



Roundtable

Professional and educational landscape in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities

Pula, 12 May 2018

Introduction

This roundtable is the second of its kind, with its first edition taking place at OCCSEE 2012. The objective is to facilitate information sharing and discussion among participants about the professional and educational landscape in their respective countries.

The roundtable is a joint event between the University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica – OCCSEE and the European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO) and has kindly been kindly supported by Carl Zeiss GmbH.

ECOO is the European umbrella association, representing the interests of Opticians and Optometrists in Europe. With this roundtable, ECOO aimed at presenting its work to non-members so as to gain further insights to members and pave the way for a possible cooperation.

Against the backdrop of the European Qualification Framework, the ECOO accreditation process as well as the Bologna system facilitating mobility of students across Europe, the University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica – OCCSEE extended the invitation to the roundtable also to other countries to gain further insights on educational programmes and practices.

Roundtable participants included representatives of academia and of professional associations from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Kosovo, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Russia, Serbia Slovenia, Sweden and the UK.

Part 1: Professional and educational landscape in Central and Eastern Europe

Based on a survey, circulated to roundtable participants in advance, the first part of the roundtable focused on the exchange of the current situation in the different countries.

Status of the Profession of Optometry and Optics

- **Estonia:** Profession not regulated, the social ministry is in charge, anyone can open an optical shop, however the right to work as an optometrist is subject to having graduated in the field.

- **Republic of Moldova:** Optometry is regulated as a health care profession since 2015 according to the Classification of occupation in Moldova, optometrists and opticians 2267 are approved by the Ministry of Labor, Social protection and Family (nr 22 March 2014).
- **Lithuania:** Optics has no status and it is not regulated in Lithuania. Optometry is currently not regulated. However, a few years ago, the Ministry of Health Care has started to develop a regulatory system for optometry. Since November of this year, optometrists will be included in the list of healthcare professions. From November of 2019, optometrists will have a stamp number. Since the beginning of 2020, the Accreditation Service will provide licenses for optometrists. Currently there are no special requirements for optics' shops, except there is an ophthalmologist employed. Nevertheless, in the near future, when regulation will come into force, hygiene standards and license for optometrist activities will be mandatory.
- **Bulgaria:** On 21 September 2006 c.a. the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria unanimously passed an amendment in the Health Act whereby the two professions were integrated and re-defined as healthcare professions. The amendment was promulgated on 6 October 2006 in the State Gazette. But till today the two professions are still not regulated. According to commercial law, every entrepreneur in Bulgaria can open an optical shop. However, there are requirements in the Health Act that determine who has the right to manage the optical shop - this must be a graduated optician or optometrist. There is no Ordinance setting minimum requirements for standards in optics and optometry equipment.
- **Russia:** The profession is regulated by the Ministry of Healthcare License for optometry services. Optometry is a new specialty.
- **Israel:** The profession is regulated by The Ministry of Health. Anyone can open a shop but only a registered optometrist can carry out eye examinations.
- **Serbia:** The profession is regulated under the Ministry of Health. 2-3 of Optometrists are employed in the public health system. The medical side (i.e. ophthalmology) recognise the need for optometry. The professions can operate independently.
- **Croatia:** Optometry falls under healthcare services, however in practice "Optometry" and "Optics" is combined under Croatian law and does not describe the scope of practice.
- **Slovenia:** Optometry is an independent healthcare profession.

Educational programmes

- **Estonia:** A programme exists in the Tallinn Health Care College; the Diploma is equal to a bachelor and falls under applied sciences.
- **Republic of Moldova:** The teaching program of optometrists started on 1 September 2017 at State University of Medicine and Pharmacy Nicolae Testemitanu of Moldova due to the Eurasia project Enhancing primary eye health care in Moldova CPEA - 2015/10066, the valuable support of Norway government, University College of Southeast of Norway , etc. The teaching program is conducting according to the EDO requirements and offers 240 credits and lasts 4 years.
- **Lithuania:** There is no education programme for optics, neither intentions to start it. Since 2004, optometrists were educated at the Faculty of Physical

Sciences, Šiauliai University. Absolvents of this study programme have a bachelor's degree diploma of Physical Sciences. Next year this study programme will be closed and a new one will be started. The new study programme will be established at the Faculty of Medicine, Vilnius University. Therefore, absolvents of this new programme will obtain a bachelor's diploma of optometry in Biomedical Sciences.

- **Bulgaria:** There are two programmes for optics. The first programme is taught by Opticians. The second programme teaches Medical Optics. Optometry Education also has two programmes - the first trains optometrists, and the second clinical optometrists.
- **Russia:** There are two main educational programmes under one specialty called "Medical Optics": 1. Medical Optician - 3-year course 2. Optometrist - 4-year course
- **Israel:** Bar-Ilan University and Hadassah Academic College in Jerusalem have a programme to educate and train optometry students
- **Slovenia:** has no school.

Aspirations for future developments in educational programmes

- **Lithuania:** Wish to develop a Master programme in the future
- **Russia:** Wish to move to a degree as the current programmes are based on vocational professional training. A PhD in Optometry is planned.
- **Malta:** Noted that it follows the UK standard but does not have a university or school itself.
- **Germany:** The Beuth Hochschule explained the challenges with having over 7 semesters (210 credits) as this makes it difficult to accept students to the MSc who come from a BSc with 180 credits as foreseen by Bologna. The BSc and MSc together are accredited with the ECOO European Diploma in Optometry and Optics.

