

Of the many reasons for extending your skills and experience outside the consulting room, all apply to studying for additional qualifications.

If you want to improve patient care, make your job more varied and satisfying, move into new areas of clinical practice while at the same time help your profession to progress, then continuing your studies is surely one of the best ways of achieving this.

Extra letters after your name can also enhance your personal status and career prospects and make you more marketable, particularly when job opportunities are scarce. Not least, adding further study to your CV may increase your earning potential at a time of downward pressure on salaries.

Qualifications that supplement those essential to practise as an optometrist or dispensing optician fall into various categories.

There are academic or professional qualifications required by the General Optical Council for inclusion on the specialist registers. For the 'registrable specialities', contact lens opticians need to hold ABDO's contact lens diploma or certificate, and optometrists the Additional Supply (AS), Supplementary Prescribing (SP) or Independent Prescribing (IP) diplomas of the College of Optometrists.

Then there are other qualifications recognised by the GOC for inclusion in the registers and therefore accessible to the public. These are listed on the GOC website and include first or higher degrees relevant to optics such as PhD and MSc, whether acquired via research or taught. The GOC will also consider applications for relevant qualifications not currently listed.

Other GOC-approved qualifications which can be listed in the register include diplomas and fellowships

The letters game

Continuing our series on finding inspiration in and out of practice, **Alison Ewbank** looks at how gaining extra qualifications can further your career and enhance patient care



Continuing your studies after qualifying can be an inspiring experience

offered by the professional bodies such as the College of Optometrists' Fellowship by Portfolio (FCOptom) and its various diplomas (currently DipCLP, DipOrth etc). Fellowship of the American Academy of Optometry (FAAO) also falls into this category.

Changes ahead

At present the College offers diplomas in five subject areas but these Higher Qualifications are undergoing a radical change designed to make them more

accessible (see panel below). ABDO offers its own diplomas, in low vision aids and spectacle lens design as well as in contact lenses. Other qualifications are not recognised in these ways but can still give you letters after your name, examples being a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) or the British Contact Lens Association's mark of esteem in contact lenses (FBCLA). For contact lens academics and educators, fellowship of the International Association of Contact Lens Educators (FIACLE) is another option.

There are also courses and qualifications which may not give you letters after your name but can be used to extend your skills, role and responsibilities. Examples here are the courses run by the Welsh Optometric Postgraduate Education Centre (WOPEC), such as for participation in acute referral under the PEARS scheme, and the many locally accredited schemes for enhanced services.

The good news is that successfully completing this type of course can now count towards higher qualifications as more flexible ways of studying are introduced.

HOW THE COLLEGE'S NEW HIGHER QUALIFICATIONS WILL WORK

The qualifications will be at three levels:

- Professional Certificate (15-20 credits)
- Professional Higher Certificate (30-40 credits)
- Professional Diploma (60-75 credits) in areas such as therapeutics, glaucoma, low vision and contact lenses.

The framework will allow optometrists to build up to Diploma level, either in depth in one area, such as glaucoma, or across a number of topics, for example primary eye care. The topics suggested by the College for qualifications are listed on its website under Revised Modular

Framework and include example routes.

So far Cardiff University and City University have accredited courses towards the Professional Certificate in Glaucoma. Providers will soon be invited to submit courses in low vision for accreditation, followed by AMD.

During 2012, the College will continue to offer its existing certificates and diplomas in low vision, glaucoma, contact lens practice, orthoptics and diabetes. Examinations will continue in 2013 for those already studying.

- For more information, contact education co-ordinator David Maun on 020 7839 6000 or visit www.college-optometrists.org/hq

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

When optometrist Craig McArthur is out of his consulting room you'll often find him performing at Scottish ceilidhs with his band, The Tatties. That's when he's not lecturing at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) or speaking at conferences and roadshows.

But somehow he has also found time outside the practice for further study to advance his career.

McArthur graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) in 2007 and first worked for Black & Lizards where he set up a macular screening service for the group. He joined Peter Ivins Eye Care in Bearsden when it opened in October 2010. The practice provides a range of specialist services including macular screening and dry eye management that give him the freedom to use his clinical skills to the full.

