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Where would dental students like to practice after graduation and why?

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Abstract

Background. The dental profession shows significant variation between countries in terms of economics and society. The profession's status, income level, opportunities for specialization, and working conditions differ markedly depending on geography. This study aims to comprehensively evaluate the career preferences of domestic and international dental students after graduation, considering different geographical, economic, and cultural structures. The study also aims to assess the economic, social, professional, and academic factors underlying these preferences.

Methods. Prior to graduation, 220 students (144 female and 76 male) were provided with information on the geographical, historical, social and professional conditions in 22 countries. They were asked to select their preferred country for living after graduation and provide reasons for their choice. These responses were then evaluated in light of the literature.

Results. The three countries that were most popular overall were Germany, the USA and Türkiye, in that order. Gender has been a factor in both country preferences and the reasons for choosing them. Female students most often chose Germany for social opportunities, family, and freedom, and chose the US and Türkiye equally. Male students most often chose the US for income level, social opportunities, and freedom, and chose Germany and Türkiye equally. Gender orientation is more noticeable in the following rankings.

Conclusion. The choice of country after graduation affects male and female students differently. Female students tend to place a greater emphasis on professional reputation and family factors, whereas male students tend to place a greater emphasis on post-graduation education, language proficiency and income. The study's findings contribute to the existing literature by providing guidance for future improvement efforts.

Keywords: Dentistry; Professional Reputation in Dentistry; Income Levels in Dentistry; Postgraduate Education in Dentistry; Residence as a Dentist; Dentistry Abroad

1. Introduction

In the era of globalisation, the international mobility of healthcare professionals is increasing rapidly, with the socio-economic structures of countries and the functioning of their healthcare systems being among the key factors determining this movement. External factors such as the level of economic development, political stability, quality of life, democratic freedoms, professional autonomy and health sector regulations deeply influence postgraduate country preferences, particularly in fields requiring high levels of expertise, such as medicine and dentistry [1, 2]. Consequently, comparative analyses of postgraduate orientation in different countries have become important in the international literature, as they help to understand the sustainability of the healthcare workforce and the distribution of professions.

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The dental profession shows significant variation between countries in terms of its economic and social status. The profession's income level, opportunities for specialisation and working conditions can differ markedly depending on geography. While dentistry in Europe and North America is characterised by high incomes and professional prestige, workforce planning, employment capacity and income levels in low- and middle-income countries can be more heterogeneous [3]. Studies in this context show that the postgraduate choices of dental students are influenced by factors such as economic security, work-life balance, prestige, professional autonomy, access to advanced technology and quality of life [4, 5].

Similar to international trends, dental education and the dental workforce market in Türkiye are undergoing dynamic transformation. Over the past twenty years, the rapid increase in dental schools and enrolment quotas has led to a dramatic rise in the number of graduates, intensifying competition in the employment market and directly affecting graduates' career plans. The increase in places from 960 in 2005 to 8,866 in 2021 is one of the key issues in dental workforce planning in Türkiye [6]. This growth increases graduates' search for specialist training and strengthens their motivation to work abroad. Furthermore, the provision of oral and dental health services by the private sector in Türkiye is another important factor shaping the economic expectations and career choices of young graduates [7, 8].

Current studies on the career plans of students in Türkiye show that specialised training remains the most common goal. A large-scale study conducted at Hacettepe University found that 80.2% of students planned to specialise after graduation, with opening a private practice (57.9%) ranking among the top long-term goals [9]. Similarly, the most important factors influencing career choices among Marmara University students were found to be 'economic security, professional prestige, and flexible working conditions', with specialty preferences particularly concentrated in the fields of surgery, orthodontics, and pedodontics. In line with international literature, these findings confirm the strong influence of economic returns and prestige on career choice and specialty orientation [10].

Educational factors also influence students' career plans in Türkiye. In particular, the "Career Planning Course," which became mandatory in all universities after 2021, has significantly increased students' career awareness; the study reported that students who took this course were approximately eight times more likely to establish a clear career goal than those who did not (OR = 7.90). This finding shows that career orientation is shaped not only by external economic and social dynamics but also by educational guidance mechanisms [6,11].

