

**A**s any parent of teenage children knows only too well, the prospect of finding the right career path on leaving school can be daunting. Provision of careers advice in schools is at best variable and cannot hope to cover all the available options for post-16 and beyond. Little wonder that careers in our own small sector have suffered from a low profile compared to professions such as medicine, nursing and dentistry.

Three years ago, a cross-sector campaign began to raise awareness of optometry and optics as a desirable career choice for students beginning to consider their options. Careers in Optics is jointly funded by the profession, employers, the College of Optometrists, optical bodies and the universities who all come together each year to fund the group's work.

In fact there were several reasons for establishing the programme. Universities wanted to raise the quality and quantity of applicants to optometry and dispensing courses. Employers were experiencing problems recruiting in particular areas of the country. And there was a general need to promote the broad range of career opportunities that exist within the sector.

Importantly, the scheme also serves to inform children and teachers about how the eye works and the importance of eye care and eye health.

### **Ambassadors recruited**

After a successful pilot scheme, the first workshops were run by those closely involved with setting up the programme. But the group has since been busy recruiting 'ambassadors' to take part in hour-long interactive sessions at schools and colleges around the country.

A key feature of the workshops is that they are delivered by practising optometrists and DOs who can give the students a first-hand account of what the job entails.

A dedicated New Dimensions website provides information for students and teachers, and has recently been developed to make it easier for ambassadors to use. Ambassadors can now go online to search for schools in their area that may be interested in running a workshop, find fellow ambassadors to help deliver the events, and access a Resource Pack Holder who can send out toolkits.

Ellen Colquhoun, head of marketing and communications at the College, which provides the secretariat for

# Back to school

Practitioners around the UK have been heading back to the classroom to act as ambassadors for Careers in Optics.

**Alison Ewbank** talked to some of those involved



**All the kit is provided to help deliver a fun and interactive workshop to students**

Careers in Optics, says that a call for ambassadors generated real interest from across the profession: 'To date we've trained 167 ambassadors across the UK who are able to run workshops within schools. We'd still like more practitioners to come forward and get involved.'

### **Promoting to schools**

The group has also been working on a promotional campaign to ensure schools understand that they can ask for a Careers in Optics workshop to be run in their own school, as Colquhoun explains: 'In the spring we sent postcards into Science, Technology, English and Maths specialist schools across the country. The postcards explained that we were offering science-based, interactive events that offer an insight into how we see and how our eyes and brain work together to help us understand the world around us. We stressed that materials had been developed by academics and mapped to Key Stage 3 and 4 of the National Curriculum.'

This was followed up with phone calls to schools and has resulted in a series of further workshop bookings. 'Getting into more schools is a priority

for the group and something we'll be focusing on going forwards,' she says. The group is also encouraging its trained ambassadors to be proactive and use any contacts they may have in their local schools to arrange workshops.

In a new development, Careers in Optics has supported Cardiff and Glasgow universities to run careers events, so far reaching around 160 students. Glasgow's events took place in June as part of the Big Bang Science Fair.

Ambassadors invariably find running these events an interesting and rewarding experience, as we found out when we spoke to some of those involved.

● Optometrist **Alison MacPherson**, director of Specsavers in Elgin, Moray has delivered workshops to more than 150 school pupils in her area

'There are many reasons why I got involved and became an ambassador. Speaking to careers advisers and teachers in the local area it became very apparent that careers in optics were not something that were being promoted in local schools and there was a general

lack of awareness of the profession.

'Working in quite a remote part of the UK, I felt there was a need to try and "grow our own resource" and encourage local young people to train as optometrists. Becoming an ambassador was a perfect way to raise the profile of optometry and get young people thinking about optics careers along with the other more traditional health-related careers such as medicine, nursing, physiotherapy and dentistry.

'Running a busy optical practice meant having the time to create materials to take into schools was not an option for me. The New Dimensions programme was a brilliant solution; all the tools were there, provided in the kit. It proved very simple to organise with local schools and was very easy to deliver. The materials are colourful, the workbook is easy to follow and the workshop itself is designed to be interactive.