For McArthur, the motivation to begin training as an independent prescriber (IP) was both personal and professional. 'It's a differentiating factor between myself and my peers. If you look at the market place today, it's polarising – some people are looking solely at price so we have to go the other way. IP is just one way of doing that.'

Taking on new responsibilities makes the job more varied and the business also benefits. 'From the patient's point of view, the practice is offering services that others can't.'

So far, McArthur has completed the first part of the IP course at GCU which involves weekend courses as well as distance



Craig McArthur:
personal and
professional
benefits

clinically – especially if, like me, you've been qualified 30 years – but also opens up all sorts of possibilities in practice development and involvement in community eye care, which for independent practices is a great place to be. It's also very reassuring for patients, knowing you can deliver the whole care package.'

learning. The cost of the first module was covered by training funds available to Scottish optometrists. He now intends to complete the remaining two modules to achieve full IP status.

McArthur predicts that, in future, the profession will have multiple levels of optometric skills and some practitioners will take on more of a shared care role, integrated with hospitals. 'To utilise that properly you have to have the training,' he argues.

Practice owner Peter Ivins is understandably supportive, since he has an IP qualification himself. 'I know how hard this is to achieve, especially if you're working full time. The rewards are worth it, though, as it not only challenges you

Ivins has long experience in recruiting professional staff and says additional qualifications are among the factors he might consider in a potential employee. 'As a marker that this is someone who's committed to delivering quality eye care and should have the necessary "hard skill set", although this is by no means the full package as personality, communication skills etc play a very important part.

'We now see a large number of optometrists – some may say too many – who have recently qualified and who from day one are left in a practice to work on their own. Further qualifications, either clinical or otherwise, help differentiate an optometrist from his peers and stand out from the crowd.'

Specialist status

Other changes may be afoot since the GOC is considering whether to restrict the qualifications that appear in the registers only to those that are essential to registration, although this change would require legislation and is not likely to happen for some time.

There are, of course, other ways to use letters after your name to promote your skills and expertise, whether on letter headings or signage, by displaying certificates in the practice or on your CV.

Some of the most recognisable qualifications, and which can give the holder a new job description as well as wider responsibilities and job opportunities, will continue to appear under the specialist registers to distinguish holders from their peers.

ABDO's Contact Lens Certificate or Diploma in Advanced Contact Lens Practice allows DOs to join the contact lens specialist register and become contact lens opticians. Three colleges – ABDO, Bradford and City & East London – offer courses in preparation

for the qualifications, which are also open to optometrists.

Less well known is the ABDO diploma in low vision aids, which can also extend responsibilities in a clinical direction and lead to a satisfying and rewarding role.

Another route for DOs to consider is converting to optometry. Various routes are available, such as the Optometry Career Progression Course offered by the University of Bradford or, at other departments, exemption from some elements of the first year of an undergraduate optometry course. Studying the full three or four years of a degree in optometry is a further option.

Taking on new clinical roles is not the only route for DOs to broaden their horizons. ABDO's diploma in spectacle lens design can be a springboard into a technical role in industry, while courses in optical management, retailing or an MBA may offer advantages in retail optics.

The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers has a range of

courses and qualifications for optical technicians and support staff, and provides training in customer service.

New learning routes

For optometrists, too, there are many opportunities to continue learning and take on additional responsibilities. Increasingly, this means having more than the entry level qualifications that are required for registration. With several new routes available, and others being phased out, the picture here can be confusing.

Concerns about the low uptake of its existing diplomas led the College to review its Higher Qualifications and the decision to work with universities and other organisations to provide nationally accredited qualifications for working in enhanced services.

The College says that cost and time commitments, along with a lack of tuition and opportunities for practical experience, were among the barriers to take-up of the previous diplomas. Courses will now be delivered around the country and will be better suited to

Beyond the consulting room

BE PREPARED

It was volunteering for an eye care project overseas that first prompted DO Helen Denton to think about extending her skills into low vision work some 20 years after qualifying. Working as a locum in practices close to her home on the Wirral-Cheshire borders, she was also seeing increasing numbers of elderly patients in practice with low vision, many of them with AMD.

Having the ability to juggle her locum days, and with her children either at or about to leave for university, the timing was right. 'They no longer needed mother,' says Denton.