The tendency of dental students to seek employment abroad is emerging as an increasingly strong trend in both Türkiye and the international literature. A study of final-year students in the United Arab Emirates identified the key factors influencing postgraduate education or employment abroad as "a high standard of living, financial stability, professional development and flexible working opportunities". Similarly, the international SCCT study reveals that around one-third of students are considering pursuing their careers abroad.

When evaluated as a whole, the literature reveals that the factors determining students' international preferences after graduation have a multi-layered structure. The characteristics of national economies, how healthcare systems function, access to specialised education, quality of life, academic opportunities and levels of professional autonomy all play a decisive role in students' choices, as do individual expectations, professional motivations and educational experiences [1-5].

In light of this information, this study aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the career preferences of domestic and international dental students after graduation, taking into account different geographical, economic and cultural structures. The study also aims to assess the economic, social, professional and academic factors behind these preferences. The study brings together Turkish literature and international comparisons to provide a multidimensional analysis of students' career orientations, with the aim of making important contributions to health workforce planning.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Study Design

A multiple-choice questionnaire consisting of two questions was presented to pre-graduation dental students with knowledge of the geographical, historical, social and professional differences between countries, who had agreed to participate in the study by signing a consent form. Non-acceptance of the survey was the only exclusion criterion for the study. A total of 220 students participated in the study, including 144 females and 76 males from the Faculty of Dentistry at Izmir Katip Celebi University.

The following questions were asked: “In which three countries would you like to practise your profession after graduation?” and “What are the three main reasons that influenced your answers to the first question?”

Participants were asked to select three preferences from a list of 22 countries (Türkiye, Spain, the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, the UK, Argentina, the UAE, Italy, North Macedonia, Switzerland, Sweden, China, India, South Korea, Japan, Canada, France, Finland, Norway and Ireland) and eight reasons (social amenities, freedom, income, professional reputation, patients per dentist, postgraduate education, language and family). The results were then analysed.

2.2. Statistical Analysis

The sample size was calculated using version 3.1.9.7 of G*Power software (Kiel University, Germany). Taking into account the ratio of female to male participants, the study required a total of 118 participants (79 female and 39 male) for a Mann–Whitney U test with an effect size of 0.5 and a power of 0.8. However, the study was conducted with 220 participants (144 female and 76 male) to bring the power of the study closer to 1.0 for this effect size. SPSS 21 (IBM Corp., NY, USA) software was used for the statistical analysis, along with Multiple Response Cross-Tabs to analyse the distribution of multiple-choice answers, and the Mann-Whitney U test to evaluate gender differences.

3. Results

When the responses to the first question of the survey were examined, the top three countries participants preferred to practice dentistry in were Germany, the United States, and Türkiye, while China, India, South Korea, and Argentina were not chosen at all (Table 1).

Upon detailed examination of the data, gender differences are noticeable; countries such as Italy, France, Spain, Australia, Sweden, and the Netherlands were preferred more by female students, while the United Kingdom, North Macedonia, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States were preferred more by male students proportionally (Figure 1).

