
- Geographic Imbalance – Graduates often avoid working in rural areas, where their skills are most needed.

- Mismatch Between Training and Job Market Needs – The curriculum may not equip students with the competencies required for immediate integration into dental practices.
- Solutions – Strengthening the Dental Assisting Profession.

To bridge the gap between training and practise, a multi-faceted approach is needed:

- Curriculum Modernization – Training programmes must be regularly updated to reflect technological advancements and evolving industry standards. The HPCSA should collaborate with dental associations and training institutions to ensure relevance.
- Enhanced Practical Training – More clinical hours and hands-on training in diverse dental settings should be mandated to improve graduate competency.
- Improving Geographic Workforce Distribution – Incentives, such as bursaries or loan forgiveness, should encourage graduates to work in underserved areas.
- Selective Admission Criteria – Institutions should implement job-shadowing requirements before enrolment to attract genuinely committed students.
- Stronger Industry Collaboration – Universities and colleges must work closely with dental clinics and industry stakeholders to align training with job market demands.
- Expanding Access Through Online Training.

The concentration of dental training institutions in urban centres limits access for students from remote areas. Universities should integrate online learning into their programmes, allowing students to complete theoretical coursework remotely while partnering with local clinics for practical training.

Benefits of this model include:

- Greater Accessibility – Students in rural areas can train without relocating.
- Improved Workforce Distribution – Graduates are more likely to work in their home regions, addressing regional shortages.
- Cost-Effective Education – Online learning reduces financial barriers for students and institutions.
- Adaptability – Programmes can be updated frequently to keep pace with industry developments.

A Call for Urgent Reform

The current training model is failing both graduates and employers. Without urgent reforms, South Africa risks deepening the shortage of skilled dental assistants despite a steady supply of newly qualified professionals. Policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders must act swiftly to modernize training, enhance practical exposure, and expand access to education – ensuring the profession thrives and meets the country's oral healthcare needs.