

**Consultation on routes to registration
for internationally qualified dentists
and dental care professionals**

**Consultation
outcome report**

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1. Background

About the GDC

The GDC's overarching objective is to protect the public and our mandate and powers to do this are set out in the Dentists Act 1984 (the 'Dentists Act').

In order to protect the public, we set learning outcomes for – and quality assure - pre-registration dental education and training in the UK, maintain a register of dental professionals, ensure that nobody is admitted to that register if they do not meet the relevant requirements, set standards of conduct for those on our register, and take action when concerns raised with us indicate that a dental professional may have fallen short of those standards.

Dental professionals with overseas qualifications make a valuable contribution to the UK workforce. As the GDC only carries out the regulatory activities described above within the UK, we require processes to ensure that professionals who obtained their qualifications internationally meet the same standards as those who trained within the UK and are eligible to join our Registers.

About the consultation

On 8 March 2023, amendments to the Dentists Act came into force under The Dentists, Dental Care Professionals, Nurses, Nursing Associates and Midwives (International Registrations) Order 2023 ("the 2023 Order"). One specific effect of these amendments is to enable the GDC to make changes to rules governing international registration processes without requiring approval from the Privy Council. This new rule-making power comes with a requirement to consult.

The 2023 Order revoked The General Dental Council (Overseas Registration Examination Regulations) Order of Council 2015 (the 2015 ORE Regulations), the existing regulations for international registration which affect dentists, but kept them in effect for one year. From 9 March 2024, therefore, the GDC will need to have new rules in place to govern international registration, to ensure it can continue to register internationally qualified dentists.

The 2023 Order also made changes to the Dentists Act which require the GDC to make rules to govern the international registration process for dental care professionals (DCPs). We need to ensure that rules are in place to ensure the continuity of the process while we conduct longer-term work to determine the best approach to DCP assessment.

This consultation has sought views on the two sets of proposed new Rules. It was launched on 4 July 2023 and asked six questions about the proposed Rules for registration of internationally qualified dentists, the proposed Rules for Overseas Registration Examination (ORE) fees, the proposal for an additional application fee for those wanting to sit the ORE, a change in terminology describing the standard that internationally qualified dentists must meet to join the Register, and the proposed Rules for registering DCPs with international qualifications. We also asked whether the proposed Rules would have any impact on equality, diversity and inclusion for people with protected characteristics.

We are conducting long-term work to develop an improved comprehensive framework for routes to registration for overseas qualified dental professionals. The Rules that we have consulted on are intended to bridge the gap between when the 2015 ORE Regulations are revoked and when this longer-term approach can be introduced. The processes set out in the proposed Rules for dentists are broadly similar to the current processes set out in the 2015 ORE Regulations and the Dentists Act.

The proposed Rules for DCPs mirror the existing process for DCP assessment that was previously set out in the Dentists Act and are also intended to allow continuation of the process while we conduct longer-term work.

Alongside this consultation, we issued a call for evidence to inform our longer-term work on international registration. Many respondents took the time to provide evidence on eight additional questions, and we are analysing these responses to inform our longer-term work. We will publish a further report on the responses we have received to our call for evidence once we have completed the analysis.

Consultation questions

As set out above, we asked six consultation questions. These were:

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should make the rules contained in the draft Rules for international registration: dentists?
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the approach to setting the fees payable for the ORE that we have described in paragraphs 2.5 to 2.12?
3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to recover the cost of processing applications for the ORE and determining eligibility (paragraph 2.10)?
4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should change the terminology describing the standard that should be met by candidates in order to pass the ORE as proposed (paragraph 2.13)?
5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should make the proposed rules in the draft Rules for international registration: DCPs?
6. Please tell us about impacts you think the proposals may have in respect of the protected characteristics or any other aspect of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Methodology

For this consultation we collected and analysed both quantitative and qualitative data. For questions 1-5 we gave respondents the following options:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Unsure
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

We also provided a text box where respondents could provide further information about the reasoning behind their answer. There were no limits on the length of these responses.

Question 6 was open-ended and respondents could provide an answer through the text box.