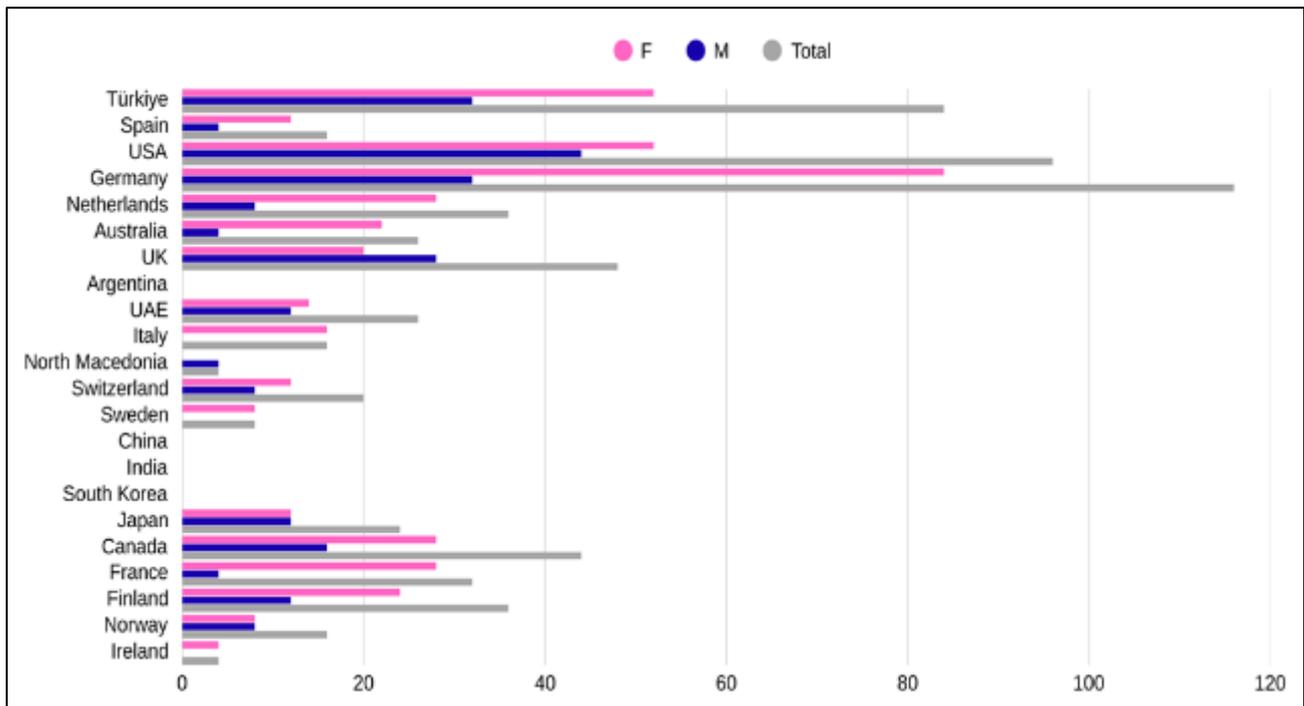


Figure 1 Gender distribution of country preferences after graduation

When the data were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test, it was found that female students statistically significantly preferred Italy, Sweden, and France more than male students, while male students statistically significantly preferred the USA, UK, and North Macedonia more than female students (Table 2).

Table 1 Sex distribution of the countries preferred in response of the first question

Student	TR	Spain	USA	GER	NED	AUS	UK	ARG	UAE	Italy	North Mcd	Swiss	SWE	China	India	South Korea	Japan	CND	France	FIN	NOR	IRL
Females	52	12	52	84	28	22	20	0	14	16	0	12	8	0	0	0	12	28	28	24	8	4
Males	32	4	44	32	8	4	28	0	12	0	4	8	0	0	0	0	12	16	4	12	8	0
Total	84	16	96	116	36	26	48	0	26	16	4	20	8	0	0	0	24	44	32	36	16	4

Table 2 Mann-Whitney U test summary for the sex distribution of the country preferences

Country	p value*
Türkiye	0.540
Spain	0.557
USA	0.029*
Germany	0.107
Netherlands	0.231
Australia	0.124
UK	0.006*
Argentina	1.000
UAE	0.361
Italy	0.034*
North Macedonia	0.05*
Switzerland	0.705
Sweden	0.048*
China	1.000
India	1.000
South Korea	1.000
Japan	0.235
Canada	0.842
France	0.046*
Finland	0.906
Norway	0.342
Ireland	0.301

*p<0.05 - Statistical significance

Examining the responses to the reasons given for the answers to the first question revealed that social opportunities, freedom and income were the most influential factors in participants' preferences (Table 3).

