

## Editorial

# Optometric Education Globally

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Optometry plays a vital role in preventing visual impairment and the landscape of global optometric education continues to evolve.

Over the past 25 years, the number of optometric education programs worldwide has increased significantly. In several countries—such as China, India, the United Kingdom and the United States—the number of institutions providing optometric education has grown. Meanwhile, countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, African and Central American regions have initiated new programs.

The World Council of Optometry (WCO) has been instrumental in supporting the growth and development of optometry. WCO represents our profession globally and maintains official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO). Additionally, WCO is a member of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB).

Legislation in each country governs the scope of optometric practice. The extent of recognition varies, with some countries either not recognizing the profession or lacking regulatory bodies. Public awareness of the optometrist's role and scope of practice also varies widely.

The length of optometric education programs and the point at which it begins in the education system differ across countries. In most cases, programs start after secondary or high school education. The majority are 3-4 years in length, leading to a bachelor's in optometry degree, while some are 6-year programs culminating in a Doctor of Optometry. Some countries require prerequisite studies emphasizing biomedical sciences prior to entering a postgraduate program, either integrated into the optometry degree or as a separate bachelor's degree.

Launching new programs brings many challenges. These include a shortage of optometric educators, limited equipment in clinical training facilities and issues such as educators not being able to commit full-time due to unsustainable salaries. Often, a small number of faculty members are responsible for teaching the entire curriculum under conditions where funding is limited.

Educators in certain regions have formed alliances with other organizations to address these challenges, both internationally and within their own countries. Committees have been established to promote resource sharing and address common educational barriers. Faculty exchange programs, continuing education initiatives, shared curriculum materials, and financial and educational support from partner organizations have all contributed to overcoming these obstacles. These efforts are particularly crucial in places the World Bank classifies as low- to middle-income countries.

### **So how can the profession continue to strengthen its education, research, and produce qualified, high-quality optometrists for the public sector?**

The **WCO Competency Framework for Optometry**<sup>1</sup> offers updated guidelines, presenting five pillars of competency for educational programs: refractive error, visual function assessment, ocular health and disease, public health, and professional practice.

Optometric programs should review their current curricula and align them with the WCO Competency Framework. Regardless of how content is presented or delivered—whether through traditional or innovative methods—competency standards should be consistent across all programs within a country and ideally aligned globally. This will support legislative efforts, expand the scope of practice, and improve public understanding that optometrists are the **primary gatekeepers of visual health**.

Various analyses across countries and regions show a clear need to train more optometrists, especially with our vital role in preventing visual impairment and detecting major contributing factors like refractive error. As a profession, are we aware of the **WHO Eye Care Competency Framework**<sup>2</sup> presented in 2022? Are we prepared to meet the SPECS 2030<sup>3</sup> targets set by WHO to address uncorrected refractive error? Are we aligning with the WCO Competency Framework for Optometry? Are we planning effectively to train the next generation of optometrists over the coming decades? And can **artificial intelligence (AI)** help bridge educational gaps?

### **References**

1. WCO Competency Framework for Optometry. Saint Louis, Missouri: World Council of Optometry; 2024
2. Eye care competency framework. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO
3. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/specs-2030>

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