

Hear the call for change

Optician looks at the training options for optical practitioners considering diversifying into hearing care

After many years apart, the audiology and optical sectors are realigning and for many, the opportunity to expand into the sector could be lucrative. However, the landscape in the audiology has changed and the days of hearing aids being sold in a door-to-door fashion have gone.

Instead, hearing aid care and dispensing is a setting in which care is the primary focus for many of the providers and multiples such as Specsavers have now introduced hearing screening as part of its wider eye care programme.

Before thought is given to the business opportunities that offering hearing care might present, it is worth considering what training and qualifications are required. For those working in optics, there are two main educational routes into hearing care and hearing aid dispensing. A number of institutions also offer full time BSc courses in Audiology Healthcare Science, but they are likely to be prohibitive for working practitioners.

Following the change of regulator in hearing aid dispensing in 2010, the minimum standard for hearing aid dispensers (HAD) set by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) is a foundation degree. One of the most popular courses is the Hearing Aid Audiology foundation course, which can be carried out via distance learning and is offered by universities Anglia Ruskin and De Montfort.



Anglia Ruskin University's 20-month, four semester foundation course has been developed with the input of audiology employers and has been designed so that the student can become active within an audiology team early in the syllabus. Students who pass the course will be qualified to work as a hearing aid dispenser in the private hearing aid sector or as an associate audiologist within the NHS. They will be qualified to test patients' hearing and dispense hearing aids based on the patient's hearing loss.

To enrol, practitioners must have O Levels/GCSEs in Maths and English and two A Levels. The student must also have a place of employment which enables them to complete work-based learning under the guidance of a supervisor who will monitor and facilitate practical on the job learning.

The £6,000 per year course covers a grounding in basic sciences, pathology of the hearing system, audiometry, hearing aid technology and rehabilitation management of hearing loss. Upon completion and passing, students can apply for direct entry to the HCPC register.

Other hearing care qualifications exist to give practitioners the opportunity to train in audiology so they are able perform support

roles. Anglia Ruskin University's Hearing Care Assistant Course (HCA) has been designed to provide an introduction to working in the hearing care sector and enables the student to provide a HAD with day to day support.

'The HCA courses are a relatively new concept, but can be very useful indeed,' says Steve Witts, AQP lead hearing manager at the Outside Clinic. 'HCAs can do most things that a HAD can do, but they're not allowed to interpret results and findings.'

The £1,500 course has no minimum entry requirements and the distance learning-led syllabus is suitable for practitioners who do not have the minimum entry requirements for the foundation degree. Upon successful completion, suitable candidates can continue to the foundation course. The course is suited for staff such as optical assistants and anyone that wants to perform dual roles in a practice. Staff will be able to talk to patients about hearing issues and carry out aftercare services and hearing aid repairs.

Specsavers has also launched its own version of the course, with a few subtle differences. Developed in conjunction with the government-accredited Education Development International, the six-month course develops practical skills in compulsory workshops, which are then built on in the student's practice with a supervisor – who develops a clinical log of the student's progress. Like the longer HCA course, there are no minimum entry requirements and students must have a reasonable level of maths and English. However, a HAD that has been registered for over two years must be available to act as a supervisor and students must be able to spend 1-2 days per week with them. ●

Patient care is the primary focus for many of the providers of hearing aid services

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