We also collected the following information:

- Whether a respondent was replying as an individual or an organisation
- Where an individual, whether they were a registered dental professional, dental student, or a member of the public/a patient
- If they were a registered dental professional, their title.

Respondents, if applying on behalf of an organisation, were invited to identify the organisation they were responding on behalf of.

In conducting the analysis, we prepared descriptive statistics of the quantitative data, which can be found in the tables in this report. For the qualitative data, we used a framework analysis where we identified themes in the responses and coded the data according to those themes. Once all the responses were coded, each of the responses with a particular code were analysed together to ensure we captured the range of views associated with that theme. The outcome of this analysis can be found in the discussion of the qualitative data for each question in this report.

2. Analysis of respondents

We received 243 responses to the online consultation form. We also received nine responses that did not use the online form; two of these responses followed the online consultation format and were included with the quantitative data, while the seven responses that did not use the consultation format were only considered as part of the qualitative analysis.

224 responses were from individuals, with 21 responses coming on behalf of organisations.

The following organisations identified themselves as respondents, either through the consultation form or in the letter they submitted:

Association of Dental Groups
Association of Dental Hospitals
British Association of Clinical Dental Technology
British Association of Dental Nurses
British Dental Association
British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy
Bupa Global and UK
College of Medicine and Dentistry
Dental Laboratories Association
Dental Schools Council
Dental Technologists Association
Dentaltubules
International Dental Organisation
Maxinity Software Limited
MyDentist
National Examining Board for Dental Nurses
NHS England
Phoenix Dental Academy
Rodericks Dental Partners
Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh
Royal College of Surgeons of England
Society of British Dental Nurses
UK Committee of Postgraduate Dental Deans and Directors (COPDEND)

Among the 224 individual respondents, 132 (59.2%) identified themselves as a registered dental professional, 65 (29.1%) were dental students or applicants to the Register, and 26 (11.7%) were members of the public and/or a patient. One respondent did not select an answer.

Registered dental professional	132
Dental student or have applied to join the register	65
Member of the public and/or a patient	26

For those who responded that they were a registered dental professional, we asked a follow-up question about the title under which they were registered and whether they were on a specialist list, the results of which are displayed in the table below. Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Clinical dental technician	0
Dental hygienist	11
Dental nurse	7
Dental technician	2
Dental therapist	21
Dentist	74
Orthodontic therapist	1
Specialist (on one or more specialist lists)	13

3. Analysis of responses

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should make the rules contained in the draft Rules for international registration: dentists?

This question was answered by 233 respondents, with a majority (57%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that the GDC should enact the proposed Rules for dentists. 11.2% were unsure, and 31.8% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposed rules.

Response	Organisation	Individual	Total	% ¹
Strongly Agree	6	40	46	19.7
Agree	8	79	87	37.3
Not sure	1	25	26	11.2
Disagree	4	29	33	14.2
Strongly Disagree	2	39	41	17.6
Total	21	212	233	

¹ Figures will not always add to 100 due to rounding.

Additional information to explain their answer was provided by 142 of these respondents.

Respondents that agreed or strongly agreed with the Rules for international dentists provided a few key reasons for their support. Several commented that they supported the new Rules because the previous Rules were outdated, rigid, and required updating. Others remarked on the need for internationally trained dentists in the UK and for an efficient process to allow them to join the UK Register, and they felt that the new Rules would help to facilitate this purpose. A small number of respondents also raised the point that the GDC, as the regulator of dental professionals, is best positioned to make rules for international registrants, and that these Rules would ensure that international registrants met the standards expected of UK trained dentists. Patient safety was another key consideration for some respondents, and several commented that they believed that the proposed Rules would support the protection of patients.

Some respondents felt that the proposed Rules were not significantly different from the current Rules. For a few of these respondents this supported a response of 'not sure' or 'strongly disagree', while others used this reasoning to agree with the proposed Rules.

