Executive summary

I Introduction and methodology
The aim of the Professionalism in optometry project was to produce an analysis of the development of professionalism in clinical training. The research took place between March and October 2014. A key outcome is a set of recommendations about embedding professionalism in optometric training; undergraduate, pre-registration and continuing professional development, with a particular focus on undergraduate training.

The project explored a number of important questions:

• What is professionalism?
• Which issues have affected its introduction in other clinical areas?
• What will be the most effective ways to introduce it at all stages of optometric training?
• What are the barriers to its introduction?
• What is the scope for interprofessional training on professionalism?
• How is it possible to assess professionalism?

The main research methods included:

• carrying out a literature review with a focus on the health professions
• undertaking a survey of College members
• conducting interviews and discussions with a range of stakeholders such as universities, employers, regulatory and representative organisations
• holding focus groups to explore issues in-depth with students and patients
• consulting on initial findings through two consultative workshops to further refine the research outcomes
• reporting to the College of Optometrists’ Education and Standards committee at intervals.

II Results

Literature review
A number of important issues were identified from the literature review (see box below).

Key literature review issues

• Professionalism is a complex concept which is context dependent – there is no agreed definition of professionalism.
• There is some consensus that professionalism includes individual, interpersonal and social levels or dimensions, though authors use varied terminology to describe these – the complexity, conflicts and tensions of professionalism arise from the interaction of these dimensions.
• There is agreement that teaching professionalism is difficult – the hidden curriculum needs challenging through role modelling.
• Small group learning methods provide a core approach to learning professionalism.
• Formative and summative assessment of professionalism needs a combination of tools to be effective.
• Learning professionalism is a long process – it can take many years to become a fully-fledged professional and continuing professional development is needed to maintain it.
• Reflective practice is important both for the development and maintenance of professionalism.
• Academic institutions, employers and peer groups all play a role in developing, fostering and maintaining professionalism.

The online survey identified six important qualities of professionalism in optometry:

• communication
• ethics
• honesty
• integrity
• knowledge
• trustworthiness.

Further research suggested that patient-centred should be added to this list.
Definitions
Survey respondents commented on three different definitions of professionalism in optometry:

Definition 1  An optometrist who is reflective and acts ethically.

Definition 2  The norms of the relationships in which optometrists engage in the care of their patients.

Definition 3  An optometrist works to the highest standards, through:
  • extending knowledge and competence, reflecting on practice, identifying improvements and carrying them out
  • building and maintaining quality relationships with patients, colleagues and other professionals to achieve positive outcomes for patients
  • actively following professional guidance and contributing through research and other activities to the development of the profession.

Definition 3 was given the highest relevance rating, but there were also suggestions for how to improve it.

Patients were keen on a more inclusive definition of professionalism which was outward looking and included carers and wider services for people with low vision in the community. They also preferred definition 3.

Learning
Students discussed what they found helpful for learning about professionalism on optometry courses:
  • talks by patients were good for telling you what not to do: “Don’t treat us as just a pair of eyes”
  • useful to fill in a reflective log after seeing a patient as it enables you to identify things you could do better
  • working with a different group of health professionals and getting feedback from them
  • working with voluntary organisations
  • work placements and experience
  • “It’s about how you handle yourself outside of university as well.”

By far the most frequently mentioned method of learning about professionalism was the use of scenarios, based on ethical or professional dilemmas. These formed a basis for guided discussion.

There was particular interest in the use of peer reviews or discussions as part of continuing education and training. These were thought to be an ideal vehicle for the development of professionalism skills and the discussion of complex professional dilemmas.

Assessment
Respondents identified a number of different assessment methods for professionalism, while also recognising that professionalism is difficult to assess:
  • attendance
  • analysis of record-keeping
  • course work
  • two-hour exam – half multiple choice, half discussing scenarios
  • projects
  • reflective self-assessment
  • presentations
  • short essays looking at clinical or ethical scenarios
  • review of logbooks
  • elevator talks – three minute poster presentations
  • analysis of case management
  • Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs).
The future
The future of professionalism was an important theme throughout the research. The issues are summarised in the box below.