Table 3 Sex distribution of the factors in response of the second question

Student	Social	Freedom	Income	Reputation	Patient Number	Education	Language	Family	TOTAL
Females	116	80	60	40	28	16	44	84	144
Males	44	40	56	4	0	20	36	28	76
Total	160	120	116	44	28	36	80	76	220

Upon detailed examination of the data, noticeable gender differences emerge. Female students place greater importance on factors such as social opportunities, professional prestige, family and the number of patients per dentist, whereas male students are more influenced by post-graduation education, income and language (Figure 2).

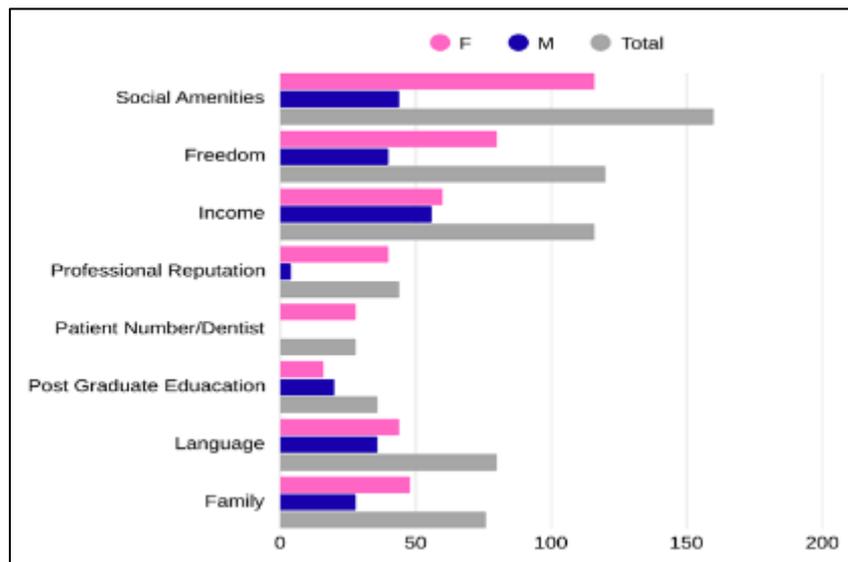


Figure 2 Distribution of reasons for country preference, categorised by gender

When the data were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test, Social Opportunities, Professional Prestige, and the number of patients per dentist were found to be statistically significant factors influencing female students' decisions more than male students' decisions, while Income and Postgraduate Education were found to be statistically significant factors influencing male students' decisions more than female students' decisions (Table 4).

Table 4 Mann-Whitney U test summary for the gender – distribution of the factors

Factor	p value*
Social Amenities	0.012*
Freedom	0.771
Income	0.001*
Professional Reputation	0.005*
Patient/Dentist	0.004*
Postgraduate Education	0.041*
Language	0.083
Family	0.714

*p<0.05 – Statistical significance

4. Discussion

This study makes a significant contribution to the current literature examining dental students' post-graduation international career preferences and the underlying socioeconomic and professional motivations behind these preferences. The findings reveal that students most want to work in Germany, the United States, and Türkiye after graduation, and that the key factors determining these preferences are, respectively, social opportunities, freedom, and general economic conditions.

This trend is highly consistent with the structural changes emphasised in recent years in the literature on the global health workforce. Economic security, professional autonomy and quality of life are known to play a decisive role in the international mobility of young health professionals in particular.

International studies specifically focusing on dentistry also demonstrate that students prioritise economic stability and living standards when making career decisions [3, 4]. Therefore, students' preference for countries such as Germany and the USA, which offer high income levels, a robust social welfare system and a high quality of life, is fully consistent with this literature. Income-related factors were considered much more important by male students. Based on the idea that income level, along with the spoken language, determines the length and difficulty of learning a language from scratch, it is understandable that male students would prefer the UK and USA, where English is the international language, to North Macedonia, where Turkish is one of the languages spoken by the population.