The respondents who disagreed with the proposed Rules provided rationales that can be grouped into several key themes. One of these themes was problems with the current ORE process. Respondents raised issues including the length of processing time for applications, a lack of capacity for exams, inefficiencies in the process for registering for exams, and the inability to resit single parts of the exam. A few respondents also felt that it was unfair that candidates with qualifications from EU countries do not have to sit the exam.

ORE fees were also a common theme among respondents who disagreed with the proposed Rules. Several respondents argued that the fees are too high and could act as a barrier for those with overseas qualifications wishing to join the Register.

Some respondents also did not support the proposed Rules on the basis that they disagreed with the change in terminology from 'a final examination of a United Kingdom undergraduate dental degree' to a 'UK diploma in dentistry'. These respondents believed the change in wording would cause confusion for applicants, while others felt that it would actually lower the standards for internationally trained dentists being admitted to the UK Register. Further commentary on this issue can be found under question 4.

Several respondents wanted the Rules to contain specific provisions for refugees who want to practise as dentists in the UK. Suggested provisions included waiving fees for the ORE, providing an alternate route to registration such as a period of supervised practice, or having a more flexible assessment system for refugees.

A number of respondents expressed that they wanted to see alternative routes to registration for all applicants. Included was the suggestion that applicants with a UK postgraduate qualification have a different route to registration, rather than being assessed through the ORE. Other respondents commented that the UK should automatically recognise qualifications from certain countries, as is currently the case for EU qualifications. There was also suggestion of a training course that applicants could complete once they arrive in the UK or a process requiring applicants to undertake a period of supervised practice as a route to registration.

GDC response

The proposed Rules are intended to provide internationally qualified applicants with a clear route to registration, while ensuring that these applicants meet the same standards that are expected of those who train in the UK. Given that the majority of responses provided support for these Rules, we will implement the new Rules to replace the current Rules that will expire on 8 March 2024.

However, this is not the end of our work in this area. We are currently working on ways to make the ORE process more efficient for applicants and increasing capacity for exam sittings, as well as reviewing the fees for this exam. In the longer term, we are committed to reviewing the processes for registering internationally trained dentists and will be using the feedback gained in this and future consultations to shape the development of new processes for international registration.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the approach to setting the fees payable for the ORE that we have described in paragraphs 2.5 to 2.12?

Question 2 was answered by 233 respondents, with 51.1% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the approach to setting the fees payable for the ORE as described. 15.5% of respondents were unsure, while 33.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Response	Organisation	Individual	Total	%
Strongly Agree	8	47	55	23.6
Agree	9	55	64	27.5
Not sure	1	35	36	15.4
Disagree	2	35	37	15.9
Strongly Disagree	1	40	41	17.6
Total	21	212	233	

Additional information to explain their answer was provided by 126 respondents.

Among those that agreed or strongly agreed with the approach to fee setting, one of the main rationales was that current registrants should not be required to subsidise the ORE through the Annual Retention Fee (ARF). Others emphasised that the international registration process should be cost neutral. A few respondents felt that the proposed approach to fee setting would ensure that only candidates who are serious about working in the UK would apply. Some respondents also believed that this approach could lead to shorter processing times for applications, although this was not indicated in the proposals.

For those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the approach to fee setting, the most common reasoning was that the fees for the ORE are significant for applicants, and that this had been and would continue to be a barrier to entry for prospective international registrants. Some respondents pointed out that many international applicants also need to bear the cost of flights and visas to travel to the UK, if not already resident in the UK. Some candidates also need to have documents translated which could be costly. Other respondents commented that the fees for the ORE were substantially higher than other healthcare regulators' examination fees. Some respondents felt that these fees would deter qualified applicants who could, if registered, contribute to addressing the demand for NHS dental care.

Several respondents commented that fees should be waived or reduced for refugees, with some of those pointing out that many refugees were already in the country and had limited recourse to earning money to pay for the ORE if they could not afford it. Some also commented that other countries and other UK regulators had been helping refugees with costs relating to registration, such as examination fees.

