

Dental students' perceptions of specialty training and career choice

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The aim of this study is to evaluate dental school students' views on postgraduate specialty training and to examine the effect of their academic career plans on their choice of specialty.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted with students enrolled in a dental school during the 2024-2025 academic year. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dicle University Faculty of Dentistry Ethics Committee (Date: 29.11.2023, Decision No: 2023-41). A total of 458 students voluntarily responded to the online questionnaire, which consisted of 14 questions. The data were evaluated using descriptive and comparative statistical analyses with the SPSS (version 25.0) program.

Results: Preclinical students comprise 52.3% of the participants, while clinical students comprise 47.7%. More than half had already heard of the concept of specialty training before entering dental school, and the vast majority agreed that specialty training is necessary in dentistry. The most preferred specialty area was oral and maxillofacial surgery (38.6%). 88% of participants stated that they plan to pursue specialty training after graduation. The most frequently cited reasons for pursuing specialty training were professional development (27.2%), financial gain (13.2%), academic career goals (11.3%), and personal interest (10.5%). While some differences were found based on educational level, no differences were observed based on gender ($p>0.05$).

Conclusion: This study demonstrates that dental students are highly motivated regarding their specialty training and career plans. The timing of specialty awareness and the reasons for preference indicate that informative and guiding activities should be increased throughout undergraduate education to enable students to make more informed career choices.

Keywords: Students, dental, specialties, dental, career choice, education, dental

INTRODUCTION

In our country, postgraduate education prior to the Dental Specialty Exam (DUS) was conducted through doctoral programs. Dental specialization in Türkiye gained a legal framework with the enactment of Law No. 6225, published in 2011, and was divided into the following specialties; oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral and maxillofacial radiology, pediatric dentistry, endodontics, orthodontics, periodontology, prosthetic dentistry, and restorative dentistry.¹ With a new decision taken in 2018, Oral Pathology has been officially recognized as the 9th specialty.² Since 2012, candidates for specialization in dentistry have been selected through the Dentistry Specialization Exam (DUS), and they are placed in faculty quotas according to their success rankings. The departments of oral and maxillofacial surgery, orthodontics, and oral pathology have a 4-year training period, while other specialties have a 3-year training period. Specialty students receive the title of specialist in their field after completing the required training, rotations, and a successful thesis during this period.³

Although general dentistry meets the needs of most patients, difficult and high-risk cases require more advanced knowledge

and experience, necessitating the involvement of specialist dentists in such situations.⁴ Since specialization in healthcare is associated with efficiency, this trend also applies to dentistry. In recent years, the increase in complex treatment procedures and rising aesthetic expectations have increased the need for dentists who can perform more comprehensive clinical procedures on patients and keep up with developments in the field. These developments have made specialist training mandatory in rare cases that exceed the clinical skills of general practitioners.^{5,6}

Students' specialty choices are shaped not only by clinical skills but also by many socio-demographic and personal factors. Studies have reported that elements such as social status, higher financial income, academic career goals, personal interests, opportunities to work abroad, individual work opportunities, and professional satisfaction influence specialty decisions.⁷⁻¹⁰ Factors such as working hours, financial benefits, job security, social prestige, and having relatives who are dentists in the family are also considered important.¹¹⁻¹³ It has also been emphasized that motivations for specialization may differ between male and female students, with women

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showing less preference for certain fields.^{14,15} At the same time, general practitioners' clinical experiences, concerns about future malpractice lawsuits, and post-specialization employment opportunities also influence decision-making mechanisms.¹⁶

When reviewing studies conducted in our country in the literature, there are studies that examine post-graduation career plans, as well as studies that evaluate perspectives on the specialties of prosthetic dentistry, restorative dentistry, pediatric dentistry, endodontics, and orthodontics.^{7-10,16-22} Upon reviewing these studies, the question of which specialty an undergraduate student with an academic career plan will choose cannot be fully answered. Furthermore, a review of existing studies reveals that the specialty of Oral Pathology has not been examined in these studies. The aim of this study is to address these gaps in the literature.

METHODS

This research was approved by the Dicle University Faculty of Dentistry Ethics Committee (Date: 29.11.2023, Decision No: 2023-41). All procedures were carried out in accordance with the ethical rules and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All dentistry students enrolled at our faculty during the 2024-2025 academic year were invited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. The data for the study were obtained using a survey method, and the prepared survey form was distributed to students via the internet (e-mail, WhatsApp, etc.).

