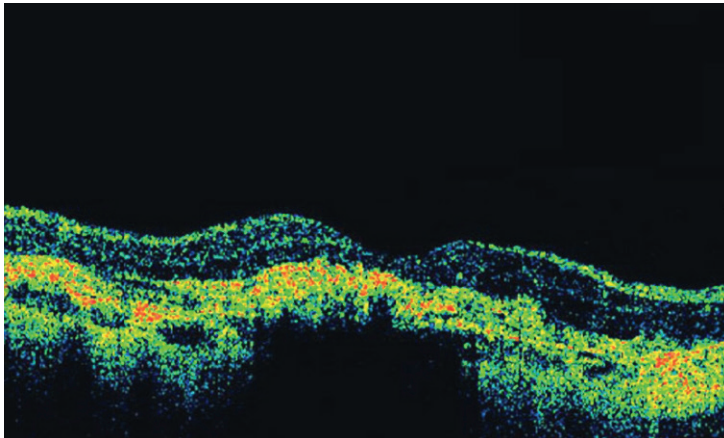


Research Strategy

2025-2030



THE COLLEGE OF
OPTOMETRISTS



Vision.

Optometrists in the UK have a clear understanding of the role and value of research in their clinical practice and their work as clinician scientists and academics.



Mission.

For the College to support, facilitate and lead work within the optometry profession and wider eye health sector to enable optometrists to lead, participate in and effectively use research for the benefit of their patients and the general public.

INTRODUCTION

The College of Optometrists advances eye care through research and evidence-based practice. This Research Strategy outlines a clear plan for the next five years, focused on three core pillars that will strengthen the evidence base and research capacity in optometry.

The strategy is underpinned by the College's core values: acting with integrity and transparency; listening and learning; demonstrating respect and professionalism; achieving high quality; and championing equality, diversity and inclusion.

Each of the pillars below includes objectives, the rationale for action, and strategic initiatives. These pillars are interconnected and collectively are intended to enable optometry to remain at the forefront of evidence-based, high-quality eye care across the four nations of the UK and beyond, internationally.

PILLAR 1

Partnerships to Boost Capacity

- Empower optometrists to develop research skills and participate in research
- Create and support professional development pathways
- Remove barriers to research engagement
- Ensure that optometry and optometrists are recognised and visible