Giving up interests in Girl Guiding and swimming tuition, she enrolled on ABDO's LVA diploma course. With theory and practical exams, the course involved 23 weeks of distance learning and a residential weekend. She then had to present 15 case studies from practical experience in hospital and community-based clinics around the northwest.

Since receiving the diploma Denton has spent three days a month as a volunteer doing low vision assessments for Wirral



Helen Denton: working with low vision patients is very rewarding

things such as advice on lighting and contrast. I can't perform a miracle and give them the sight they've lost back but I am able to maximise their useful vision.

'It's very different from other dispensing and very rewarding. It's like a bereavement losing your vision – you have to regain their trust and confidence, and be able to empathise.'

Keeping abreast of changing technology is also important as hand-held electronic devices and screen-based systems are increasingly used to supplement

traditional optical magnifiers. Moving low vision services into the community under the LOCSU pathway may well create more opportunities for LVA work in practice and Denton is keen to get involved. 'That would be the way forward for me. Being part of a holistic service is what I'd love to see.'

Society for the Blind and Partially Sighted, working alongside professionals from other disciplines. She also sees LVA patients in the practices where she locums. 'It's been a hard slog. It was hard work getting the qualification under my belt but it's made me more confident in simple

optometrists' work schedules.

Candidates will be able to take one module or several, and work in one topic area or across a range of topics. Courses may work out more expensive than the previous College diplomas but will offer more in terms of tuition and support.

The College has already introduced Fellowship by Portfolio based on work or study already achieved in the workplace. The intention here was to make the scheme more flexible and remove the cost barrier. So far 10 College members have taken up this option but more interest is expected in future.

Integrated learning

The new Higher Qualifications will also be integrated with other learning pathways. At WOPEC in Cardiff, for instance, successful completion of previous postgraduate courses gives academic credits to use towards a degree, certificate or diploma.

The Centre offers a full MSc in Clinical Optometry, or a Postgraduate Certificate or Postgraduate Diploma allowing you to use the suffixes PgCert or PgDip. Alternatively you can choose to study individual modules that interest you without working towards a qualification.

Other universities such as City have modular courses that aim for a flexible or 'blended' learning approach, combining face-to-face teaching with

distance learning. Most also offer postgraduate degrees by research. Departments are also becoming aware of Border Agency changes that have implications for overseas students.

New courses are emerging all the time so it is worth visiting the institutions' websites for the latest information. Among recent additions are the Doctor of Optometry and Ophthalmic Doctorate offered by Aston University, and the Institute of Optometry's Doctor of Optometry in partnership with London South Bank University.

Aston's professional doctorate programme started in 2008 and can be completed on a distance learning basis. Students undertake modules and practical work to accumulate credits towards various awards.

For optometrists and DOs, these are the PgCert, PgDip or MSc in Optometry or in Ophthalmic Science respectively. The highest awards are the DOptom (Doctor of Optometry) or the DOphSc (Doctor of Ophthalmic Science) both of which entitle the holder to use the title 'Dr'.

Prescribing role

Perhaps the most recognisable way for optometrists to extend their scope of practice is to take a therapeutics qualification to train as an optometrist prescriber and register an AS or IP speciality. The SP has now been incorporated into IP although those

who have this can still use it, while AS will continue for those who prefer not to take on independent prescribing.

Therapeutics training has three components: a theoretical course, currently offered by City University, Glasgow Caledonian University and jointly by Manchester and Aston Universities; a clinical placement of set duration for each level; then a final assessment through the College.

Since 2009, a total of 104 optometrists have gained the IP qualification over six examination sittings and most of these have registered an IP speciality with the GOC. Interest in therapeutics seems likely to increase as new pathways emerge and professional responsibilities change.

With a range of qualifications available, the College says its purpose is to raise standards of education and practice by supporting its members in their professional development so they deliver the highest quality of eye care. NHS reforms are expected to offer new opportunities for the profession to provide enhanced clinical care and make further study even more relevant.

Chief executive Bryony Pawinska sums up the benefits: 'Gaining extra qualifications will give optometrists the confidence, recognition and skills they need to play a significant part in the new health service by offering patients a wider range of services.' ●