Some respondents took the opportunity to make suggestions for alternative ways for fees to be used or collected. A few respondents believed that the GDC should seek government subsidies for the ORE, as internationally qualified dentists could help to fulfil the demand for NHS dental care. Others encouraged the GDC to look for ways to lower the cost of the ORE to bring it in line with the costs for similar examinations run by other regulators, such as the General Medical Council. A few respondents also suggested that the ORE Part 1 be offered outside of the UK, so applicants could reduce travel costs. A couple of respondents suggested that the fees collected by the GDC should be used to fund a training course that international registrants could take to enter the dental profession in the UK.

GDC response

The amendments to the Dentists Act allow greater flexibility in setting and updating fees for the ORE, making it more straightforward to align them with our fee setting policy. Previously, fees for the ORE had not changed since 2015, which meant that the increasing costs for the ORE were being subsidised by registered dental professionals through the ARF. The inability to amend the 2015 Order without Privy Council approval limited our ability to align examination fees to costs and meant that any increase in capacity would require further subsidy by dental professionals paying the ARF.

Bringing the ORE fees in line with the GDC's fees policy will remove one of the main constraints on the capacity of the exam and enable the number of places to be increased while minimising the need for cross-subsidy. The current fee structure has limited our ability to increase exam places for the ORE because each additional place requires more funding from the ARF as there are only two potential sources of income through which to fund the examination: the ARF and the exam fees.

We recognise that fees for the ORE are significant for many applicants and we will consider the comments received as part of this consultation in our ongoing and longer-term work. We are currently working on developing new fees regulations, including determining how and when we charge fees for the ORE. As part of the longer-term work on fees we are considering issues such as whether to reduce or waive fees for refugees or whether parts of the assessment can take place outside of the UK. We are currently conducting a procurement exercise for the ORE Parts 1 and 2, which we expect to complete by the end of 2024.

Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to recover the cost of processing applications for the ORE and determining eligibility (paragraph 2.10)?

Question 3 was answered by 226 respondents, with 47.3% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposal to recover the cost of processing application for the ORE and determining eligibility. 16.8% of respondents were unsure, while 35.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Response	Organisation	Individual	Total	%
Strongly Agree	7	43	50	22.1
Agree	9	48	57	25.2
Not sure	2	36	38	16.8
Disagree	2	38	40	17.7
Strongly Disagree	1	40	41	18.1
Total	21	205	226	

Additional information to support their answer was provided by 108 respondents. There was significant overlap in the responses between questions 2 and 3. Many respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal commented that existing registrants should not be subsidising the ORE process and that the GDC should recover the costs of processing applications to ensure the process is cost neutral as far as possible. Some respondents also commented that a fee would help to ensure that only applicants who were serious about coming to the UK would apply. A small number of respondents indicated that there were some applicants who applied, but never book a place on the ORE, and believed that an application fee would help prevent this and reduce the backlog in applications. Several respondents commented that they hoped charging an application fee would reduce the processing time for applications.

As with question 2, the main rationale for respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed was that the cost of the ORE is already significant for applicants and further fees would act as a barrier to internationally qualified professionals who wished to join the Register. A few respondents also raised concerns about long waiting times for application processing and felt that an application fee would further complicate the ORE process.

Several respondents felt that any application fee should be waived for refugees.

A few respondents believed that the costs involved in assessing applications should be included in the exam fees, to make the process simpler and to minimise the number of separate fees involved in the process.

A couple of respondents suggested that we provide an eligibility tool that prospective applicants could use to determine the likelihood that their application would be successful.

GDC response

We proposed to charge an application fee to cover the costs of processing and assessing applications to ensure, as far as possible, that the cost of processing and assessing ORE applications is not paid by income from the ARF. The proposal is consistent with our fees policy and the fees we charge for other routes to registration. We have decided to introduce this fee in 2024. We will publish details of the fees in advance of any new rules coming into effect, so that candidates know what to expect. We will also use this feedback to inform our longer-term work.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should change the terminology describing the standard that should be met by candidates in order to pass the ORE as proposed (paragraph 2.13)?