PILLAR 2

Funding for Optometric Research

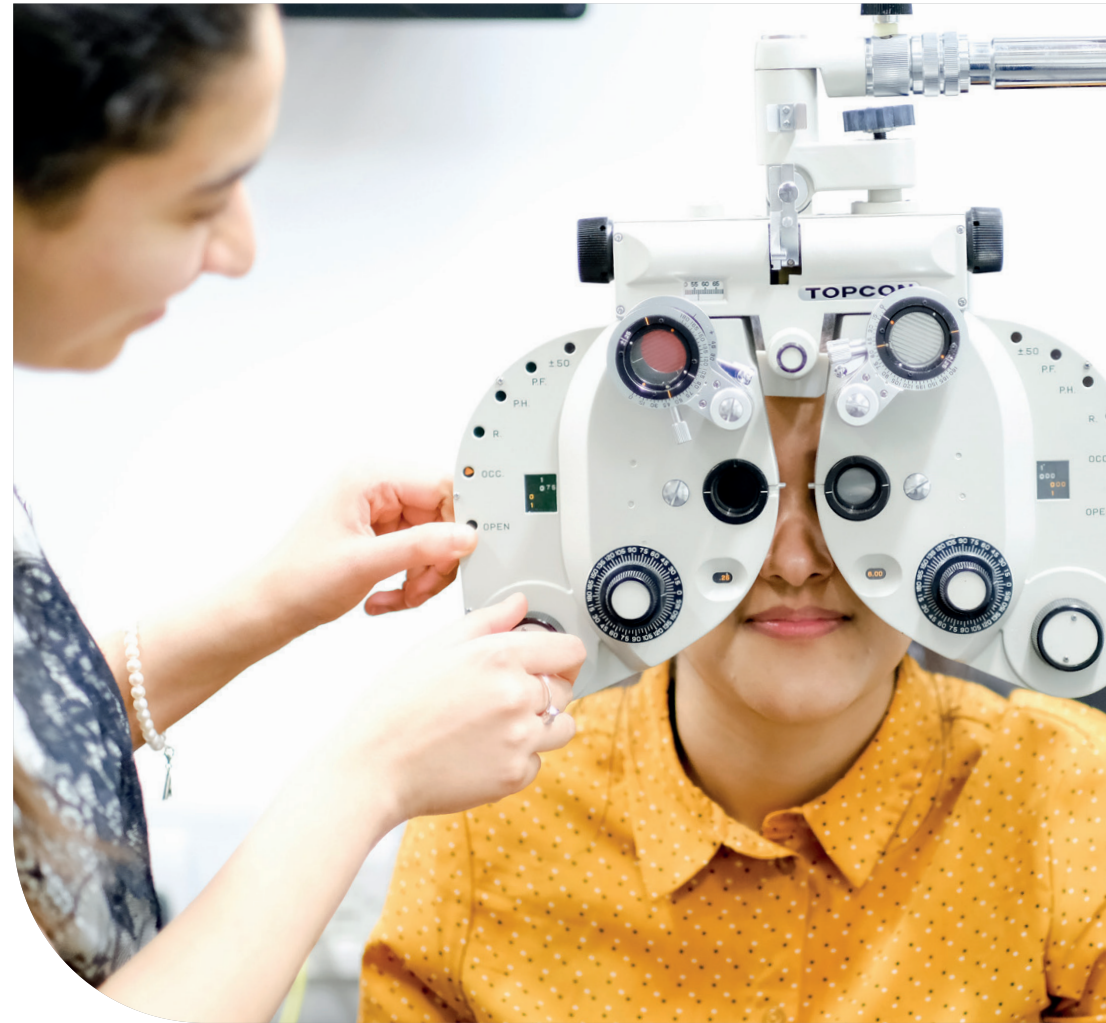
- Expand the number of funded PhD scholarships
- Expand the number of Research Fellowships funded by the College or sponsors
- Further develop the Practice-based Research Programme
- Support optometry universities

PILLAR 3

Dissemination, amplification, and filling gaps in the evidence base

- Identify key knowledge needed in optometric practice
- Disseminate and amplify outputs from optometry researchers
- Lead and innovate within academic publishing
- Incorporate new research findings into clinical guidance and policy
- Direct research efforts to address gaps

Partnerships to Boost Capacity



OBJECTIVES

- **Empower optometrists** at all career stages to develop research skills and participate in research, thereby nurturing a research-active culture within optometry.
- **Create and support professional development pathways** for clinician-researchers (e.g. “clinical academic optometrists” or “research optometrists”), so that engaging in research is a rewarding, recognised part of an optometrist’s career progression in both clinical and academic settings.
- **Remove barriers to research engagement** – such as lack of skills, time, or support – by providing training, mentorship, and resources, with a strong emphasis on equality, diversity, and inclusion in all capacity-building efforts.
- **Ensure that optometry and optometrists are recognised and visible** – within the NHS’s research frameworks and infrastructure, opportunities for optometrists to take up leadership roles in relation to clinical research across all practice settings will be developed and fostered.





R A T I O N A L E

Building research capacity is vital to ensure that optometry not only utilises evidence effectively to drive evidence-based practice but also produces evidence. A larger, well-equipped base of optometrist researchers means the profession can lead studies, contribute to multidisciplinary projects, and adapt to emerging health challenges. Currently, many optometrists face obstacles to getting involved in research: they may feel untrained in research methods, have limited time due to clinical duties, or are unsure how to start.

This pillar aligns with the activities under Pillar 3 of the 2025-30 College Strategy – “Patients get what they need, when they need it, where they need it”.

It also aligns with national frameworks such as the NIHR’s drive to “embed research in routine care” and the Integrated Clinical Academic programmes for non-medical health professionals, which provide fellowships and training for practitioners to pursue research alongside clinical work.

