

Why choose a career in eye care?

Sight is the most precious of all our five senses. It is vital to everything we do: at work, at home, driving, for sports, at leisure. Optometrists and dispensing opticians play a vital role in caring for people's sight and eye health. Quality eye care is so important that opticians, like doctors, have their own statutory regulatory body. The General Optical Council (GOC) is the regulator for the optical professions in the UK. Our purpose is to protect the public by promoting high standards of education and conduct amongst opticians. The Council currently registers around 24,000 optometrists, dispensing opticians, student opticians and optical businesses.

The GOC has put together this fact sheet for anyone considering a career as an optometrist or dispensing optician. We have included helpful tips on where you can study and what the job entails, so that you can make an informed choice about your future. You can get more information from some of the organisations listed at the end of this sheet.

What skills do I need?

Vision care is a field which demands the ability to communicate with people, and to work with precision and professionalism. As a qualified optometrist or dispensing optician you would be responsible for the visual health of your clients, working to maintain or improve the quality of their lives. This is demanding but also rewarding and stimulating, particularly in a field with many technological and clinical advances. Once qualified and registered, you can earn an attractive salary and work in a variety of settings including independent and corporate practice, hospitals, or academic research and teaching.

Optometrist or dispensing optician – what's the difference?

An **OPTOMETRIST** examines eyes, tests sight and prescribes spectacles or contact lenses for those who need them. They also fit spectacles or contact lenses, give advice on visual problems and detect any ocular disease or abnormality, referring the patient to a medical practitioner if necessary. Optometrists may also share with a medical practitioner the care of patients who have chronic ophthalmic conditions. Once qualified, optometrists can undertake further training to specialise in eye treatment by therapeutic drugs.

A **DISPENSING OPTICIAN** advises on, fits and supplies the most appropriate spectacles after taking account of each patient's visual, lifestyle and vocational needs. When advising people about new spectacles, an important asset is an interest in fashion and style. Dispensing opticians also play an important role in advising and dispensing low vision aids to those who are partially sighted. They are also able to fit contact lenses after undergoing further specialist training. On completion, practitioners are placed onto a specialty GOC register. Career opportunities also exist to develop business skills in marketing and practice management.

What qualifications do I need?

OPTOMETRY

You can study for an undergraduate optometry degree from one of nine GOC-regulated institutions in the UK: Anglia Ruskin University, Aston University, the University of Bradford, Cardiff University, City University, Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of Manchester, Plymouth University and the University of Ulster.

Length of course: usually 4 years in total (Scotland 5 years). A full-time 3-year (in Scotland 4-year) degree course followed by one year's salaried pre-registration training with a practice under the guidance of a GOC-registered optometrist. This includes a series of assessments throughout the placement, which are set by the College of Optometry.

Entry requirements: you will normally need 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at grade C or above, one of which should be in English. You will normally be required to have 3 A Level passes/ approx. 320 UCAS tariff points from the following subjects: physics, biology, chemistry or mathematics. Requirements vary between universities, so be sure to check the university's prospectus and/ or consult the relevant admission tutors.

DISPENSING OPTICS

Qualification takes approximately three years in total, and can be completed by combining a distance learning course or day release while working as a trainee under the supervision of a qualified and GOC-registered dispensing optician. Alternatively students can do a two-year full-time course followed by one year of supervised practise with a qualified and registered dispensing optician. In the UK you can study at six GOC-approved training establishments: Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) College, Anglia Ruskin University, Bradford College, City and Islington College, City University and Glasgow Caledonian University. All routes are assessed by final ABDO examinations. On successful completion of training you must register with the GOC in order to practise in the UK. If you qualify as a dispensing optician and have worked in practice as a qualified dispensing optician for at least two years, the University of Bradford offers a career progression course that enables you to graduate with a degree in optometry in one calendar year.

Entry Requirements: you will normally need to have 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades C or above, including English, Maths and Science. For mature students, and overseas/ alternative/ vocational courses, admission requirements will vary and may be more flexible. For further details contact the admissions tutor at the university you wish to apply to.

What will I pay to train?

The main costs of study are tuition fees and maintenance. Tuition fees for the universities and colleges listed will vary. We recommend you consult each university's prospectus for further details.

Registration in the UK

To train or practise as an optometrist or dispensing optician in the UK, you must be registered with the General Optical Council. You will have to agree to abide by a code of conduct, pay an annual registration fee, and sign declarations of good 'character' and health, including details of any criminal convictions or cautions, and any illnesses or disabilities that may impair your ability to practise. Once qualified, you will need to undertake a minimum amount of continuing education and training to remain on the register.

Useful contacts

General Optical Council, 10 Old Bailey, London, EC4M 7NG
www.optical.org 020 7580 3898

The College of Optometrists, 41-42 Craven Street, London, WC2N 5NG
www.college-optometrists.org 020 7839 6000

Association of British Dispensing Opticians, Godmersham Park, Godmersham, Canterbury, Kent CT4 7DT
www.abdo.org.uk 01227 733901

The Association of Optometrists, 61 Southwark Street, LONDON, SE1 0HL
www.assoc-optometrists.org 020 7261 9661

The Eyecare Trust, PO Box 131, Market Rasen, Lincs, LN8 5TS
www.eyecare.org.uk 0845 129 5001