The study found that professional respectability and autonomy were particularly important factors for female students. This suggests that female healthcare workers feel they face more challenging social conditions than their male colleagues. In countries such as Italy, Sweden and France, which are more popular with female students, the dental profession is considered to have high professional status by society and the healthcare system. Across Europe, dentists enjoy a high level of professional autonomy thanks to strong professional associations and standardised practice processes [7]. International studies show that the perception of prestige and professional respect plays a critical role in dental students' orientation towards the profession. Studies conducted specifically in Türkiye have also yielded similar results: prestige and economic security stand out in students' future expectations regarding the profession in both the Hacettepe and Marmara University studies [9, 10]. In this context, students' preference for countries with strong professional autonomy is consistent with national and international findings. This study also contributes to the existing literature by indicating that this is an even more important factor for female students.

Another important finding that supports existing literature is that students increasingly value criteria based on human rights, freedoms and social security. In recent years, the global health worker migration literature has pointed to a new dynamic called 'value-based migration' in addition to economic factors [2]. This approach reveals that young professionals consider quality of life factors such as democratic rights, legal guarantees, and social peace to be crucial when choosing a country. Our study shows that this factor is particularly decisive when it comes to preferences for European countries, the US, Canada and Australia.

The Young Dentists Association's report on the Turkish dental workforce also reveals a similar trend, showing that young graduates shape their plans to move abroad not only based on economic factors but also in search of social and political stability [8]. This situation is important in that it shows that, in addition to professional conditions in Türkiye, social dynamics also influence students' career plans.

Another key finding of the study is that students consider postgraduate educational opportunities to be a decisive factor in their choice of country. The structured specialisation programmes, educational quality and technological infrastructure in countries such as Germany, the UK, Switzerland, the UAE and Canada make them attractive to international dental students. A multi-centre SCCT study by Riad and colleagues showed that more than half of the students viewed international education opportunities as an important step in their career plans. A study conducted in the UAE reported that students particularly linked their postgraduate preferences to opportunities for gaining clinical competence and academic development [5, 12]. Due to the limited capacity of residency programmes in Türkiye, the high level of competition and the regional distribution of educational centres, students are keen to pursue more systematic and stable residency and doctoral programmes abroad. Male students, who place greater emphasis on postgraduate education, also express a preference for the UK, UAE and Switzerland when choosing a country, which is consistent with the literature [5, 12].

In addition to the challenges of living away from the family being considered a more significant factor for female students, language is also considered a more significant factor for male students. Together with other factors, Türkiye has become the third most popular destination for both genders.

Overall, the study findings show that the country preferences of dental students after graduation are shaped by multidimensional and complementary factors [13]. Students are led to prefer developed healthcare systems such as those in Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom by criteria such as economic security, professional prestige, social freedoms, and accessibility to specialist training. These results are highly consistent with the international literature and reflect a rational trend when considering current educational dynamics, professional competition and the structure of the healthcare system in Türkiye. The study is also noteworthy in that it shows that, increasingly, 'life philosophy and value-oriented' motivations, rather than economic or professional ones alone, are decisive in dental students' career choices. This multidimensional approach offers important insights for healthcare workforce planning and the development of future dental education policies.

5. Conclusion

According to the results of the study, dental students wish to pursue their careers in Germany, the USA and Türkiye after graduation, respectively. In this regard, no student prefers China, India, Argentina, or South Korea.

The choice of country in which to live after graduation differs between male and female students.

Female students prioritise social opportunities, family, and freedom, choosing Germany, Türkiye, and the USA; while male students prioritise income, social opportunities, and freedom, choosing the USA, Türkiye, and Germany.

Female students prioritise professional prestige and family factors relatively more highly than male students, who prioritise post-graduation education, language, and income factors.

The study contributes to the literature by providing guidance for future improvement efforts.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author has nothing to disclose.

Statement of ethical approval

The study was approved by the İzmir Katip Çelebi University Health Researches Ethics Committee (decision number 2025-SAEK-1184).

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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