By dovetailing with these initiatives and committing to facilitate further opportunities for community-based optometrists, the College’s Research strategy will help optometrists take full advantage of UK-wide resources for developing research careers.



STRATEGIC ACTIONS

- **Research Training and Education:** Roll out comprehensive training resources to build research skills among optometrists. Following the successful development of the “Getting Started in Optometric Research” e-learning modules in partnership with Ulster University and NIHR, the College will promote these and develop further modules as needed. We will also integrate research components into Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offerings.
- **Small Grants and Practice-Based Research:** Continue and develop the College’s Small Grant Scheme and practice-based research initiatives. These small-scale grants support optometrists, especially those in clinical practice, to undertake research projects on practical questions (often service evaluations or pilot studies). This grass-roots research activity cultivates a habit of inquiry and innovation in everyday practice.
- **Partnerships to Boost Capacity:** Continue to build on existing and develop new collaborations with external partners to amplify capacity-building. Such partnerships will broaden the support network available to optometrists and integrate our efforts to engage with the wider health research community.
- **Working with employers across all settings:** Employers are vital to the development of a research culture within optometry and eye health, since they hold gatekeeping powers with regard to optometrists getting involved in research. Employers must be brought into the processes for developing research infrastructures for optometrists.
- **Optometry Research Networks:** Support and develop local and regional research networks for optometry and eye health research, ensuring that optometrists are enabled to engage with and lead research. Highlight the profession’s capacity to support, facilitate and lead clinical research across primary and secondary care.

Funding for Optometric Research



OBJECTIVES

- **Ensure research funded by the College produces evidence** that addresses practical clinical needs and policy priorities in eye care.
- **Expand the number of funded PhD scholarships** for optometrists to develop the next generation of clinical researchers and academics.
- **Expand the number of Research Fellowships funded by the College or sponsors** to support the development of early career researchers.
- **Further develop the Practice-based Research Programme** to ensure that members working in clinical settings are able to access research support and funding.
- **Support optometry universities** by enabling College members to develop their research and education training and qualifications to ensure that the academic workforce meets the future needs of the profession.





RATIONALE

Investing in funding for optometrists across the range of grants and awards that the College has developed is crucial for building a strong foundation of optometric research and innovation.

The College's funding of PhD scholarships over the last 45 years has had significant impact on the development of leaders in UK and international optometry, as well as on the profession's ability to develop effective relationships with other disciplines across clinical and academic settings.

The full range of funding within the College's portfolio of research awards provides impact and flexibility to support the development of optometrists as researchers and of a research culture within the UK profession.



STRATEGIC ACTIONS

- **Increase funding across the portfolio of grants:** Continue the College's portfolio of research grants and seek to enlarge it (through fundraising and partnerships) to support more researchers across the four nations of the UK. For example, the College will explore co-funding opportunities with research councils, charities, and industry to sustain at least one award of each type within the portfolio annually, as well as continuing to seek core budget for these awards within the review process each year.
- **Transparent and Inclusive Selection:** Apply rigorous, transparent selection processes for scholarships, with criteria aligned to the College's values (e.g. integrity, high quality). Actively promote these opportunities to under-represented groups in optometry research to champion equality, diversity and inclusion in research.
- **Outcome Dissemination:** Support optometrists to publish their findings in high-quality journals, such as OPO, and to present at conferences. The knowledge generated will be shared through College channels to inform practice and policy. Successful projects and scholars will be highlighted as examples of high-quality research, which drives improvements in eye care, advances the understanding of vision, visual processes and optics, develops individuals who go onto become part of the education and training of future optometrists, and improves the evidence base that underpins the practice of optometry.