Question 4 was answered by 227 respondents, with 48.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposed terminology change. 26.9% of respondents were unsure and 24.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Response	Organisation	Individual	Total	%
Strongly Agree	3	37	40	17.6
Agree	5	65	70	30.8
Not sure	5	56	61	26.9
Disagree	1	18	19	8.4
Strongly Disagree	6	31	37	16.3
Total	20	207	227	

Additional information was provided by 97 respondents to explain their answer. Those who agreed or strongly agreed with the change commented that this helped align the terminology in the ORE Rules with what is in the Dentists Act, and provided clarity regarding the requirements for applicants. A few respondents noted that the proposed change was clear and consistent with standards for UK-trained dentists. Others felt that using the term ‘diploma’ rather than ‘degree’ amounted to a minor change and agreed on the basis that it would not have a significant impact on the international registration process.

Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the terminology change provided several key reasons to support their position. Many of these respondents felt that changing the terminology would cause confusion for applicants; others commented that since a UK dentist would need a degree-level qualification the word ‘degree’ should remain to make it clear to applicants what was required of them. Others pointed out that the word ‘diploma’ had different connotations in other countries, and in some cases indicated a qualification below degree-level, while in others, it referred to a post-graduate qualification. There was concern among some respondents that the proposed change in terminology indicated that the standards that applicants would need to meet to be eligible to take the ORE, and join the Register, were being lowered. One respondent commented that even if standards were not being lowered, by using the term ‘diploma’ there could be a perception that standards were being lowered for overseas applicants, and that this could affect public confidence.

A few respondents felt that the change was insignificant and therefore not necessary.

Some responses were indicative of a belief that passing the ORE would provide the applicant with a UK diploma in dentistry, and this misinterpretation influenced their view about whether the proposed change should be made.

A few respondents took the opportunity to suggest other qualifications that the GDC could consider when assessing an applicant’s eligibility to sit the ORE, including:

- years of work experience
- a post-graduate qualification
- registration in another country.

GDC response

The GDC has proposed to change the wording of the standard that applicants must show to be eligible for the ORE from 'a final examination of a UK undergraduate dental degree' to a 'UK diploma in dentistry' to align with language in the Dentists Act, and with the support of a majority of respondents, we will be making this change. The proposed change is not reducing the standards that applicants must meet to be able to pass the ORE and continues to require applicants to meet the same standards as those required of UK-trained dentists.

Although we recognise that a diploma can mean different things in different countries, this change will ensure that our Rules mirror the language used in the Dentists Act, providing a clear standard for ORE applicants to meet. The Dentists Act defines 'diploma' as a broad term that encompasses any relevant qualification that enables a person to practise a profession. We will look into further ways to present information about eligibility requirements to make it clear to prospective candidates.

Passing the ORE does not confer a diploma or an award to the candidate. The ORE is solely used as a route to determine if an internationally trained applicant meets the necessary standards to join the Register. We will consider ways to explain this process more clearly to reduce misconceptions.

Question 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should make the proposed Rules in the draft Rules for international registration: DCPs?

Question 5 was answered by 223 respondents, with 52.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposed Rules for international registration of DCPs. 22.4% were not sure and 24.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Response	Organisation	Individual	Total	%
Strongly Agree	3	33	36	16.1
Agree	7	75	82	36.8
Not sure	1	49	50	22.4
Disagree	5	15	20	9.0
Strongly Disagree	5	30	35	15.7
Total	21	202	223	

Additional information to explain their answer was provided by 86 respondents.

For those who agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed Rules, the rationale included that the Rules were fair, reasonable, and appropriate, and would ensure that international registrants meet the standards to practise safely in the UK. Some respondents indicated that they supported the proposed Rules because they would continue the process of assessing DCPs credentials instead of instituting an exam-based system. A few respondents felt that any significant changes to the current system of assessing DCP applicants would risk further delays in processing applications.

Among respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposed Rules, one of the most common reasons given was the view that it would be preferable for DCPs to undergo an exam-based assessment, similar to dentists. Some respondents felt that the current assessment process did not adequately ensure that internationally trained DCPs had the skill level expected of a UK trained DCP. A number of respondents also addressed the current backlog in processing DCP applications and felt that a different assessment format would allow these applications to be processed more quickly. In addition to the difficulties that this delay had caused for applicants, a few respondents mentioned that there was significant demand for DCPs and processing applications more quickly would allow international applicants to contribute to addressing the demand for care.

