

Advancing to a higher level

Dr Shehzad Naroo introduces Aston University's ophthalmic doctorate, describing it as a unique qualification to encourage eye care professionals to enhance their knowledge and critical awareness of current issues through taught and research elements

The aim of the taught element of the ophthalmic doctorate is to allow practitioners to enhance their understanding of more advanced ophthalmic topics and to bring their knowledge up to date in evidence-based eye care.

The programme is designed to facilitate interdisciplinary participation so that students qualified in ophthalmology, optometry, dispensing optics and orthoptics as well as other healthcare professionals can study both basic and clinical visual science to a higher level.

The number of taught elements taken at any time is flexible and can be accumulated over a period of five years (including completion of the research project).

Evidence-based eye care

The main goal is to enhance the clinical practice of eye care practitioners to enhance their level of specialisation and to enable them to better assimilate and process academic knowledge to provide evidence-based eye care to the highest level. The course also supports the research requirement of the ophthalmic doctorate. The taught element of the doctorate is distance learning to allow it to be conducted while the students remain in practice. Students apply the knowledge they gain from lectures to complete their assignments based on theory and evidence-based practice.

The taught element of the ophthalmic doctorate aims to:

- Provide an understanding of advanced eye care
 - Enhance the ability to search for relevant academic research
 - Teach critical analysis skills to assess clinical research
 - Optimise record keeping and the writing of case records/dissertations
 - Allow reflection on clinical practice in the light of current research
 - Allow specialisation in key areas of eye care
 - Provide a deep insight into selected areas of eye care by experts in the field.
- The research project will be

Aston University: the dissertation will consist of a series of linked research studies or a larger clinical project



supervised by ophthalmic research group staff. Students will be given a list of projects or will be able to discuss their own ideas for a project with a staff member with appropriate research interests.

Programme outline

Taught modules will be 20 credits each, equivalent to 200 hours of nominal student learning. They will consist of 10 two-hour remote access lectures with 12 multiple choice questions (MCQs) for feedback and CET accreditation where possible) in a virtual environment (10 credits) and a module coursework assignment such as five case records including reflection or a 3,000 word literature review related to the module (10 credits). Each module will include a two-hour written exam.

Up to one third of the taught credits will be available for accreditation of prior learning (APL) for approved professional courses. Modules will be available at least once a year, with start dates of October, January and April. The credits can be used for various qualifications, but once they are used for one qualification they cannot be re-used for another. For example someone with 180 credits cannot exit with an MSc and then decide to complete the

ophthalmic doctorate using the same 180 credits.

Apart from the coursework element that each module will include, the student will need to submit a research dissertation to be considered for the ophthalmic doctorate. If this research dissertation is not completed the student will only have the opportunity to exit with a taught MSc, a diploma or certificate (depending on the number of credits accrued). Students wishing to undertake the ophthalmic doctorate need to complete the epidemiology and research methods taught module before they begin their project. (This is the only compulsory module for students wishing to complete the ophthalmic doctorate degree. Students who wish to exit with an MSc or other do not have any compulsory elements.) The dissertation will consist of a series of linked research studies or a larger clinical project. A substantive piece of work is required, with some novelty and clear evidence of developed expertise in the speciality chosen. Alternatively, a shorter research portfolio can be presented with at least two peer-reviewed research publications. The exact format will be decided by the supervisor and student.

At present the list of modules included can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1

A summary of some of the modules

Module title	Credits	Level	Module code	Core/elective
Ametropia	20	M	OPGAM1	Elective
Advanced contact lenses	20	M	OPGACL	Elective
Advanced ophthalmic examination	20	M	OPGAOE	Elective
Advanced visual science	20	M	OPGAVS	Elective
Epidemiology and research methods	20	M	OPGERM	Core
Glaucoma	20	M	OPGGL1	Elective
Neuroimaging	20	M	OPGNI1	Elective
Refractive surgery	20	M	OPRS1	Elective
Retinal and macular disorders	20	M	OPGRMD	Elective
Ocular therapeutics*	20-40	M	OPGOT	Elective
Ophthalmic business and law	20	M	OPGOBL	Elective
Visual impairment	20	M	OPGVI1	Elective

*Ocular therapeutics will be introduced once its independent prescribing taught requirements are defined by the General Optical Council.

Others will follow in due course and future modules may include some that require attendance. (Please note that all these modules will not be available in October 2008.)

Students may choose any combination of taught modules to make up the required credits for the ophthalmic doctorate.

Please note this qualification is not a method that will enable you register with the GOC or GMC as an eye care or medical provider. This is an academic qualification. It is multi-disciplinary and taught modules are designed with that in mind. Some modules may appeal more to optometrists or dispensing opticians or other groups. Research projects will also be multi-disciplinary in nature.

Assessment

Each two-hour lecture will be followed by 12 MCQs. In total there will be 10 two-hour lectures per module.

There will be a two-hour written exam per module, which will take a distance assessment format.

Finally, for each module a short literature search or case records will be presented on that subject area. The length of each element of coursework will be decided by module leaders and discussed with individual students.

The pass mark in each element is 50 per cent and good marks in one element cannot be offset against poor marks in another element.

The research portfolio for those taking the full ophthalmic doctorate will be assessed by an internal and external examiner and will

be defended in a *viva-voce* style examination. The length of the final research dissertation will be agreed between the student and supervisor and is dependent on the research topic.

Students must submit three copies of the project report within the time their taught module credits are valid. One copy shall be retained by the school for a minimum of three years from the date of award. Another copy may be retained by the university.

Acquired prior learning (APL)

Up to one-third of the taught element of the course can be gained by APL. Modules from other MSc courses can be used for this purpose as long as they have not already been used to gain a higher degree from Aston University or any other university. APL of up to 20 credits can also be gained from 50 hours of continued education and training (CET) or continued professional development (CPD) courses that have been approved by a recognised body such as CME or DOCET (Vantage) in the previous three years (when claimed).

● **Start date for course**
October 2008

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If a student applies for APL of one third of the taught element then only six further taught modules are required to gain the 180 credits that allow the student to commence the final research dissertation and gain the ophthalmic doctorate.

Alternatively if a student applies for APL of 60 credits of the taught element and then completes six further taught modules to gain 180 credits, but does not complete the final research dissertation, they will exit with an MSc. A student wishing to exit with a diploma can use APL for up to 40 credits and for a certificate the APL component can be up to 20 credits.

Entry requirements

Applicants must hold at least an upper second class honours degree in an ophthalmic or biomedical field from a UK university for direct entry onto the course. Indirect entry, for students with equivalent qualifications (such as a Fellowship of the British Dispensing Opticians) or with a lower degree award, involves successfully completing two modules as CET (same fees), which can then be accredited as APL (40 of the 60 credits allowed). Therefore this will not disadvantage these students' progress in completing the ophthalmic doctorate. Students whose first language is not English must demonstrate a satisfactory command of written and spoken English.

For international students this is demonstrated by an IELTS score of 6.5 or higher overall, but with no score below a 6.0 or equivalent qualifications. Applicants will have to have spent at least two years in clinical practice.

Fees

The current fees for EEA students are £700 per module (payable at the start of each module). The fees for EEA students the research element of the ophthalmic doctorate are currently £6,000. (If you wish to pay this in two instalments then you need to discuss this with Aston University finance office.) Non-EEA students' fee information can be obtained on application.

Application form

To obtain an application form please email: od@aston.ac.uk ●

● **Dr Shehzad Naroo** is a lecturer at Aston University and the ophthalmic doctorate course leader