The sample size was calculated using the G*power 3.1.9.7 program. Based on a 95% confidence level ($1-\alpha$), 95% test power ($1-\beta$), and an effect size of $d=0.2005251$, it was decided that the study would be conducted with a total of 390 participants. Due to higher-than-expected participation in the survey, the study was completed with 458 participants.

The survey consisted of 14 questions. The first three questions of the survey were demographic questions, such as age, gender, and education period. The remaining 11 questions were designed to inquire about the students' thoughts on their specialist training and exam (Table).

Statistical Analysis

The normality of continuous variables was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Variables showing a normal distribution were expressed as mean $\pm$ standard deviation, while those not conforming to normal distribution were presented as median (minimum: maximum). Categorical variables were reported as frequencies and percentages [n (%)].

According to the results of the normality test, comparisons between two independent groups were performed using the Mann-Whitney U test. When the number of groups exceeded two and normal distribution was not observed, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied. In cases where the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated overall significance, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Dunn-Bonferroni test.

Categorical variables were compared between groups using the Chi-square test or the Fisher-Freeman-Halton test, as appropriate. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (IBM Corp. Released 2012. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.), and a p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Table. Investigating dental school students' thoughts on specialty training and the impact of their academic career plans on their choice of specialty

1. What is your gender?
Female
Male
2. Your age?
.....
3. What is your level of education?
1 st year preclinical student
2 nd year preclinical student
3 rd year preclinical student
4 th year clinical student
5 th year clinical student
4. When did you first hear about specialization training in dentistry?
Before university
During university selection period
Preclinical period
Clinical observation period
Clinical period
5. Which was the first specialty area you heard about?
Oral and maxillofacial surgery
Oral and maxillofacial radiology
Restorative dentistry
Prosthodontics
Endodontics
Periodontology
Orthodontics
Pediatric dentistry
Oral pathology
6. Do you think specialization training in dentistry is necessary?
Yes
No
7. If your answer to Question 6 is 'Yes,' in which field do you think specialization is most necessary?
Oral and maxillofacial surgery
Oral and maxillofacial radiology
Restorative dentistry
Prosthodontics
Endodontics
Periodontology
Orthodontics
Pediatric dentistry
Oral pathology
All
8. What is your opinion about the Dentistry Specialization Examination (DUS)?
Positive
Somewhat positive
Neutral
Somewhat negative
Mostly negative
9. When choosing dentistry as a profession, did you plan to receive specialization training?
Yes
No
10. Are you currently considering pursuing postgraduate specialization training?
Yes
No



Table. Investigating dental school students' thoughts on specialty training and the impact of their academic career plans on their choice of specialty (continued)

11. If your answer to Question 10 is 'Yes,' which field do you aim to specialize in?

Oral and maxillofacial surgery
Oral and maxillofacial radiology
Restorative dentistry
Prosthodontics
Endodontics
Periodontology
Orthodontics
Pediatric dentistry
Oral pathology

12. For what reason(s) would you like to receive specialization training? (You may select more than one option.)

To pursue an academic career
Because of my personal interest in the specialty
To improve myself professionally
For better financial opportunities after graduation
To enhance my social status
For more flexible working hours
To be my own boss
Other

13. If your goal after specialization is to continue academically, which department would you prefer?

Oral and maxillofacial surgery
Oral and maxillofacial radiology
Restorative dentistry
Prosthodontics
Endodontics
Periodontology
Orthodontics
Pediatric dentistry
Oral pathology

14. If your expectation from specialization training is better financial income, which department would you prefer?

Oral and maxillofacial surgery
Oral and maxillofacial radiology
Restorative dentistry
Prosthodontics
Endodontics
Periodontology
Orthodontics
Pediatric dentistry
Oral pathology

RESULTS

Of the 458 participants in the survey, 241 were female (52.6%) and 217 were male (47.4%). The average age of the participants was determined to be 21.61 ± 2.98 years.

The students' distribution was nearly evenly split between preclinical and clinical stages (**Figure 1**).

