



Developing a career in optics

The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers supports a variety of career progression routes. **Gordon Jones** gives some examples of career development and the qualifications available

When Gaynor Williams took a job with Hoya in 1982 she didn't know anything about lenses. She had left school with few qualifications and her first job had been working in a high-street chain store. But she became hooked on optics right from the start. 'I walked into Hoya on my first day, looked at a lens and said, 'Wow, what is this? How does it do that?,' she recalls. Twenty-nine years later – she's now Hoya's training co-ordinator – Gaynor Williams FBDO SMC Tech has lost none of her enthusiasm. 'When I'm working with students, I'm still inclined to pick up a lens and say, "Look at this! Look how it bends the light!"'

Louise Ballantyne also left school with few qualifications. She already had a Saturday job with Dollond & Aitchison in Cambridge, and she decided to go full-time. 'I thought, I'll give it a year,' she remembers. That was in 2001. Today Louise is a dispensing optician in the north-east of England. 'I'm one of the luckiest people in the world: I have a job I can be passionate about,' she says.

There are many roads to becoming a dispensing optician, but for both Williams and Ballantyne, the critical first steps were provided by the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (WCSM).

'The managing director at Hoya suggested I do an SMC Tech course,' says Williams. Now renamed the Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians, this is a two-year distance learning course from the WCSM. Regarded by many within the manufacturing sector as 'the gold standard', holders of the qualification are entitled to use the letters SMC Tech after their name. 'I had a wonderful tutor, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. After I passed, my managing director said to me, "What do you want to do next?" I said, "I want to become a DO."'

Ballantyne took a different route,



From SMC Tech to Ethiopian trek: the career development pathway of Gaynor Williams (foreground) has taken her to some interesting places

AT A GLANCE: WCSM QUALIFICATIONS 2011/12

- Level 2 Certificate in Optical Practice Support
- Level 3 Certificate in Optical Practice Support
- Level 2 Certificate in Optical Customer Service (Spectacles)
- Level 2 Certificate in Optical Customer Service (Contact Lenses)
- Level 2 Diploma in Optical Retail Skills*
- Level 2 Award in Optical Screening*
- Level 2 Award in Glazing Spectacles**
- Level 3 Award in Rimless Glazing**
- Level 5 Certificate in Optical Care (Scotland)
- Level 2 Certificate in Optical Production Processes
- Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians

* New for this year, ** Coming soon

via the WCSM's Level 3 Certificate in Optical Practice Support. This is a one-year distance learning course for senior assistants and practice supervisors; it follows on from the Level 2 Certificate in Optical Practice Support, which is designed for people new to the sector, as well as more experienced receptionists and optical assistants who want to develop their skills and knowledge. 'It gave me a

very smooth transition to the DO course,' Ballantyne comments. 'It was user-friendly, it was well-structured, and it got me into the world of studying and learning.'

The WCSM was incorporated in 1629 to promote assistance to the visually impaired. It has a strong focus on training and qualifications, and it is an accredited awarding body in all four countries of the UK. A key goal is to help create a career ladder for the optical sector: the WCSM's programmes are designed to help individuals build their skills and knowledge, enhance their careers, and become more of an asset to the places where they work.

'There are some people in optics who have been slow to see the benefits of professional training,' acknowledges Williams, who, in addition to running Hoya's in-house education programmes, also works as a WCSM tutor and as an ABDO examiner. 'Sometimes there is an attitude of "We'll muddle through". One of the things we've got to do within the sector is to "get the message out" about continuing education and training.'

The road to career development never stops. Ballantyne is currently studying for her Contact Lens Certificate, and she is keen to expand her career into teaching. And Williams' path has taken her to Ethiopia three times: as part of a Vision Aid Overseas team she provided eye tests and spectacles, trained local people and helped set up an eye workshop.

The WCSM never stops, either: it is introducing four new qualifications this year. Most courses begin in September – which means that now is the time to apply. Full syllabi, information about fees and enrolment forms are available at www.spectaclemakers.com; postal packs can be obtained by contacting training@spectaclemakers.com or 020 7236 2932. ●

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