



Improving skills and knowledge

Graham Jones describes how the WCSM helps people progress within the optical sector, and become more of an asset to their employers

Optics has always offered opportunities for continuous learning and career development. In the 17th and 18th centuries, for example, the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (WCSM) oversaw a complex apprenticeship system to maintain and enhance the craft in an age without universal education or textbooks (or popular weekly journals).

Things have, of course, changed since then. But the WCSM continues to play a key 21st-century role in helping people improve their skills and knowledge, progress within the optical sector, and become more of an asset to their employers.

Lizzie Bartlam, who was named Dispensing Optician of the Year at the Optician Awards in 2008, is a dispensing instructor at Aston University's optometry clinic. Earlier this year she enrolled on the WCSM's SMC (Tech) fast-track, a six-month distance-learning course for qualified DOs that covers the parts of the technician's role not included in the FBDO qualification.

'There was lots of work to do, but the course was really helpful for the job I'm doing now,' she says. 'It's added different elements to being a DO – it's furthered my knowledge and given me



The WCSM focuses on educating staff on the 'non-regulated' side of optics

a different perspective.'

The principal focus of the WCSM's educational activities is on those who work on the 'non-regulated' side of optics, such as receptionists, assistants, supervisors and practice managers. Last year, for instance, the WCSM launched its Level 2 Diploma in Optical Retail Skills. This qualification, which is based around training and assessment in the workplace, allows optical and dispensing assistants to choose units that match their own individual needs, as well as those of the practice. Leightons Opticians was one of the first to take advantage of the new diploma.

'We're delighted to be adopting the Optical Retail Skills qualification, which we're piloting in our Hempstead Valley Store,' says Rebecca Sharp, Leightons' director of business development and HR. 'The programme is a good fit with our own training and development schemes, and it's benefiting both experienced and new optical assistants. It enables them to develop, and to be properly recognised for the role they perform.'

Other courses and examinations offered by the WCSM include those shown in the panel. (A full list is available at www.spectaclemakers.com – click on 'Qualifications, training & awards').

Global links

The WCSM is there for people at almost any stage of their optical career. Mo Webb was certified as a dispensing optician by the American Board of Opticianry in 2004. When she returned to the UK in 2009 she

● Level 2 Certificate in Optical Practice Support

Designed for receptionists and other frontline members of the practice team, the Level 2 OPS distance-learning programme is ideal for people who are new to the optical sector, as well as more experienced staff who want to build on their existing skills and knowledge

● Level 3 Certificate in Optical Practice Support

Level 3 OPS is aimed at senior assistants and supervisors, and can be a stepping stone towards becoming a DO or optometrist

● Level 2 Certificate in Optical Customer Service

An introduction to optics for customer-facing staff in practice or manufacturing

● Level 2 Award in Optical Screening

A 'short and sharp' qualification for practice staff who support the optometrist in the provision of screening

● Level 2 Award in Glazing Spectacles

Short, practical course designed to meet a demand for formally recognised glazing qualifications

● Level 3 Award in Rimless Glazing

Short, practical course designed to meet a demand for formally recognised glazing qualifications

enrolled on the WCSM's Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians, a two-year course that is another route to the SMC (Tech) qualification.

'The WCSM is well respected around the world,' she says. 'It was also really exciting to become part of the history and tradition of optics, since holders of WCSM qualifications are automatically entitled to become members of the Company.'

Webb now helps to run Glasseswebb, an online store that sells vintage and contemporary eyewear. 'The industry is changing so much,' she reflects. 'In the end, however, it all comes down to customer service, knowledge and experience. I think vocational qualifications are definitely the way ahead.' ●



Staff are offered the chance to learn practical skills