



HEIW brief for Health and Social Care Senedd committee.

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The purpose of this brief is to provide the Senedd committee with some background information relating to HEIW activities in supporting optometry and ophthalmology workforce development

1.0 Optometry/dispensing optician Training

Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) commissions postgraduate higher qualifications for optometrists and dispensing opticians working in Wales. Over the past four years, HEIW has commissioned 460 higher qualifications to enable optometrists to develop enhanced skills supporting delivery of high-quality patient care in primary care settings and reducing demand on secondary care specialist services. These higher qualifications are designed to ensure that optometrists are fully equipped to deliver these services in practice. They focus on high priority, high demand areas such as glaucoma, medical retinal disease management and independent prescribing. Equipped with these enhanced skills the optometry workforce has a direct impact on patient experience and care, enabling rapid and timely patient access, which is vital in reducing long term and often irreversible morbidity associated with these conditions.

This approach ensures that optometrists in Wales are among the most highly trained in the UK and aligns with the ambitions of the Wales General Ophthalmic Services (WGOS).

HEIW also provide enhanced education and training for optometrists who have not worked in Wales previously to ensure they are familiar with the structure and expectations of WGOS and are appropriately upskilled to deliver high-quality services.

All commissioned qualifications are awarded by Higher Education Institutions, such as Cardiff University, with educational oversight from the General Optical Council (GOC). Some qualifications also require clinical placements, which have traditionally taken place in hospital eye departments within secondary care.

In addition to enhanced skills opportunities for some optometrists, HEIW supports the continuing education and development of the whole optometry workforce in Wales. This includes a planned agile and responsive programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), closely aligned with service need as delivered under the WGOS.

Quantifying the impact of HEIW commissioning and skills enhancement in the short term is challenging, as the change is dependent on other factors, such as Health

Boards ensuring services are fully operational. There has been a significant increase in services being rolled out in nearly all health boards. Table 1 below demonstrates the increased number of patient services, facilitated by the qualifications, in health boards.

Table 1: Service provision with higher qualifications in each HB, comparison 2021 to 2025.

Health Boards	Medical Retina filtering and monitoring		% Increase	Higher Certificate Glaucoma (monitoring)		% Increase	Independent Prescribing		% Increase
	2021	2025		2021	2025		2021	2025	
ABUHB	12	22	83.3	1	11	1000	9	22	144.4
BCUHB	16	37	131.3	1	4	300	5	11	120.0
CAVUHB	15	22	46.7	5	14	180	7	19	171.4
CTMUHB	5	8	60.0	8	11	37.5	8	14	75.0
HDUHB	14	31	121.4	3	15	400	9	25	177.8
PTB	2	7	250	0	8	800	1	5	400
SBUHB	6	10	66.7	0	0	0	0	12	1200

1.1 Higher qualification education placements

A significant barrier to the timely completion of some enhanced skill qualifications is the requirement for clinical placement experience and supervision by ophthalmologists within hospital eye units. Training capacity to support this is limited because of service demands and the existing need for ophthalmology trainers to supervise ophthalmology trainees. HEIW has facilitated a revised approach to supporting Independent Prescribing placements in high street practices utilising experienced optometry supervisors. This reduces the length of time to achieve the qualification, significantly increases the number of available placements, reduces training pressures on ophthalmologists, but also ensures standards are fully met. HEIW has also taken on the role of facilitating coordination of hospital placements to ensure a mixed model approach of both primary and secondary care placement experience. Currently, through this novel approach we have:

- Coordinated and organised placement plans for 30 practitioners waiting for IP placements since Sept 24
- Arranged sessions for 19 practitioners, funding over 75 community sessions in high street practices
- Coordinated HES sessions leading to 5 completed clinical placements.

In summary the approach being taken is supporting the development of enhanced skills in an increasing number of the optometry workforce, alleviating pressure on secondary care services and improving patient care.

1.2 Workforce- Optometry

The optometry workforce in Wales plays a crucial role in delivering comprehensive eye care services in primary care and supporting secondary care under the new WGOS (Wales General Ophthalmic Services).

Despite increased demand, there are currently no significant waiting lists for patients requiring eye care appointments. Routine appointments remain readily available and there are few, if any, outstanding vacancies in Optometry. Furthermore, due to legislative changes made to the WGOS system, patients requiring urgent care are effectively accommodated through a triage process, ensuring timely and appropriate access to services.

