

The high road to Glasgow

Emma White talks to Professor Alan Tomlinson, about his department's forward-thinking approach



Glasgow Caledonian University is the only establishment in Scotland to offer an optometry and dispensing programme which forms a key part of the School of Life Sciences.

Head of department Professor Alan Tomlinson says the university provides a captive pool of applicants. 'It's definitely a benefit being the only department in Scotland in that it tends to give us a designated market because Scottish students often prefer to stay in Scotland,' he says.

Each year 500-600 people apply to join the undergraduate courses, with optometry admitting around 60 students each year, while the dispensing course admits around 20 students and 18 PhD students carry out full-time research. Mature students with a science degree are also welcomed and usually fill around 12 places in any given year.

English and Irish students must apply with a minimum ABB in A level subjects physics, maths and biology. Scottish students need Highers grades AABBB including maths and physics. 'We have the highest qualified students with the highest points entering our department out of all other courses at the university,' says Tomlinson.

The department has some 20 academic staff including 12 clinical members and Tomlinson says the state-of-the-art 24-consulting room clinic has the latest refractor units, projector viewing systems for slit lamps, fundus cameras and a special clinic for the diagnosis of visual disorders in children.

After radically redesigning its vision sciences programme in 2003 the school has moved to a four-year biomedical model for optometry. 'All courses have to fulfil the basic GOC

requirements but in addition we have oriented towards biomedical subjects for optometry including pharmacology, therapeutics and ocular disease. Our graduates are prepared for therapeutic prescribing without having to do all the work that existing practitioners need to do to get up to speed.'

Students on the ophthalmic dispensing course have the option of graduating after two years with a diploma certificate or staying on for a third year to obtain a degree. Strong emphasis is placed on the integration of theoretical and practical aspects throughout the programme and students can develop their practical dispensing skills while developing interpersonal skills with patients. During year two, students spend one afternoon a week in an optical workshop or in a practice. A small proportion of dispensing students can also move into the second year of the optometry course, but Tomlinson says this is 'very competitive'.

Final-year optometry students carry out placements within hospital eye departments including the Royal Infirmary Glasgow and the Royal Alexandra Paisley, attending general clinics for conditions like glaucoma and diabetes and theatre sessions to observe standard ophthalmic surgery. Students also visit the Royal Centre for the Blind and Tomlinson says: 'We've always had links with the centre and provide low-vision services at our clinic. We also have links with domiciliary company Health Call and students accompany practitioners to nursing homes.'

Research opportunities are available for postgraduate studies in a range of areas with scholarship support available. Current research areas include: anterior eye, visual development, ocular motor function and visual psychophysics. The department has built up links with

Professor Tomlinson: 'We have the highest qualified students at the university'

external companies to aid research and teaching, including Allergan, Hydron, CIBA Vision, Renaissance Healthcare, Sauflon and Pfizer.

Glasgow Caledonian offers an additional supplementary prescribing course for optometrists with two years' experience in practice to gain 'additional supply' and 'supplementary prescriber' status. 'We're the only programme outside London that has certification through the GOC,' says Tomlinson. Content has been developed to encompass all aspects of the GOC therapeutic prescribing curriculum and the competency framework for prescribing OOs published by the National Prescribing Centre. A modular structure has been developed to allow students maximum flexibility to develop clinical knowledge and skills. The flexible course is made up of three 15-credit modules, each taking some three months to complete.

Full support is offered to students, including careers guidance and presentations from independent and multiple opticians plus representatives from the professional bodies. 'We provide tutorials for all years but more in the first year and in particular for students in the dispensing programme,' adds Tomlinson. 'This is largely due to optometry and dispensing students taking some of the same modules when entry qualifications for DOs are not as high, so they need that extra support.'

Tomlinson takes pride in Glasgow Caledonian's optometry department and adopts a forward-thinking approach to keeping it up-to-date. One of his latest plans is to involve students with some of the local refractive surgery companies. 'This is an aspect of work many optometrists are involved in at pre- and postoperative surgery stages and we'd like to expose students to this,' he says. ●