Approximately 59.8% of participants reported prior awareness of dental specialty training before commencing their university education. A total of 35.4% of participants indicated that orthodontics was the first dental specialty they had heard of, followed by oral and maxillofacial surgery (30.8%). Less

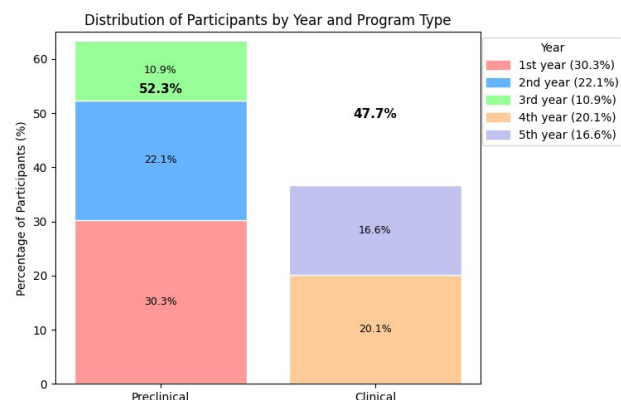


Figure 1. Distribution of participants according to academic year

well-known fields included oral and maxillofacial radiology (0.7%) and oral pathology (0.2%).

Among the individuals participating in the study, there was a significant difference between the answers to the question "When did you first hear about specialty training?" and the level of education ($p < 0.001$). In particular, the vast majority of first-year preclinical students stated that they were aware of specialty training before starting university. This suggests that awareness of specialty training in society is increasing.

When asked, "Do you think specialty training is necessary in dentistry?" the vast majority of students agreed that specialization is necessary in dentistry. Significant differences by educational level were found regarding which branches were perceived as most essential ($p = 0.001$), with fifth-year students showing greater recognition of oral pathology as a critical specialty (**Figure 2**).

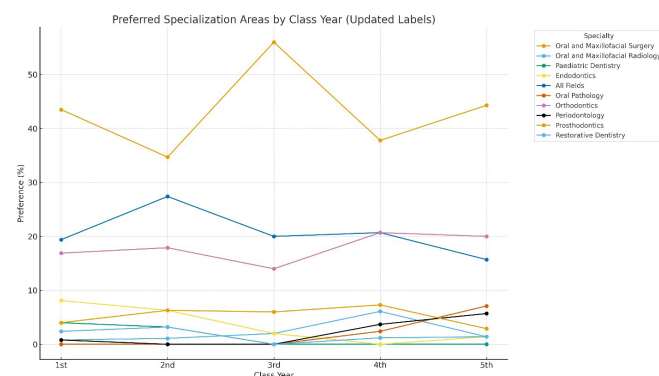


Figure 2. Distribution of specialty preferences among dental students according to academic year

When examining opinions about the DUS, 49.6% of participants reported a positive opinion, while 25.8% reported a partially positive opinion. This situation is thought to reflect a general satisfaction with the DUS. The fact that 19.9% of participants were undecided about the DUS indicates that there needs to be more information and discussion on this subject. The percentage of those who were mostly negative was quite low, at 2%.

When examining specialty training plans while choosing dentistry, it is seen that 71% of participants planned to pursue specialty training while choosing dentistry. This rate suggests that a significant number of students consider pursuing advanced education when entering the profession. The rate of those who answered "no" is 28.8%. Upon examining the results, a significant difference was found between educational



level groups ($p < 0.001$). It was determined that first-year preclinical students had a higher rate of planning to pursue specialty training when choosing dentistry. In response to the question of whether they planned to pursue a specialty when choosing dentistry, a higher percentage of female students indicated that they planned to pursue a specialty ($p = 0.047$).

It is observed that 88% of participants plan to pursue postgraduate specialty training after graduation. This indicates that students are highly motivated to continue their education at a more advanced level. The percentage of those who answered “no” remained at 12%, highlighting that specialty training is viewed as an important step for professional development. A significant difference was also found between educational level groups in responses regarding the intention to pursue post-graduation specialization ($p = 0.006$). In this context, second-year preclinical students were found to have a higher rate of considering post-graduation specialized training. No significant difference was found in responses regarding the intention to pursue postgraduate specialization based on gender ($p = 0.087$).

When examining the specialty areas preferred by students planning to pursue a specialty after graduation, oral and maxillofacial surgery (34.3%) and orthodontics (27.9%) are the most popular fields among those wishing to pursue specialty training. Less preferred fields include oral and maxillofacial radiology (1.5%), periodontology (1.3%), and oral pathology (0.7%). It was determined that the proportion of 5th-year students preferring periodontology and 2nd-year preclinical students preferring restorative dentistry was higher ($p < 0.001$). No significant difference was found among other groups ($p > 0.005$). No significant difference was found in the responses regarding the fields that students considering postgraduate specialization would choose based on gender, and this difference was determined to be statistically insignificant ($p = 0.137$).

