



Fit for the Future: Lifelong Learning Review Continuing Education and Training Consultation

Executive Summary Report

General Optical Council

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Executive summary

Introduction

The General Optical Council (GOC), in its role as the UK regulator of optometrists, dispensing opticians, student opticians and optical businesses, has the remit to oversee a mandatory scheme of continuing education and training (CET). The GOC is reviewing the current CET scheme, introduced in 2013, as the optical sector has changed since then and the work optometrists and dispensing opticians carry out has expanded and diversified.

As part of this review, Enventure Research, an independent research agency, was commissioned by the GOC to undertake analysis of data collected via the ‘Fit for the Future: Lifelong Learning Review’ public consultation. The consultation explored stakeholder views on the existing CET scheme and how it can evolve to meet the challenges of the future.

An online survey designed to be completed by individuals and organisations was created by the GOC to collect responses to the consultation, utilising the Citizen Space consultation platform. During an eight-week timeframe, 994 responses were received from 973 individuals and 21 organisations.

Enventure Research was commissioned by the GOC to conduct independent analysis of the consultation data. This executive summary presents the key findings. Colour-coded verbatim quotations from open-ended survey questions have been included as examples (**blue** responses are from optometrists, **green** responses are from dispensing opticians, and **red** responses are from organisations).

Views and understanding of the current CET scheme

Attitudes towards the current CET scheme

The GOC asked stakeholders for their views on the current CET scheme. Overall, the feedback was generally positive, with the majority of respondents agreeing that the current CET scheme:

- Allows registrants to develop their skills and knowledge in order to keep pace with changes that are happening in the optical sector (78%)
- Allows registrants the flexibility to undertake CET in relation to their individual scope of practice (73%)
- Helps encourage professional development (73%)
- Helps improve registrants’ practice (76%)
- Helps keep registrants up to date with good practice (82%)
- Helps registrants plug gaps in their knowledge (77%)

By contrast, a smaller majority (56%) agreed that the current scheme helps to build and maintain public trust and confidence in the optical professions.

Organisational responses were less positive when reviewing some areas of the current CET scheme. For example, nine of 17 organisations disagreed that the current scheme allows registrants the flexibility to undertake CET in relation to their individual scope of practice, and seven of 17 disagreed that the current scheme helps encourage professional development.

Understanding risks in the optical sector and the role of revalidation

The most commonly perceived riskiest areas of work carried out by optometrists and dispensing opticians were within the clinical risk category, including the detection of disease/missed pathology (25%), emergencies/identifying and managing eye disease (17%), optometrists offering a wider range of services (16%) and referrals/triaging (13%).

Optometrist respondents were more likely to suggest clinical risks, whereas a larger proportion of dispensing opticians suggested conduct risks, such as risk of complaints/litigation and communication.

Similar proportions of respondents commented to say that CET goes some way to address these risks or provides relevant information, or that CET does not address these risks or do enough to support registrants, highlighting that opinion is divided.

Almost three in five respondents (58%) thought there is a risk that optometrists and dispensing opticians may be de-skilling (i.e. losing skills and knowledge in some areas of practice), including 15 out of 18 organisations. Additional comments provided highlight concerns about technology and automation causing de-skilling in areas such as retinoscopy and refraction, and loss of skills in areas not frequently used in daily practice, such as contact lenses and fitting or dispensing.

If registrants do not see many contact lens patients... undertaking one or two hours of CET...will not replace lack of experience and could give a false sense of security. Directorate of Optometric Continuing Education and Training

However, smaller proportions of respondents commented that they perceived registrants to be more skilled than ever, that certain skills were being replaced because they were out of date, and that the CET scheme is designed to prevent de-skilling.

The majority of respondents (86%) said that there are core areas of practice that optometrists and dispensing opticians should keep their skills and knowledge up to date in, including 15 out of 18 organisations. The most commonly suggested areas were pathology/ocular disease and developments in technology/products. A large proportion of respondents also suggested that all areas were relevant, rather than singling out specific areas.

Lifelong learning and reflection

The GOC wants to promote the concepts of lifelong learning and reflection within their CET scheme. They asked stakeholders for their views on how well these concepts currently work and what further support they could provide in future to support registrants in embedding a culture of reflective practice.

Two-thirds of respondents (68%) agreed that the GOC's current CET scheme intends to promote and embed a culture of lifelong learning and encourages registrants to reflect on their practice. However, seven of 17 organisations disagreed with this statement. Comments in relation to this statement mostly detailed problems with the current CET scheme or suggestions for improvements, including a number who felt that the current scheme was perceived by many registrants as a 'box-ticking' exercise.

A similar proportion (64%) also agreed that the name of the current scheme, 'Continuing Education and Training', helps to promote a culture of lifelong learning and reflection. However, only nine out of 16 organisations disagreed with this, and a significant proportion of additional comments suggested that the name 'continuing professional development' would be more appropriate, particularly given that this term is widely used in other healthcare professions.

