Look to the future

See yourself as an optometrist?
“Optometry is about helping people to see as well and as clearly as possible. Optometry is the same as other healthcare careers, such as medicine or dentistry, in that your knowledge is able to make a real difference to people's lives every day.”

Dr Susan Blakeney FCOptom, Clinical Adviser, the College of Optometrists.
What is an optometrist?

Your body is an intricate structure of highly complex working parts. People who work in healthcare often choose to be specialists in the workings of a particular organ, such as the heart, the brain or the lungs. Optometrists are healthcare professionals who specialise in the eye – one of the most complex of all the body’s organs.

Optometry is a varied and rewarding career. Optometrists work in a broad range of settings – some practitioners divide their time between clinical practice, research or teaching, and some volunteer to work for charities in the UK and overseas.

Optometrists carry out eye examinations that find out how well your eyes are working, and detect any difficulties or illnesses that could affect your sight. It is even possible for optometrists to spot underlying conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, through a test.

Once they have examined the patient, the optometrist will advise on whether they need spectacles or contact lenses, or whether they need to have further treatment for an eye or other health condition. All optometrists can prescribe spectacles and contact lenses and some are qualified to prescribe medicines.

Because sight is so important, optometrists treat a wide variety of patients, from the very young to the elderly – even people who are legally blind can benefit from an eye exam.

Optometrists’ skills give them a passport to many different activities. Over the next few pages we explore some of the different career options and look at the skills and qualifications you need to make it as an optometrist.
Optometrists can run their own business

Take a trip down any high street and you're likely to see optometrists' practices – these are usually referred to as 'opticians'. Many belong to big companies with multiple branches in the UK and abroad (known in the profession as 'multiples'), while others are independent businesses. All have one thing in common – they all need optometrists. Working in a practice means you'll be meeting a wide variety of people on a regular basis, of all ages and with different lifestyles.

Depending on your area of work, you'll need to:

- speak to patients to get detailed case histories from them
- examine patients' eyes to detect signs of injury, disease, abnormality or vision defects
- be aware of signs and symptoms of general health conditions (e.g. diabetes)
- fit spectacles or contact lenses
- offer advice and reassurance about vision-related matters
- offer help and advice to patients when choosing frames and lenses
- write referral letters to doctors
- liaise with other medical practitioners and sometimes share the care of patients with long-term ophthalmic conditions
- recommend the type of spectacles or contact lenses that are best suited to each patient.
Some optometrists may get involved in the selling of spectacles, contact lenses and related products. Some optometrists may choose to own their own practice. This may be an independent practice, or be a franchise of a multiple practice (a franchise is where you are responsible for a single practice which operates under the brand name of a bigger company). Running your own practice means you need to get involved in things like staff salaries, the layout of the store and buying products and technology.

“Optometry is well suited to working part-time, giving me control over my work life balance.”

Daniel Hardiman-McCartney MCOptom Prof Cert Glauc
Optometrists protect sight

To most people, sight is the most precious and vital of our five senses. Without it, we would struggle to perform the simplest tasks, to communicate with others, to move about freely – something many of us take for granted. By diagnosing and treating eye problems, optometrists are the professionals who save people's sight – and with it their quality of life.

As an optometrist working in a hospital, you'll be treating the people most in need of urgent attention in a busy and highly varied environment. You'll be part of a large team of eye specialists, working alongside ophthalmologists (medical doctors who specialise in the eye) and other healthcare professionals. Hospital work may require you to adapt quickly to different patients' needs.

The hospital environment also offers you the chance to get involved in more specialised aspects of optometry, such as the treatment and management of patients who have glaucoma, an eye disease that is more common among older patients.

"The thing I enjoy most about working in a hospital is the extra knowledge I gain. I see more patients with advanced eye problems, and being able to help them not only extends my skills, but gives me a greater feeling of satisfaction when someone's vision is improved as a result of my treatment."