It is observed that 27.2% of participants wish to pursue specialized training to advance their careers, 13.2% to achieve better financial opportunities after completing their education, and 11.3% to pursue an academic career. In addition, 10.5% of participants stated that they preferred this training because of their special interest in their field of expertise, while 4.2% stated that they wanted to be their own boss. Among participants with multiple motivations, those aiming for an academic career, interest in their field of expertise, and professional development together accounted for 2.2%; those seeking professional development, improved financial opportunities, and social status accounted for 2.0%; and those aiming for an academic career, professional development, and improved financial opportunities accounted for 1.7%. Additionally, 1.7% of participants preferred more flexible working hours. Beyond this, 1.5% aimed solely for an academic career and professional development, 1.5% considered an academic career, professional development, and financial improvement together, and 1.5% sought to raise their status in society. Finally, 1.2% of participants stated that they aimed for an academic career, interest in their field of expertise, and professional development. 20.3% of participants indicated that they wanted to receive specialist training, citing multiple motivations.

When examining academic career preferences, the most preferred fields for those aiming for an academic career are

oral and maxillofacial surgery (35.2%) and orthodontics (24%). the least preferred academic fields are oral and maxillofacial radiology (2.6%), oral pathology (1.5%), and periodontology (0.9%). When the results were examined, it was seen that the proportion of second-year students was higher among those who preferred the field of restorative dentistry ($p < 0.001$). No significant difference was found among other groups ($p > 0.005$). No significant difference was observed between gender groups in the responses regarding the departments that students planning to pursue an academic career after specialty training would choose ($p = 0.126$). No significant difference was found between gender groups in the responses regarding the departments that students expecting economic gain from specialty training would choose ($p = 0.649$) (**Figure 3**).

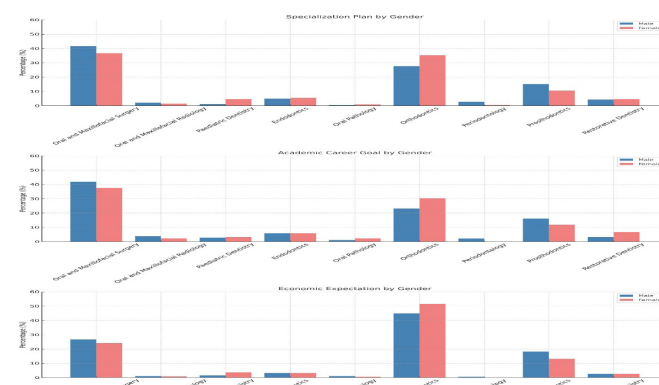


Figure 3. Distribution of specialty preferences, academic career goals, and economic expectations by gender

When examining specialty preferences based on economic motivations, Orthodontics is the most preferred field due to expectations of better economic gains (43%). This indicates that orthodontics is perceived as having high economic potential alongside its popularity. Oral and maxillofacial surgery (22.5%) ranks second in terms of economic motivation. Among the less preferred fields are oral pathology (0.7%) and periodontology (0.2%). When examining the departments preferred by students whose expectation from specialty training is to achieve better economic gains, it was found that the proportion of third-year preclinical and fourth-year clinical students was higher among those who preferred Orthodontics ($p = 0.002$). No significant difference was found among other groups ($p > 0.005$).

DISCUSSION

Of the 458 dental students participating in this study, 52.3% were preclinical students and the remaining 47.7% were clinical students, with an average age of 21.61 ± 2.98 years. A significant proportion of students (59.8%) stated that they were familiar with the concept of specialty training in dentistry before starting university. This indicates that the proportion of students hearing about it for the first time during the preclinical period is relatively low. Previous studies in the literature report that most students are introduced to specialty fields during the preclinical education process.

Aksoy et al.⁹ found in their study that 75.3% of students first heard about the Prosthodontics department during the preclinical period. Similarly, in a study conducted in the field of endodontics, 69% of participants stated that they first heard about this discipline during preclinical education.²⁰



In another study on restorative dentistry, 47% of students reported that they learned about this department through faculty courses.¹⁷ Our study shows that students are now encountering the concept of specialization at an earlier stage, particularly before starting university. This situation indicates that, with the increase in the number of graduates over the years, social awareness of specialty training has increased, and students are becoming knowledgeable about this subject at an earlier age.

