

# Small is beautiful

**Emma White** concludes her series of reports on optometry courses at UK universities with a look at the opportunities on offer at Ulster

**S**andy beaches, golf courses, excellent accommodation and close proximity to a bustling town make the University of Ulster a wonderful setting for study, according to senior lecturer Kathryn Saunders. Meanwhile, low student numbers, high quality teaching and an active research department ensure the optometry course remains highly sought after.

The University of Ulster admits just 32 students a year to its optometry course and receives an average of 250 applications. Students need to achieve AAB grade A levels including two As in science subjects but Saunders is keen to point out that the department welcomes participation from non-traditional students.

'We are one of the top universities for encouraging wider access on to our courses and we have had a lot of brilliant students who have come to us later in life because they haven't been able to do their A levels due to family or illness,' she says. 'We're keen not to be a department that just admits 18-year-olds with traditional A levels. However, we do ensure we maintain our high standards.'

## Student/tutor ratio

Saunders also believes it is good to receive a high number of applications to 'attract high quality students' and observes a ratio of two male applicants to three females.

'Optometry is a great career for women, especially those who would like to start a family and return on a part-time basis, so I'm not surprised there are more female applicants,' she says.

A staff base of 14 permanent members along with clinical supervisors takes the students through the three-year course, while postgraduate students often get involved in assisting with teaching.

'I'm really happy that we teach just 32 students as it means we can have really good student-staff ratios of two to one,' she says. 'I think it is a huge advantage for tutors to be able to get to know all their students as they develop



**A postgraduate student using the department's multifocal electroretinogram (ERG)**

through the course. Also, the students have the confidence in smaller classes to speak out and answer questions during lectures.'

The course has recently been remodelled and now includes a module on therapeutics which Saunders believes will equip the students with invaluable skills when they qualify.

'We have an ophthalmologist on the staff, which is important in view of the therapeutics teaching,' she says.

Clinical optometry including optometric techniques, refraction and a background in biomedical science underpins year one of Ulster's course, where students test each other's eyes to gain an understanding of how the visual system works.

## Interpersonal skills

As part of the course remodelling, students begin testing the eyes of OAPs at the start of their second year and carry out a full eye examination each week. 'We felt it was something the students enjoyed so we brought it forward and it's really good for them because they can see where they are heading,' says Saunders. 'They get to hone their interpersonal skills and meet people with conditions such as cataracts and AMD, as well as those who have had surgery.'

Modules in low vision and dispensing also form part of the second year of study. During the final year, students focus on binocular vision and an orthoptist teaches alongside an optometrist. 'I think it is important and useful for students to understand the referral process and

to gain a better appreciation of how different specialists work together,' says Saunders.

The University of Ulster has two clinics – one in Coleraine at the main campus and one in Belfast which forms part of the larger student campus. The latter is part of a multi-disciplinary clinic which offers other services in podiatry and physiotherapy.

'We have general public clinics, open access contact lens clinics, paediatric clinics, low-vision clinics, binocular vision clinics and clinics for people with special needs,' says Saunders.

Final-year students also spend time at various regional hospitals and take part in hospital eye services, such as low-vision clinics. Some students also travel overseas to Waterloo, Canada, to carry out final year projects. 'We also have an arrangement with the Socrates Erasmus exchange programme in Granada, so we have had Spanish students coming to study. It is interesting for the students to see what optometry courses in other countries are teaching,' Saunders says.

Saunders has been a postgraduate and undergraduate student at Cardiff University, taught in Glasgow and examined at Bradford and City Universities, but she believes the University of Ulster's small course is superior for generating good cohesion between staff and students.

She adds that it is easy to keep track of the students and to monitor how they are getting on in obtaining pre-registration posts and resulting jobs. 'We have never had a problem with our students getting places and, interestingly, a high number have historically gone on to hospital positions. This year two out of the three students admitted to Moorfields Eye Hospital are from Ulster.'

Saunders says the companies and hospitals that have placed Ulster students always give very positive feedback and request more students the following year.

'I think the brilliant feedback underlines that the hospitals and profession hold our students in high regard and I'm very proud of them,' she adds. ●