The term 'Continuing Education and Training' is not wholly fit for purpose...the term 'Continuing Professional Development' comes closer to describing a culture of learning and improvement through a registrant's professional career.
Optometry Northern Ireland

Opinion was divided between those who said that the GOC's tools for registrants to help them reflect on their practice were helpful (44%) and those who said they were not (44%). Just five of 17 organisations said that these tools were helpful. Further feedback from respondents focused more on negatives, suggesting the tools were not helpful and showed a lack of trust in registrants, and that reflection was a waste of time or a box-ticking exercise. A smaller number of comments, however, were more positive about reflection in general and the tools available.

From my own experience, and speaking to other colleagues, it tends to be a tick box exercise that we do. Some aspects are good, but there needs to be a different method of reflecting instead.
Optometrist

A lack of clarity around the concept of reflection and the benefits (63%) was perceived to be the most significant barrier making it difficult for optometrists and dispensing opticians to reflect on their practice. Similar proportions of respondents also said that a lack of guidance or support (56%) and a fear of being open and honest about where improvements could be made (57%) were also barriers to reflective practice. This result was reinforced by the proportion of additional comments relating to registrants' fear of the consequences when admitting mistakes or gaps in their knowledge, or that more guidance was needed to overcome barriers to reflective practice.

Many people might be afraid of being open & honest if they felt their skill set was below par for fear of being disciplined by the regulator as it is them who monitor & maintain the current CET system.

Dispensing optician

The most popular suggestions for what the GOC could do to support registrants in embedding a culture of reflective practice were having clear guidance, structure and regulation, having more peer reviews, meetings and mentoring opportunities, and providing more accessible

learning opportunities. A small proportion of comments suggested that the GOC should do nothing, as reflective practice was seen as the personal responsibility of the registrant.

*The GOC could achieve this both through the CETs, emphasising the need to regularly discuss and reflect on incidents, lessons learnt and good practice, as well as providing supportive forums to do so, either through events or conferences or online. **The Royal College of Ophthalmologists***

Views on the proposed changes to the CET scheme

Giving registrants more control over their learning and development

The GOC is proposing to link CET requirements to more high-level learning outcomes based on their *Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians*. This approach would be consistent with the learning outcomes the GOC are developing through the Education Strategic Review for education prior to joining the register.

Three-quarters of respondents (74%) agreed with the GOC's proposed approach of giving optometrists and dispensing opticians more control over their learning and development, including 12 of 19 organisations.

*This is necessary to allow individuals to take responsibility to identify the right learning priorities, better supports reflective learning, and should make CET more agile and relevant to today's varied clinical practice. A key benefit of self-directed learning is that it will allow individuals to prioritise CET that meets the needs of their own mode of practice. **Association of Optometrists***

*Linking CET to high level learning outcomes and standards allows for flexibility to undertake self-directed learning activities focused on developing skills that are most relevant to individual needs. **General Medical Council***

However, stakeholder feedback from additional comments highlighted that there is a view that knowledge and skill in core areas of practice must be maintained to avoid de-skilling and ensure patient safety, whilst enabling increased specialisation in areas of relevance or interest.

*I feel all competencies still need to be covered if we are to be responsible for these areas in practise. **Optometrist***

Comments also suggested that this approach may risk registrants becoming too specialised, avoiding topics that were not of interest, and being reluctant to work outside their comfort zone. Again, it was felt this could result in de-skilling or a shortage of acquiring new skills and knowledge.

*Allowing practitioners to fully design their own learning and development might mean that they deskill in some areas. **Optometry Northern Ireland***

*The risk of not completing certain competencies because they aren't relevant to your current practice could then exacerbate the deskillling, and ultimately restrict future development. **Dispensing optician***

The main challenge of moving towards this approach was the potential for gaps in knowledge, loss of core competencies and de-skilling, should registrants be allowed to specialise in the areas they most commonly work in or which they were most interested in. However, a wide range of benefits were also suggested, including flexibility and personalisation of the learning experience and undertaking CET more relevant to registrants' everyday practice.

Aligning CET requirements for optometrists and dispensing opticians

The GOC asked stakeholders for their views on aligning CET requirements for all their registrants, specifically about their views on peer review. Optometrist and dispensing optician respondents listed a number of benefits when thinking about their experiences of peer review, including exchanging ideas with colleagues, meeting peers (particularly for lone workers), learning and sharing best practice, and generally having positive experiences. Smaller proportions of respondents commented on negative experiences of peer review, which they found to be of little benefit or having no impact on their personal practice.

Three in five (59%) respondents agreed that peer review should play a more central role in a scheme which aims to embed a concept of lifelong learning and reflection. One in five (21%) disagreed with this, and a further 19% neither agreed or disagreed. All 19 organisational responses agreed with this statement. Additional comments made by respondents further highlight this divided opinion, with some commenting that peer review was useful in the current CET scheme, others (primarily organisations) commenting that peer review should play a more central role, and those who thought it should not be mandatory or central to CET.