It has been observed that opinions regarding the necessity of specialty training in dentistry are quite strong. The vast majority of participants (91.9%) agreed that specialization is essential in the field of dentistry. This finding largely coincides with previous literature. In a study conducted by Çulhaoğlu et al.¹⁹ on the Dentistry Specialization Exam (DUS), 91.5% of preclinical students and 88.7% of clinical students indicated that they were inclined to pursue specialization. Similarly, in a survey on post-graduation career plans conducted by Taşöker et al.²¹ 52.3% of participants responded that they were “considering specialization,” emphasizing high motivation for specialization. The findings of our study reveal that the increasing clinical diversity, technological innovations, and multidisciplinary approach in modern dental practice are directing physicians to acquire in-depth knowledge and skills in specific areas.

When participants were asked, “In which field do you think specialized training is most necessary?”, the most common response was oral and maxillofacial surgery (38.6%). Meanwhile, 19.2% of participants indicated that specialized training was necessary in all fields, selecting the “all” option. In a study conducted on third-, fourth-, and fifth-year students, similar to our study, participants most frequently indicated the need for specialized training in oral and maxillofacial surgery (43.4%).⁷ Similarly, in a study by Erhamza et al.⁸ oral and maxillofacial surgery (40.8%) was also considered the most necessary specialty. Our findings largely coincide with those in the literature. The fact that oral pathology was mentioned more frequently by fifth-year students may be related to this specialty becoming more visible and being introduced later in the undergraduate curriculum. This finding reflects the relationship between the content of the undergraduate curriculum and the level of awareness regarding specialties.

In our study, the percentage of participants planning to pursue a specialty when choosing the dentistry department was determined to be 71%, and the results are consistent with the current literature.^{19,22} In a study on post-graduation career motivation, oral and maxillofacial surgery ranked first with 33.3%, while orthodontics ranked second with 15.2%.²¹ In another survey focusing on the field of pediatric dentistry, oral and maxillofacial surgery was the most preferred specialty, with a rate of 38.8%, while orthodontics was again reported in second place.⁷ Similarly, in a study conducted by Gedikli et al.²⁰ the top two most preferred specialties were oral and maxillofacial surgery (34.2%) and orthodontics (23.6%). The results of our study are consistent with the literature.

When examining the primary motivational factors behind participants’ choice of specialty, the most prominent factors were professional development (27.2%), better financial opportunities (13.2%), and the desire to pursue an academic career (11.3%). Our results were consistent with the data in the literature.^{16,22} However, 10.5% of participants stated that

their preferences were based on their particular interest in the fields of specialization. This distribution largely overlaps with the motivational factors reported in previous literature.^{7,9,17} The findings of this study reveal that the motivations guiding students’ specialization choices cannot be reduced to a single cause but are shaped by multidimensional reasons. In particular, the high percentage of participants who expressed both professional development goals and expectations of economic gain and social status indicates that students view specialty training not only as professional competence but also as a strategic investment for the future.

In our study, no significant difference was found between educational levels in terms of attitudes toward DUS, plans for specialization, and the necessity of specialized training. This indicates that awareness of specialization is widespread and strong across different class levels.

Overall, the findings of this study are largely consistent with previously reported trends in the literature, supporting the high motivation of dental students regarding specialty training and career plans. However, differences observed in the timing of first exposure to the concept of specialization and in the level of awareness of certain fields reveal that pre-university information activities and undergraduate-level introduction processes are not homogeneous.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. First, the research was conducted at a single dental faculty, which may limit the generalizability of the results to students from other institutions or regions. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which could be affected by social desirability bias. Additionally, while the survey covered a wide range of motivational and perceptual factors, it did not include qualitative components such as interviews or open-ended responses, which could have provided a deeper insight into students’ reasoning processes. To confirm and expand upon these findings, future multi-center and longitudinal studies using mixed methods are ideally recommended.

CONCLUSION

As a result, the literature and the results of the current study indicate that the factors that influence the specialization preferences of dental students are diverse. Career planning can be facilitated in accordance with the specialty requirements of the national health system by providing early and comprehensive information about specialty examinations and branches. This method will not only assist students in making well-informed and fulfilling career decisions, but it will also guarantee that the oral and dental health requirements of the community are adequately addressed. Moreover, the establishment of structured guidance within dental education could promote a more effective alignment between the demands of specialty and the interests of students, thereby contributing to the development of more effective curriculum and policy in the field of dental education.

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethics Committee Approval

The study was carried out with the permission of the Dicle University Faculty of Dentistry Ethics Committee (Date: 29.11.2023, Decision No: 2023-41).



Informed Consent

All dentistry students signed an open and informed consent form.

Referee Evaluation Process

Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure

The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Contributions

All of the authors declare that they have all participated in the design, execution, and analysis of the paper, and that they have approved the final version.

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