'I've now delivered this to 150 school pupils in my local area aged 14-16, the largest group being 42 in one workshop. I was concerned beforehand that it might be a little bit daunting, in terms of trying to keep the pupils' interest, but as the workshop is designed to be fun and interactive it was easy to get the students engaged.

'The students loved the experiments they carried out in the workshop, in particular the Illusion Zone, and several described the 3D film as "awesome"!

'I would certainly encourage others to take part in this initiative. All it requires is a brief training session to get up and running. All the kit is provided so really the only commitment is the time to actually go and deliver the workshop itself. It's a great way of introducing the profession to young people. We've taken it a step further and combined it with work experience so any students who wish to, following the workshop, can come in and spend time in the practice to learn more.

'It's also an opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of eye health and eye examinations and engage with young people in your locality. This scheme has been well thought out and the online resources are excellent, so why not get involved?'

● **Graeme Kennedy**, lecturer in Vision Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University, has run careers events at science fairs, including the UK-wide Big Bang

'I first got involved in Careers in Optics in 2011, when one of my colleagues arranged for our department to run a series of public engagement



**The scheme is a great way of introducing young people to optics**

workshops about eyes and vision, as part of the Glasgow Science Festival. These workshops were aimed at 14-16 year olds and were largely based on the College's toolkit, but we expanded them to involve some other activities that we could run in our Eye Clinic, like retinal and slit-lamp photography.

'I felt it was really important to support these events both to highlight the importance of eye examinations and eye health, and to promote the opportunities that exist to pursue a career as an eye care professional.

We've continued to run these events each year since then, and this year we also ran a day of workshops as part of the UK-wide Big Bang Science Fair.

'All of the workshops I've taken part in have been, above all else, great fun. It's really good to see the students getting "hands-on" and beginning to think about how the process of vision works. Every time, at least one of them asks a question that makes me really have to think, and this year one of the students told me that a new layer of the cornea had been discovered, even before I had read about it!

'The students and their teachers always leave with a sense of having learnt something new and with an increased awareness of what optometrists and other eye care professionals do.

'We'll certainly be running more events in future years, and we're hoping to get out and about to some local schools in the next year or so. I would encourage anyone who has an interest in getting out into the community to promote careers in optics to become an ambassador for this project. I think that engaging with school pupils, and public engagement in general, is really important if we

want to continue to attract bright, inquisitive, enthusiastic individuals into our professions.

'At the recent Big Bang fair we got a real surprise when a group of 9-10 year olds signed up for one of our workshops. It turned out, though, that they were just as keen to learn as the older groups of students, and the great thing was that they had no inhibitions. The highlight for me was watching a group of them try to throw and catch balls while wearing prism-reversing goggles. The whole class ended up rolling about with laughter – it was brilliant fun.'

● One of the most recent recruits is **Beth Hall**, who practises in Torquay, Devon and delivered her first workshop in June

'I saw the Careers in Optics programme as a great opportunity not only to encourage young children to consider optics as a career option, but to increase their awareness of the importance of vision, and the health of their eyes.

'For me it was an opportunity to take myself out of practice, to do something different, and go and tell others why I love my job. If in doing that I could encourage even one of those students to consider a career in optics for themselves, then for me that would be a job well done!

'The school I visited was St Cuthbert Mayne in Torquay. It was a very positive experience – the programme is well organised and simple to implement. I have very little experience of controlling and entertaining a group of 30 children for an hour but the well structured workshop and plans make it an easy task.

'It was a bit daunting but it's given me the opportunity to help develop my communication and teaching skills which can only be a positive thing. I felt well supported by the staff at the school who had been well briefed via the New Dimensions website and information leaflet.

'The workshop went down well with the students and staff, and we've been asked if the practice where I work would be willing to set up a stand at the school careers fair later this year. Obviously this is a great opportunity for us to help build links within the local community.' ●

● If you'd like to get involved in Careers in Optics, visit [www.newdimensioninoptics.org](http://www.newdimensioninoptics.org) or email [ambassadors@newdimensioninoptics.org](mailto:ambassadors@newdimensioninoptics.org)