Rasmeet Chadha MCOptom Prof Cert Glauc, hospital optometrist
Did you know?

60% of the population don't realise that the eye disease glaucoma may run in families.
“Each day is different. I’m currently investigating ways of improving the early detection of macular degeneration, the most common cause of blindness in Western society. It’s exciting to be involved in a project that is so relevant to eye health today. Working in the academic side of the profession allows you to get involved with projects that may shape the future of optometry and that will potentially change the way that we do things inside the testing room.”

Allannah Gaffney MCOptom, Cardiff University
A career within research would normally begin with a doctorate (PhD). PhD programmes typically last three to four years and applicants tend to be matched with an academic supervisor based on their research interest and background. However, research is not limited to academic institutions. For example, the College of Optometrists provides support (funding and training) to optometrists to undertake clinical and practice-based research.

Increasingly, optometrists are choosing to pursue further academic studies in a specialist area. Some of these work as academics in universities, teaching the next generations of the profession and/or carrying out research to extend the profession’s overall body of knowledge and evidence.

With so much still to discover about the complex workings of the eye and the visual system as a whole, there’s plenty of opportunity to become a pioneer in the field.

Research can lead to a very varied career. As well as spending time conducting research (in labs or university clinics for example), you’ll write papers and attend conferences (which may be anywhere in the world), allowing you to share your findings.
People living in the UK benefit from easy, affordable access to eye care when they need it. In other countries, however, many people’s lives are often blighted by poor eyesight. Often, their eye conditions are easily treatable – but many countries have no eye care system in place, and no way of supplying people with the spectacles or medicines they need.

A number of eye care charities set up clinics in countries where they are needed to provide treatment for local people, as well as training local optometrists to provide future care. Some optometrists choose to take time out from their regular job to work for one of these organisations on a short term basis, helping where it’s needed most.

Optometrists may also find themselves volunteering in roles that take them away from their day job – for example, in 2012 nearly 80 optometrists worked in the London Olympic village to assess athletes’ eyes during the Olympic Games.

“When I volunteered in Romania, I discovered that many people are partially sighted because they lack basic eye care. I was pleased to give them the chance of a better life.”

Sarah Farrant MCOptom, Optometrist, East Quay Vision
Did you know?

670 million people (10% of the world’s population) are disadvantaged by poor vision and a lack of glasses.
Gaining the right skills

In addition to the right qualifications, optometrists need the right personal qualities to make sure they succeed in a career that requires so many different skills.

• You need to be a good communicator to put patients at ease, listen to their concerns and advise them on their treatment. In a high street practice you’ll see all kinds of patients from young children to the elderly, so it’s vital to be adaptable and feel comfortable talking to all types of people.

• You’ll need strong attention to detail. Many of the processes and systems you need to be familiar with are complex.

• To help you while examining patients, a steady hand and the ability to handle high-tech equipment confidently and skilfully are important.

• You need to understand how scientific theory and methods can be applied in practice, and be ready to keep up-to-date with developments in your field.
Did you know?

Only 28% of computer users realise that they are entitled to an eye examination paid for by their employer.
Training to become an optometrist

At school
You'll need a strong academic record to gain a place on an optometry degree course.

- You will usually need a minimum of five GCSEs (or equivalent) at A*-C grades, including English, mathematics and at least one science subject.
- Entry requirements vary between universities but you will typically need a minimum of AAB at A-level or equivalent, with at least two science subjects.
- If you're a Scottish Highers student you will usually need a minimum of five subjects including sciences, and if you're working towards the Irish Leaving Certificate you will usually need six subjects including sciences.

Work experience in an optical practice will help you learn more about optometry as a career, and will be a great asset when making your application to university. Visit your local practices and ask if they have a vacancy for someone to work at weekends, or if they offer work experience placements.