Peer review is particularly useful...it encourages peers to exchange ideas which are very constructive. **Optometrist**

Helps me, as the only DO in a very busy practice, connect with other professionals. **Dispensing optician**

Over half (55%) agreed with the principle that the GOC should introduce peer review for dispensing opticians. Almost one in five (17%) disagreed with this, including a larger proportion of dispensing opticians (30%). Almost all organisational responses (15 out of 16) agreed with this proposal. A large proportion of additional comments focused on the issue of funding for dispensing opticians to undertake CET, but many also suggested that peer review would be beneficial for dispensing opticians.

Both dispensing opticians and optometrists would gain from undertaking peer review together on topics that are common to both professions. **College of Optometrists**

The most commonly suggested barriers for dispensing opticians to introducing this policy were financial, such as the cost of attending, travel expenses and lack of funding. The perceived inequality of funding between optometrists and dispensing opticians was particularly highlighted. Accessibility and time were also highlighted as significant barriers. However, a significant minority highlighted the positive impacts over the barriers, such as engaging with colleagues, swapping ideas and improving learning.

As we don't receive CET grants or funding, and are being paid considerably less than most optometrists, financially would be the main impact for me. **Dispensing optician**

Views on the proposed timeframe for introducing changes

The GOC is reaching the end of the current three-year CET cycle which will finish on 31 December 2018. It is then proposing a 12-month transition year from 1 January to 31 December 2019, followed by a new scheme to be launched on 1 January 2020.

Impact of the proposed one-year transition period

The largest proportion of respondents (49%) indicated that there would be little or no impact as a result of the proposals for a one-year transition period, that it would be easy to achieve the requirements, or that the proposals were a good or reasonable idea.

*It is not an unreasonable target to meet in a year. **Optometrist***

*Since you say that we are not expected to cover all the competencies it shouldn't be a problem. **Dispensing optician***

However, smaller proportions focused on negative impacts or concerns, including potential difficulties achieving the required number of points (15%), particularly interactive points, and especially for certain registrants such as those on maternity leave, working part time, or living in rural areas (18%). Small proportions also suggested that the transition period should be longer or more flexible (8%), or that there should be more accessible opportunities to gain CET points and peer review (10%).

The GOC should urgently review whether the CET reforms can be fully delivered by January 2020. If not we think it would be preferable to begin another three-year cycle in 2019 rather than risk needing two transitional years before the next cycle.

Association of Optometrists

Because the minimum is currently six points in a year, some registrants may find 12 difficult, so will need maximum notice.

College of Optometrists

We consider that this time frame is realistic and achievable. However, some allowance needs to be provided for practitioners with special circumstances (e.g. those on maternity leave, long term sick leave etc.)

Optometry Northern Ireland

Support from the GOC

When asked how the GOC could best support stakeholders during the transition year and into a new scheme starting in January 2020, respondents' comments focused on good communication, including promotion, reminders and updates. Others suggested that the GOC should provide lots of information such as clear policies, guidelines, templates and examples.

*Communication is critical to ensure registrants are well supported. **Education/training provider – Postgraduate CET***

*The GOC should be clear and timely in its communications to registrants about the transition period, the expectations on them and the further changes planned for 2020. **Association of Optometrists***

Again, respondents suggested that it should be easier to access CET points, including more opportunities for free, local or online events. Flexibility was also mentioned, focusing on registrants who may struggle to achieve the required number of CET points during the transitional phase.

*Make sure there's a lot of online CET available free. **Optometrist***

*Work closely with ABDO to help us access interactive learning. **Dispensing optician***

A number of responses, particularly from organisations, said that as much notice should be provided as possible to ensure that registrants are able to successfully adapt to the transitional period and into a new CET scheme.

*Give us as much notice as possible of the new scheme requirements so we can implement in time for January 2020. **Directorate of Optometric Continuing Education & Training***

Summary of the key findings

The consultation has provided a wealth of insight which will help to inform the GOC's review of its CET scheme. The key findings of this consultation are as follows:

- There are generally positive attitudes towards the current CET scheme, with some suggestions made to make it more accessible such as more learning opportunities at a local level, online or free of charge. However, organisations appear less positive towards some aspects of the current scheme
- Stakeholders focus on clinical risks as the riskiest areas of practice
- Stakeholders believe there is a risk of de-skilling, but that this can be mitigated by maintaining core areas of knowledge and skill
- Stakeholders feel more could be done to promote and enable a culture of lifelong learning and reflection
- Some stakeholders, particularly organisations, feel that the name 'Continuing Professional Development' would be more appropriate than 'Continuing Education and Training'
- There is significant appetite from stakeholders for registrants to have more control over their learning and development, which is supported by organisations, but the correct balance between autonomous and mandatory learning needs to be established to prevent de-skilling
- Attitudes towards increased focus on peer review are more mixed. Dispensing opticians were more likely to disagree that peer review should be introduced for dispensing

opticians, whereas almost all organisations agreed that peer review should play a more central role within CET and should be introduced for dispensing opticians

- A one-year transition period is generally seen as achievable, but important impacts of this have been highlighted by stakeholders for certain registrants who may be working part time, on maternity leave or living in rural areas
- Communication is seen as key to the success of the transition year and new CET scheme implementation. A number of organisations highlighted the importance of providing as much notice as possible for the transitional period to be successful