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29 September 2023

## **CHIEF OPTOMETRIC ADVISOR LETTER TO OPTOMETRY SECTOR: UPDATE ON UNDERGRADUATE OPTOMETRY DEGREE REFORMS**

Dear Colleagues

It's a while since I've written and I wanted to update you on progress with the reforms to the undergraduate optometry degree model in Scotland.

As I explained in my letter of February 2022, the General Optical Council (GOC) has reviewed our professional education. This has resulted in significant changes to the way that optometrists are trained, with a view to supporting our more clinical roles. The Scottish Government (SG) therefore asked NHS Education for Scotland (NES) to develop some proposals to support the universities.

I want to thank those who gave up their time and joined the numerous Stakeholder and Focus Group sessions organised by NES to hear views and experiences. There was great representation from across the whole profession.

Discussions have been taking place between Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), NES and SG throughout the last year and I am delighted that a foundation has been agreed on which to proceed. This is outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the Annex with this letter.

Despite the extensive financial constraints imposed across the public sector, the SG is invested in the future of Optometry. This is evidenced by:

- (i) grant funding provided to the universities to develop their new five year Masters courses;
- (ii) additional funding secured for every Scottish domiciled student enrolling in the Masters courses, which are due to start in Academic Year 2024/2025 for GCU and in 2025/26 for UHI;
- (iii) funding to NES to support the universities in delivering the clinical placements in the Foundation Training Year (FTY), i.e. Year 5 of the Masters courses.

To meet the new requirements set by the GOC, students will receive additional clinical experience in the first four years of the Masters courses.

Mirroring what happens in other professions, NES will support the universities in the delivery of the FTY (formerly the pre-registration year). The FTY will include two different placements of 24 weeks, with students receiving an annual salary.

Almost a third of optometrists in Scotland are now independent prescribers (IP), well ahead of any other UK nation in proportional terms; that's incredibly impressive and is testament to the huge amounts of hard work and time that many of you have invested. The Masters courses in Scotland will enable students to register as IP optometrists at the point when they successfully complete their five years of undergraduate training – the only UK nation in which this opportunity will be available. NES will also provide mentorship to newly qualified optometrists practising in Scotland.

As required by the GOC, the pre-registration year will become incorporated into the Masters courses. As they have been for many years, the supervisors will be key to the success of any new placements. There will also be the opportunity for many others to get involved in the next few years too, and share their skills and knowledge with new members of the profession.

The universities, NES and SG will be further engaging with the wider profession and interested stakeholders in the near future, with a view to working collaboratively on specific aspects of the FTY. These are exciting times for our profession and I very much hope that you will embrace the new opportunities that are in development.

Very best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Pooley'.

Dr Janet Pooley PhD MCOptom  
Chief Optometric Advisor, Scottish Government

## **ANNEX - Memorandum of Understanding between the Scottish Government, NHS Education for Scotland, Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the Highlands and Islands in respect of Optometry Undergraduate Reform**

In order to deliver the best possible eyecare for patients in Scotland well into the future, it is vital that the training of optometrists is enhanced and improved. Most importantly, this will require considerable teaching and experience in a clinical setting for student optometrists.

The Scottish Government's regulator the General Optical Council (GOC) made significant changes to the requirements for undergraduate teaching to be incorporated into all undergraduate optometry degree courses across the UK.

These changes include, but are not limited to:

- emphasising the development of professional capability vital in the formation of an optical professional well prepared to respond effectively to changing patient needs;
- ensuring that students gain greater experience of working with patients in a variety of settings, with at least 1600 hours of patient facing learning and experience which must increase in volume and complexity;
- introducing an integrated approach to curriculum design, informed by feedback from stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum remains current and responsive to patient needs and broader stakeholder requirements.

The changes mean that the new undergraduate optometry degree courses in Scotland will be an integrated five year Master's degree.

Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the Highlands and Islands ("the Universities") will deliver these changes in line with GOC requirements and with support from NHS Education for Scotland.

The Scottish Government will provide new funding to support:

- additional clinical training in years 1-4;
- placements in year 5.

The Universities, NHS Education for Scotland and the Scottish Government agree to work together to positively promote the new courses in Scotland to stakeholders, including the profession and wider eyecare sector.

In line with the Scottish Government's policy to provide increased community based eyecare and additional non-medical workforce within hospital eye services, the optometry undergraduate courses in Scotland must enable students to register as Independent Prescribing optometrists at the point when they successfully complete their five years of undergraduate training. It would only be in exceptional

circumstances that students will graduate without the Independent Prescribing qualification and the University programmes design will incorporate an appropriate exit award for this eventuality.

A robust post-registration programme will be put in place to support clinical decision making, clinical management skills and mentoring. This will be delivered via NHS Education for Scotland.

The amount, and terms and conditions, in relation to funding and student numbers will be agreed and set out separately.

## **SIGNATORIES**

### Scottish Government



Name: Dr Janet Pooley PhD MCOptom

Position: Chief Optometric Advisor

Date: 15 September 2023

### NHS Education for Scotland




Name: Professor Karen Reid

Position: Chief Executive

Date: 11 September 2023

### Glasgow Caledonian University



Name: Professor Steve Decent

Position: Principal & Vice-Chancellor

Date: 15 September 2023

University of the Highlands and Islands

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sheena Stewart', with a horizontal line underneath.

Name: Sheena Stewart

Position: University Secretary

Date: 8 September 2023