Did you know?
59% of people don’t realise that some eye diseases can manifest without noticeable symptoms.
At university
The 11 universities* in the UK who offer accredited optometry degrees are:
• Anglia Ruskin University
• Aston University
• University of Bradford
• Cardiff University
• City University
• Glasgow Caledonian University
• University of Hertfordshire
• University of Portsmouth
• Plymouth University
• University of Manchester
• University of Ulster

Courses are full-time and last between three and four years, depending on the university you choose. The exact content of the course varies between universities, but all will cover the anatomy of the eye, theoretical knowledge and clinical practice.

*(List correct as of January 2017. Please refer to the General Optical Council website at optical.org for an up-to-date list.)

After university
When you graduate with a 2:2 or higher degree and have been awarded with a Certificate of Clinical Competency, which is valid for two years, you can then undertake pre-registration training.

The pre-registration period involves working under the supervision of a qualified optometrist while you acquire experience in the skills needed for the role. As a pre-registration student you will undergo a number of assessments in the workplace and then have to pass a final practical exam before you can register with the General Optical Council as a qualified optometrist.

“The preregistration period helped me make the transition from university to practice. During that time, I was able to build my confidence as well as develop my clinical and communication skills. It was like having training wheels on when learning to ride a bike: my supervisor and the College of Optometrists were there to support me until I was ready to go it alone.”

Michelle Snowball MCOptom, newly qualified optometrist
Career prospects

Optometry has a flexible career structure and it’s possible to move between sectors and to combine a number of roles.

Opportunities for career progression within corporate practice can include promotion within the clinical and/or management structure, and transfer between practices may help you progress.

If you’re working in an NHS hospital, there’s a defined career structure and you can work your way up from optometrist to specialist and principal optometrist and then, ultimately, consultant optometrist.

There are options to specialise in areas such as prescribing optical aids for people who are visually impaired or pre- and post-operative care. It may also be possible to become involved in the education of ophthalmic nurses and medical students.

You may choose to develop your career by going into lecturing and research. Some optometrists become involved in supervision of pre-registration students and full training is provided by the College of Optometrists.

There are also opportunities to work abroad in countries such as New Zealand, Australia and Canada, where the structure of optometric practice is similar.

Professional development

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is your way to develop as a professional once you have qualified and allows you to continuously improve standards of patient care. In order to stay on the General Optical Council’s register you will need to undertake extra learning. You can get these in different ways such as reading articles and answering questions, attending lectures and discussion events with colleagues, and by going to conferences.
The College of Optometrists is the professional, scientific and examining body for optometrists in the UK. Pre-registration students must pass final examinations set by the College before they can register as an optometrist. You can spot optometrists who are member of the College by the letters MCOptom or FCOptom after their name. You can also search for members via our website college-optometrists.org.

You’ll find lots more information about the College’s work, the daily life of an optometrist, and how to get into the profession on our website at college-optometrists.org/careers.

As well as running the pre-registration scheme for optometrists, the College is responsible for all aspects of the development of optometry. This includes research into new areas, setting professional guidelines for optometrists, helping optometrists develop their skills, running assessments for qualified optometrists who want to specialise in different areas, for example, glaucoma and raising awareness of the profession among the general public.

“As the professional, scientific and examining body for optometry in the UK, the College plays a vital role in both shaping the profession and developing those who work within it.”

Dr Mary-Ann Sherratt MCOptom
President of the College of Optometrists
Did you know?

29% of adults don’t realise that children under the age of 16 are entitled to a free NHS sight test.
“It’s a varied and challenging career. As optometrists we help people to see as well and as clearly as possible. This is important for learning and activities like driving; our work can really change people’s lives.”

Gavin Rebello MCOptom, Patrick and Menzies Optometrists and Opticians
Did you know?

22.5 million 18-60 year olds in the UK wear either spectacles or contact lenses.

Go to college-optometrists.org/careers for

- more information about the key skills needed to study optometry
- contact details for the universities where you can study optometry
- detailed information about how to qualify and register as an optometrist.
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For more information about eyes visit lookafteryoureyes.org