

## Position paper

# ECOO alignment to WCO eye care competency framework

November 2024

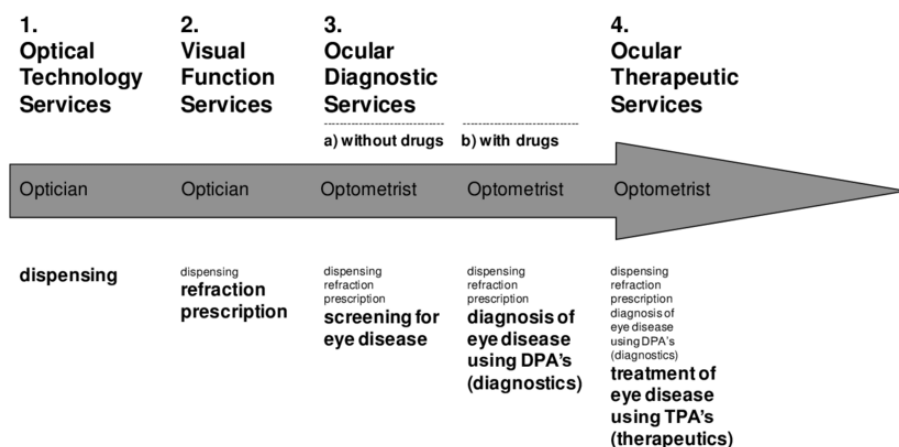
### Background

The World Report on Vision<sup>1</sup>, published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019, highlighted the impact of changing demographics worldwide on eye health and vision needs. It set out an increased need for eye care services in the areas of refractive error and presbyopia correction, and, equally important, the detection and management of chronic ocular diseases such as dry eye, cataracts, glaucoma, age-related maculopathy, and diabetic retinopathy.

This report showed that the WHO recognises the fundamental role of the eye care workforce in improving the outcomes of eye care services. In Europe that workforce includes optometrists, optometrist-opticians, dispensing opticians as well as ophthalmologists and orthoptists.

In order to meet the challenges of developing the necessary workforce capacity, the WHO produced an eye care competency framework (ECCF) in 2022<sup>2</sup>. This was a welcome recognition of the role of eyecare and vision in public health by the WHO, and their first policy document focussing on eye care. The WHO eye care competency framework provides a tool to enable planning and development of the eye care workforce needed to meet public health needs in a given country and summarises standards of competencies and activities needed to deliver effective eye care.

The World Council of Optometry (WCO) launched their Competency Framework for Optometry<sup>3</sup> in March 2024. This updated their previous Global Competency-based model of scope of practice for optometry (2015)<sup>4</sup> and aligns with the WHO's competency framework. The WCO previously used a four level-definition of eye care services (see Figure 1), but the new competency framework sets out competencies across five domains: 1. Refractive error, 2. Visual function assessment, 3. Ocular Health and ocular disease, 4. Public Health and 5. Professional practice.



**Figure 1.** Four levels of optometric services from WCO Global Competency-based model of the scope of practice for optometry (2015)

The new WCO competency framework articulates levels of experience based on training duration, in line with the WHO ECCF, and this is summarised in Table 1, along with examples of occupational nomenclature. Specifically, this has five levels of experience, from basic training in community screening, to expert level training of 7+ years. The competencies are grouped under five curriculum domains:

1. Refractive error
2. Visual function assessment
3. Ocular health and disease
4. Public Health
5. Professional Practice

Eye care specific training duration (estimations)	Less than 3 months	3–12 months	1–4 years	4–7 years	7+ years
<b>Education level</b>	Has an introductory level of relevant education e.g. High school graduate with additional training.	Has a working level of relevant education e.g. High school graduate with additional training (3–12 months).	Has an intermediate level of relevant tertiary education e.g. Certification course/ Diploma / University degree (Bachelor).	Has an advanced level of relevant higher education e.g. University degree (Bachelor/ Master/Professional doctorate). May further specialize and/or have an academic/teaching/ research role.	Has an expert level of relevant higher education e.g. University degree (Master/Professional doctorate/PhD) with an area of specialization e.g. a medical specialization in Ophthalmology/PhD. May further specialize and/or have an academic/ teaching/ research role.
<b>General abilities</b>	Works under the supervision and direction of an eye care worker trained for up to 12 months and higher. Often works within other health groups with eye care being an add-on responsibility.	Works under the supervision and direction of an eye care worker trained for 2 or more years.	Works under the supervision of an ophthalmologist or optometrist. Assists in the diagnostic evaluation, treatment, management, and care of patients with deficiencies and abnormalities that affect their vision and the visual system.	Works autonomously in most settings, at primary/ secondary/ tertiary health-care level. Provides eye and vision care, which includes detection/ diagnosis and management of vision disorders and selected eye conditions, and the rehabilitation of the visual system.	Works autonomously, at secondary/tertiary health-care level. Evaluates, diagnoses, treats, and provides consultations; orders diagnostic studies and procedures, and performs non-surgical and/or therapeutic and/ or surgical procedures on people with vision disorders and eye conditions; and rehabilitative care of people with permanent visual impairment.
<b>Occupation titles (depending on local context)</b>	Community health worker Eye health coordinator Outreach worker Teacher/school nurse Village health worker/ Volunteer	Ophthalmic administrator Ophthalmic technologist/ photographer/ imager Optical assistant Refractionist Spectacle dispenser Vision technician	Ocularist Ophthalmic Assistant Ophthalmic clinical officer Ophthalmic clinician Ophthalmic nurse Optical dispenser Optician Orthoptist Specialist nurse Vision therapist "Allied Ophthalmic Personnel" is an umbrella term often used to describe eye care workers in this column	Basic eye doctor Optometrist	Eye doctor Ophthalmologist Optometrist Specialist

**Table 1.** From WCO competency framework for Optometry (2024).

For more than 15 years ECOO has captured and published a valuable repository of information comparing education levels and scope of practices in their member countries in Europe, called the Blue Book<sup>5</sup>. The WCO four levels of optometry have been very useful in this to help countries align their scope of practice.