Other countries expressed that they were satisfied with their current educational programmes in place.

Scope of practice

- **Estonia:** Refraction, contact lens fitting, dispensing glasses etc. but not diagnosing eye diseases and use of diagnostic or other drugs. Referral to ophthalmologist in case of abnormality.
- **Republic of Moldova:** The optometrist will be allowed to perform dispensing, refraction, prescription, contact lens fitting, participate in screening, diagnosis (eye examination), except treatment.
- **Lithuania:** Currently: vision tests with appropriate equipment and giving a qualified consultation on glasses (frames, lenses, sunglasses, etc.) for customers of the optics' shop. Once the regulation on primary eye health care services has come into effect: evaluate eye health by making bio-microscopy and other eye health and vision tests, prescribe corrective glasses, fit contact lenses and educate patients about eye health issues. Optometrists will not be allowed to use diagnostic and therapeutic drugs.

- **Bulgaria:** According to the law, opticians and optometrists are allowed to manufacture and sell eyeglasses and contact lenses and other optical devices. Nowhere in the Law is it explicitly mentioned that the two groups have no right to refraction. There are also no restrictive measures on the issue of contact lenses and their sale. According to the Law, doctors allowed to work in the optician's area have the right to prescribe eyeglasses and contact lenses. As the rights and obligations of optometrists and opticians are not sufficiently detailed in the regulation, practically everyone does what they decide.
- **Russia:** Allowed: Refraction, standard contact lens fitting .etc Not allowed: diagnostic and therapeutic drugs, individual contact lens (orthokeratology) fitting, children refraction.
- **Israel:** Refraction, Contact lens fitting, selling and dispensing spectacles. Children under the age of 6 first need to see an ophthalmologist.
- **Czech Republic:** Optometrists can check the eyes of children only as of the age of 17.
- **Serbia:** allowed to perform refraction but without eye drops.
- **Germany and Austria:** children examinations are allowed but are not subsidised by the insurance.
- **Croatia:** Optometrists can refract and fit contact lenses. Contrast sensitivity is not permitted but not restricted (grey zone).
- **Slovenia:** Optometrist who work independently cannot refract (issue to be tackled).

Part 2: The European dimension – opportunities and resources

In the second part of the roundtable, ECOO presented its work and answered questions of interest to participants.

ECOO's overarching objective is to improve vision and eye health by providing high-quality, cost-effective optometric and optical services across Europe.

It has more than 40 national associations from 24 countries

Its mission is to:

- To **improve eye health and vision for all** and eliminate avoidable blindness and visual impairment in Europe.
- To create a **harmonised professional and educational system** for optometry and optics based on the European Diploma in Optometry and the Qualification in Optics.
- To **develop the scope of practice for optometrists and opticians** to the degree that the same high standards apply and are mutually recognised in all European countries

Whilst the strategic direction is provided by the Executive Committee, the highest decision-making power rests with its members in the General Assembly. Two standing committees work on specific topics, develop position papers and offer a platform for in-depth discussion and exchange of information. The Secretariat is based in Brussels and represents the interest of the professions at EU-level.



At EU-level, ECOO monitors and engages in a range of topics that have an impact on the profession. This includes for instance the work on the medical devices legislation, where it was ensured that plano-contact lenses are included in the scope of the directive. The classification of fluorescein ophthalmic strips as medical devices continues to be an ongoing work strand that will ensure the future use of fluorescein in contact lens fitting. Another area of interest is vision and driving in terms of harmonising the vision test requirements across Europe.

The mutual evaluation of professions, which has been carried out by the European Commission between 2015 and 2017, consisted of a critical review of the regulatory landscape governing the profession at national level. Thanks to ECOO's coordinated approach, the profession has been adequately represented in the relevant meetings and no further requirements linked to deregulation have been imposed.

ECOO follows the WCO Categories of Optometric Services, which clarifies the various steps on the professional ladder and their related competencies. The European Diploma in Optometry is set at the same level as optometrists in box 4 and incorporates competencies such as dispensing, refraction, prescription, diagnosis of eye disease and using DPA's (diagnostics). The European Qualification in Optics has been designed to set the standard at the entry level to the profession.

The ECOO Blue Book is a valuable aggregation of data on the professions of optometry and optics in countries across Europe. It is the only publicly available compilation of data that offers a comparative and comprehensive view on these two professional groups across 30 countries. Roundtable participants have been invited to get in touch with ECOO and to fill-in the data from their country for the next edition (to be published in 2020). They can also request to be added to the ECOO newsletter distribution list.

[Future outlook and next steps](#)

With an eye to the future, roundtable participants expressed their aspirations. A number of countries aim to receive accreditation with the European Diploma in Optometry (Israel, Moldova, Serbia). Others expressed the wish to receive more information about standards in Europe and harmonisations efforts (Lithuania). A few countries will continue to work on the regulatory side and to raise the bar in terms of competences and recognition (Russia, Croatia, Bulgaria) as well as to further the educational framework (Austria, Russia, Croatia). The need to standardise definitions, skillsets and competences was also highlighted (UK). There was an overall agreement to remain in contact, to enhance collaboration and to support each other through guidance and information.