Although applicants with an overseas diploma in dentistry have not been able to apply to register as a DCP since 8 March 2023, many respondents expressed views on whether dentists should be allowed to apply via this route. This route to registration is closed and was not the subject of this consultation. Comments on this issue were previously invited in the Government's consultation on 'Changes to the General Dental Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council's international registration legislation'.

A few respondents specifically mentioned the barriers that refugees were facing in completing the ORE and suggested that the DCP route was a way for refugees, who were already living in the UK, to earn an income and maintain their skills while they navigated the ORE process.

GDC response

The proposed Rules for DCPs are intended to provide a route for internationally trained DCPs to join the register and practise in the UK, while ensuring that these professionals meet the standards expected of UK trained DCPs.

We will be implementing the Rules as proposed, with a majority of respondents in agreement, ensuring a clear route for internationally qualified DCPs while the GDC undertakes longer-term work to evaluate and update its international registration processes. Any potentially significant changes to DCP assessment process will need careful consideration, and we will take the comments we have received in this consultation into account as we conduct this longer-term work.

The GDC has been working to reduce the backlog of DCP applications and has increased its processing capacity so that applications are being assessed at a faster rate. These applications are being processed under the Rules that were in place at the time the application was made, therefore any changes to the process contained in the proposed Rules will not affect these applications.

The changes to our legislation as a result of the 2023 Order mean that it is no longer possible for internationally qualified dentists to register as DCPs. The position for internationally qualified dentists is now consistent with UK trained dentists, who have never been able to register as DCPs. As part of our longer-term work, we will be exploring ways to make the ORE process more efficient and reduce barriers to accessing this route. We will also be looking at the process for DCPs to join the Register and will consider whether to include a clinical exam as part of this process.

Question 6: Please tell us about impacts you think the proposals may have in respect of the protected characteristics or any other aspect of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Question 6 was answered by 103 respondents. Some of these responses focussed on how international registration processes impact equality, diversity and inclusion more generally, rather than the specific impact these proposals may have.

Some respondents felt that the fees for the ORE could impact people differently, based on their race or nationality, as the fees presented a greater barrier to applicants coming from lower-income countries. A few respondents commented that the proposals disadvantaged refugees, particularly regarding the DCP Rules that did not permit dentists to register on this route, although this was not a proposal we were consulting on.

A few respondents suggested that some parts of the ORE should be available to applicants in their home countries to minimise the financial burden of having to travel to the UK and (in some cases) obtain visas. Some of the respondents suggested that not being able to sit the ORE in their home country particularly disadvantaged women with childcare commitments or people with disabilities, who may have more difficulty travelling.

A couple of respondents felt that the proposals could adversely impact people based on their age, although did not provide further detail to explain what this impact would be.

GDC response

The GDC is committed to understanding how its work impacts people and our analysis of these proposals and the responses received in the consultation has not indicated any adverse impacts on people with protected characteristics. We do, however, recognise that the ORE fees are substantial and may be a barrier to registration for some applicants, particularly those from lower-income countries. As part of our longer-term work, we are considering whether we could offer parts of the ORE outside of the UK, but this will require careful consideration. We are also looking at other ways to make the ORE more efficient for applicants and we will continue to consider the feedback we have received as we engage in longer-term work on international registration.

4. Next steps

Taking into account the feedback received, the GDC will proceed with making the Rules as proposed, with one minor amendment as explained below. These Rules will come into effect on 9 March 2024, replacing 2015 ORE Regulations when they expire.

Although this point was not raised in the consultation responses, we have amended the draft Rules for dentists by replacing the term 'assessment fee' with 'examination fee' to increase clarity.

We will continue to analyse the information we received as part of our call for evidence on the ORE and will use this alongside consultation responses to inform our longer-term work on international registration.

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