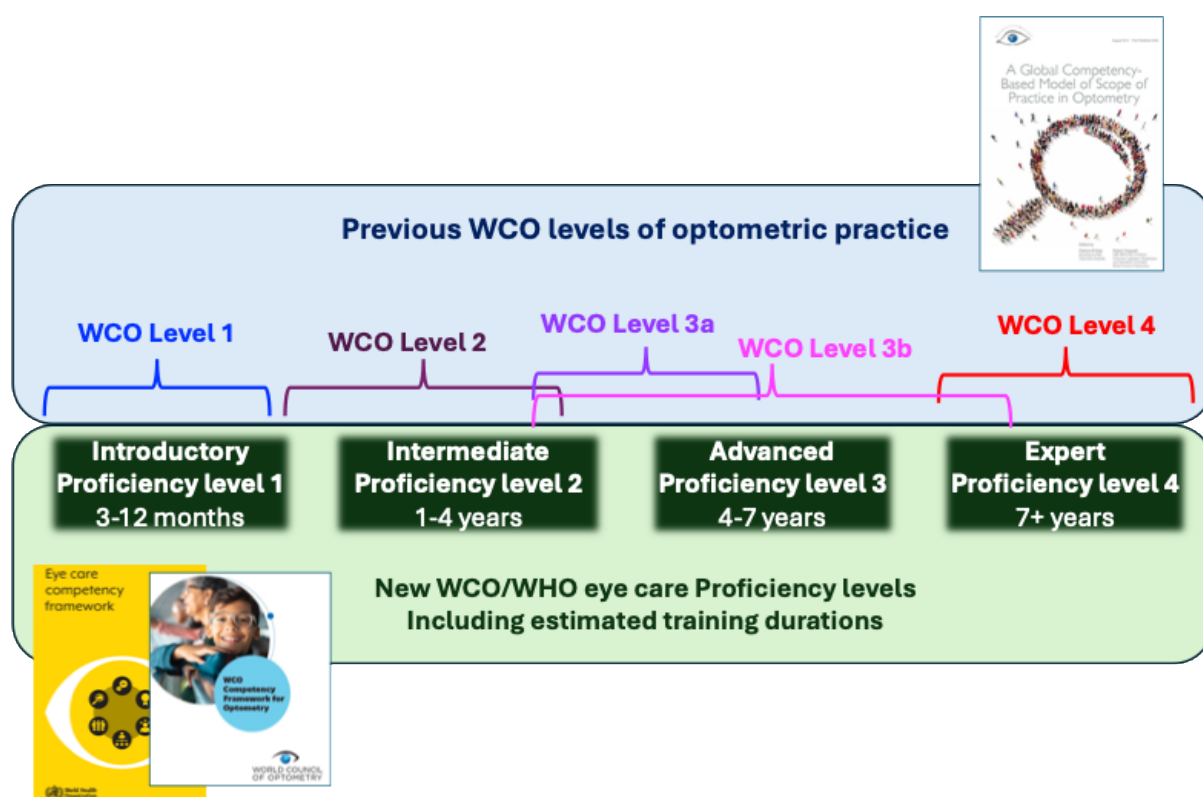
The Bologna process in Europe has established the BSc/MSc format to higher education, with years of education 3+2 in this framework. For optometry, the typical educational framework comprising a 3-year bachelor's degree has been followed by many institutions in several countries. Others require 1 year pre-registration clinical practice while others require 1 or 2 additional years to achieve a Masters in Clinical Optometry. Optometry education takes place in University or Polytechnic institutions and depends on the scope of practice in different countries. One of the key differences across European countries is the access to use diagnostic drugs to aid examination of the eye. Thus, for the vast majority of Europe, optometry operates at either level 3a or 3b, with only a few at level 4.

We note that while the WCO ECCF years of training aligns optometry to the 'advanced' 4+ years of training level, some European countries will have training programmes that are 3+ years, due to constraints of the Bologna system. Nevertheless, these programmes, often with significant clinical placement components, deliver graduate optometrists who are working at the 'advanced' level.

In the spirit of the Bologna declaration ECOO established the European Diploma in Optometry as a stimulus to the harmonisation of European optometric education and clinical practice. The European Diploma is set at the Bachelor level in European Higher Education and provides a qualification appropriate for optometric practice at Category 3 of the WCO four levels model. The countries of ECOO have adopted the Diploma as the "Gold Standard" for European optometry. As harmonisation progresses an increasing number of schools and universities now base their curriculum on the Diploma. To foster this harmonisation ECOO has established an accreditation agency to invite training institutions to benchmark their programmes against the European Diploma competency framework.

### Transition to new model

To aid us in the transition from the WCO four levels model, in the following Figure, (figure 2) we have mapped between the previous WCO levels of scope of practice for optometry and WCO/WHO eye care training duration estimates:



We will also undertake mapping of the EDO competency framework with the new WCO competency framework for optometry.

## **Conclusion**

ECOO recognises the importance of the WCO's Competency Framework for Optometry and the value of moving to this format as it aligns with our vision for a common and robust European framework of education in optometry, levelling up the standard of education, strengthening the national capabilities to implement the global strategies for vision care, expanding the scope of practice, and facilitating the free circulation of citizens and professionals across Europe.

## **References**

1. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241516570>
2. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240048416>
3. [https://worldcouncilofoptometry.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/WCO\\_Compentency-Framework-for-Optometry.pdf](https://worldcouncilofoptometry.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/WCO_Compentency-Framework-for-Optometry.pdf)
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