Dissemination, amplification and filling gaps in the evidence base



OBJECTIVES

- **Identify key knowledge** – working with optometrists, patients and partners to identify where there are critical areas of clinical practice where robust evidence is lacking.
- **Disseminate and amplify** the outputs from optometry researchers where their research relates to identified gaps in the evidence base or key policy priorities for the College and its members.
- **Lead and innovate through College publications, including OPO**, within the academic publishing arena, providing a route to publication for high quality research, and making that research accessible for optometrists to engage with, use and challenge.
- **Incorporate new research findings** into clinical guidance and policy, ensuring that every aspect of optometric practice is informed by up-to-date, high-quality evidence for the benefit of patients.
- **Direct research efforts** (via funding, commissioned projects, or collaborations) to address these gaps, thereby strengthening the evidence base that underpins optometric care in both primary and secondary settings.





R A T I O N A L E

For optometry to deliver high-quality, patient-centred care, it must rest on a solid foundation of evidence. Yet currently, there are notable areas of practice where limited evidence exists, leaving clinicians to extrapolate from limited or outdated evidence resources, or make best guesses. Working with partners to identify, highlight and where feasible filling these gaps is a core responsibility of the College as the professional and standard-setting body for optometry in the UK.

By proactively identifying unanswered clinical questions or areas of uncertainty – such as the effectiveness of new models of community eye care, optimal approaches for managing refractive error, ocular telehealth, or the impact of expanded optometrist prescribing – the College can target resources to generate needed evidence and encourage other organisations to do so.

This pillar reflects the College's value of listening and learning, as we will listen to members and patients about what questions matter to them, and learn from ongoing research. It also demonstrates integrity and transparency: openly acknowledging where evidence is weak and taking action to improve it.

This work aligns with national research priorities such as the UK Clinical Eye Research Strategy, which has recently refreshed key research questions in ophthalmology and optometry to guide investigators.



STRATEGIC ACTIONS

- **Evidence Gap Audit:** Conduct a comprehensive “evidence gap analysis” of optometric practice. In the first year of this strategy, the College will survey members, consult with expert panels (including ophthalmologists and academics), and review systematic reviews (e.g. Cochrane Eyes and Vision reports) to compile a list of critical research questions that lack sufficient evidence. The findings will be published transparently and will guide the College’s research funding priorities.
- **Translation to Guidance:** As new evidence is generated, the College’s teams will translate findings into updated clinical guidelines, College practice notes, and educational materials. Each completed research project or published study that fills an evidence gap will be followed by activity to disseminate the knowledge: CPD, webinars, articles in OPO or Acuity, conference presentations, and integration into the College’s clinical practice guidance. This ensures that research impact is realized swiftly in day-to-day optometry.
- **Monitoring and Updating Priorities:** Establish a mechanism to regularly review and update the list of evidence gaps. An annual or biennial research forum will be convened to assess progress on filling gaps and to identify any new questions arising from changes in technology, practice, or demographics (e.g. the rise of myopia in children or post-COVID changes in service delivery). This ongoing process embodies a culture of continuous learning and adaptation within the profession.
- **Priority-Driven Research Funding:** Allocate a portion of the College’s research budget specifically to projects that address the identified priority gaps. This may involve commissioning research (through requests for proposals) on topics of urgent need – for example, studies on the outcomes of enhanced optical services in the community, or paediatric vision screening protocols. The College will also actively support or partner with external research teams working on these questions, ensuring optometric expertise is included.

CONCLUSION

Through these three pillars, the College of Optometrists will drive knowledge and skill development amongst our members, grow future research leaders and provide evidence to support our members' research engagement and output.

The impact of this strategy will be measured not only in publications or grants, but ultimately in improved patient outcomes and service quality and the development of new talent and leaders within the profession. Optometrists empowered by research will be better equipped to prevent vision loss, manage eye conditions effectively in the community, and advocate for advancements in eye care. Optometrists who are supported to develop their research skills, knowledge and careers will go on to become the lecturers and clinician-scientists who support the development and education of the next generations of the profession.

The College will regularly review progress on this strategy and remain flexible to adapt to new opportunities or challenges in the research landscape. In doing so, we reaffirm our commitment to professional excellence in eye health and to an evidence-informed future where optometrists are at the forefront of delivering better eye health and vision for all.