We are currently awaiting the first outputs from workforce data, which has been collected monthly since March 2025. This data will help inform our understanding of the demographics, structure and shape of the optometry workforce, particularly in rural areas, such as North West Wales where there have been some practice closures. Linking workforce data with the Health Boards' eye care needs analysis will be a key component of our strategic workforce plan, enabling a more targeted and informed approach to workforce development and service planning.

1.3 Working Patterns and Gender Trends

Findings from the HEIW 2021 Workforce Survey identified notable trends in working patterns. Only 28% (n=560) of respondents reported working full-time. Additionally, there is a clear gender-related employment trend: female optometrists are more likely to hold employed roles, while male optometrists predominantly work as self-employed locums. This pattern is evident across both full-time and part-time employment.

Further investigation into these trends will be included in future workforce strategy work. A deeper understanding of employment preferences and working patterns will inform future recruitment, retention, and service delivery strategies. Efforts are already underway to create opportunities for other members of the optometry-related workforce, such as dispensing opticians. These include enhanced roles within services such as Low Vision and acute eye care assessment. This approach supports a more integrated and multi-disciplinary model of care, helping to maximise workforce capacity and improve patient access to services.

2.0 Undergraduate Education and Training

A recent change to the Optometry undergraduate programme at Cardiff University is expected to further integrate enhanced skills qualifications into the primary degree. As a result, graduates will possess enhanced skills and competencies aligned with WGOS service delivery levels, enabling them to contribute effectively from the outset of their careers.

This will require additional clinical placements for the optometry undergraduates in Wales which is a challenge for the University. Placements must be completed within approximately one hour's travel of Cardiff University, limiting opportunities for practices located further afield to host undergraduates and promote their region as a good place

to work. HEIW does not commission undergraduate optometry or the associated placements but continues to work closely with Welsh Government colleagues and the University to establish a 'joined up' approach to support the future needs of Wales

2.1 Optometry Student Demographics and Future Workforce Supply

The current profile of optometry students at Cardiff University shows that only 111 out of 442 students (25%) are from Wales. The number of Welsh students studying optometry elsewhere in the UK remains low, with fewer than 20 students in total. Evidence from the 2021 survey demonstrated that approximately 15% of the workforce are looking to retire within the next 10 years. These figures raise concerns about the sustainability of the locally trained optometry workforce and the long-term ability to meet service demand across Wales.

In response, HEIW is developing strategies to promote optometry as a career pathway and increase engagement with learners. An options appraisal is planned to identify and evaluate potential solutions aimed at creating a sustainable optometry workforce for the future.

3.0 Hospital Optometry: A Growth Opportunity

Hospital optometry currently represents a significantly small proportion of the overall optometry workforce, highlighting a potential area for growth and development within the profession. Substantial changes to the Electronic Staff Record (ESR) (2024) profiling of optometrists within the NHS may support efforts to address recruitment challenges. However, a significant salary disparity remains, which continues to act as a barrier to attracting optometrists into hospital roles. Part-time working in hospital settings, alongside community practice, has shown that the skills developed through collaboration with ophthalmology colleagues can be effectively transferred into primary care, enhancing service delivery in the community.

4.0 Medical Workforce- Ophthalmology

HEIW commissions and quality manages the postgraduate medical ophthalmology training programme. Aligned with HEIW's strategic workforce functions HEIW is committed to ensuring the ophthalmology pipeline meets the future needs of Wales' healthcare system. There is a need to increase the number of training posts in Wales, training capacity (which includes availability of trainers and placements) is a factor which is currently limiting the pace at which the programme can be expanded, HEIW continues to work with all relevant stakeholders to increase capacity whilst ensuring high quality training is provided. Any expansion in training numbers is achieved through HEIW's annual Education and Training Plan and is dependent on funding approval. Once training capacity issues are addressed an increase in training posts would be facilitated in a phased manner ensuring the delivery of sustainable, high-quality training aligned to GMC standards is maintained. As part of HEIW's aim to increase the focus on ophthalmology, a Specialty Training School dedicated to the specialty has been established and a Head of School appointed. Previously ophthalmology sat in the School of Surgery. The Head of School for Ophthalmology will lead on:

- exploring ways to increase exposure to Ophthalmology earlier during training e.g. in Foundation training, so as to promote the career at an early stage
- improving recruitment and retention both to the training programme and into consultant posts on completion of training (collaborative work between HEIW and UHBs to promote post training retention is underway across all specialties.
- exploring opportunities for programme expansion by developing a better understanding to the current training capacity limitations and developing strategies to address those.

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