Summary of the future of professionalism issues
• The optometry profession is going through significant change at the moment.
• Professionalism is seen as a key to the future – the cornerstone of optometry.
• There are concerns that tensions between professionalism and business demands will grow.
• Joint training with ophthalmologists provides a basis for better care of patients.
• Optometrists need greater opportunities to develop competencies to keep up with the pace of change.
• There is a need for additional training in business and management skills.

Barriers and encouragement for professionalism
The table below summarises factors thought to help or hinder the development of professionalism according to online survey respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors helping the development of professionalism</th>
<th>Factors hindering the development of professionalism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Clearer focus on professionalism in the undergraduate curriculum.</td>
<td>• No clear definition of professionalism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Integrate professionalism within the continuing education and training (CET) scheme.</td>
<td>• Lack of understanding of what professionalism involves.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Support from employers.</td>
<td>• Lack of interest from employers.</td>
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**III Discussion**

**Definition**

The working definition of professionalism in optometry was refined and simplified as the research progressed. The outcome is in the box below.

An optometrist who is honest and knowledgeable, acting ethically in the best interests of patients through:

- applying own knowledge and improving competence and critical judgement
- communicating effectively with patients, colleagues, other health professionals and the wider community
- actively following professional guidance.

It was not necessary to list all the key words in the definition. Overlap between concepts meant that honesty had elements of trustworthiness, integrity, responsibility and ethics, for example. Professional guidance includes the College of Optometrists’ Guidance for professional practice and the General Optical Council (GOC) Code of Conduct for individual registrants.

Some key points about the definition are:

- Honesty and knowledge were consistently highly rated in feedback on the definitions.
- Effective communication is not just talking to patients and others, but listening to them as well – non-verbal communication is also important.
- Good communication is linked to developing quality relationships.

**Remodelling the curriculum**

Generally, the students thought that opportunities for learning about professionalism were too limited, particularly in the first two years of the courses. University representatives also noted a lack of consistency between degree courses.

There are a number of factors which could help universities remodel the curriculum to strengthen professionalism outcomes for students:

- Audit existing courses to identify which learning methods support the development of professionalism across the curriculum.
- Use the working definition of professionalism as a benchmark to develop professionalism as a theme running throughout the curriculum.
- Work through the Optometry Schools Council (OSC) to share best practice in learning and assessment methods for professionalism.
- Work with students to explore the implications and rationale for these changes with them.

**Professionalism and the future**

There was widespread agreement that professionalism was vital to the future of optometry. Indeed, a number of respondents thought that strengthening professionalism was essential to the future of the profession.

It may be helpful to think about professionalism in optometry across three arcs of development. Each arc represents a thematic approach to professionalism. It is important that each arc aligns with the others so that learning professionalism is consistent, starting with admission to university, and running throughout an optometrist’s career. Each arc of learning lays the foundation for the next stage of professional development.

Arc 1: the optometry degree
Arc 2: the pre-registration phase
Arc 3: the registered optometrist
IV Recommendations

**Recommendation 1**
There will need to be agreement among the key stakeholders to a shared approach to strengthening professionalism training. This will include professional bodies, the regulator, employers and the universities. It is essential that this work is reflected in the revised GOC professionalism standards and aligns with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s benchmark statements for optometry degrees.

**Recommendation 2**
Universities should make use of the research outcomes to review how professionalism training could be strengthened within optometry degrees. The OSC could provide a focus for identifying good practice and improving consistency.

**Recommendation 3**
The College of Optometrists should continue to encourage discussion on professionalism through disseminating the research outcomes, making use of the forums and events at its disposal. The College should also continue to develop ethical scenarios, case studies and other learning resources which focus on professionalism and judgement, including pre-registration training. This work would also support the Guidance for professional practice.

**Recommendation 4**
The College should encourage further research into professionalism within pre-registration training, using the current research outcomes as a starting point. More widely, there would also be benefits to exploring the integration of professionalism training with CET, CPD and higher degrees. This research would help to identify gaps and pinpoint ways to strengthen training.