

Welcome to our global ophthalmology colleagues from the College President, Professor Ben Burton

“The Royal College of Ophthalmologists has many objectives laid down in its Royal Charter. Many will be aware of our role setting standards, running exams and advancing the science and practice of ophthalmology. We also have an objective to further instruction and training in ophthalmology both in the United Kingdom and overseas.

We continue to expand our exams abroad and welcome new Fellows from around the globe. We are particularly grateful to our international examiners supporting our work.

Increasingly we are seeing innovative practices and low carbon emission solutions from other countries and the UK has many opportunities to learn as well as teach.

Some of my happiest moments as President have been attending COECSA's annual conference in Africa, and I would encourage others to attend and get involved with the RCOphth Links programme and volunteering overseas.”

The Global Ophthalmology Subcommittee

Our subcommittee advances global ophthalmology by fostering international collaboration and promoting excellence in education, training, research and practice through worldwide partnerships.

Its main activities include:

- Improving global ophthalmology insights within the College by establishing strong communication channels with international organisations
- Supporting overseas members and refugee ophthalmologists to integrate and grow professionally by representing their interests at the College
- Expanding access to exams, educational resources and training opportunities for international doctors, in line with the College's Charter, by collaborating with global partners for multidisciplinary training programmes
- Supporting alignment with global health priorities by providing strategic guidance on the College's global ophthalmology policies, including sustainability, lay perspective and long-term impact
- Assisting in establishing and maintaining clinical standards in under-resourced countries by collaborating with relevant organisations
- Promoting the design and delivery of sustainable eyecare as part of the resources and standards that the committee publishes
- Promoting diversity in all its forms, ensuring that decisions and outputs are inclusive and consider a range of perspectives, and that representation on the committee is appropriate to achieve this.

Our international links programmes

The VISION 2020 LINKS & Networks Programme is part of the International Centre for Eye Health (ICEH).

ICEH is a global academic network, delivering excellence in research, education and capacity strengthening to improve eye health worldwide through collaborative partnerships. ICEH activities include: **Research** that translates impactfully into policy and practice, **Education** that equips and informs eye health leaders and personnel, **Capacity Development** that strengthens the workforce and catalyses system transformation and

Knowledge Exchange providing a forum for sharing and debating ideas in global eye health.

Background

The VISION 2020 LINKS & Networks Programme, in place since 2004, establishes and facilitates capacity-strengthening partnerships between eye departments in low- and middle- income countries, mostly in Africa, and their counterparts in the UK. Through long-term partnerships and whole team training, eye health professionals are supported in their goal of delivering high quality eye care services for their population.

Networks have grown out of these partnerships and continue to flourish since 2013 when we began to establish them. These networks address specific subspecialist training needs that are shared by many different LINK partnerships; these share learnings south-south as well as north-south. The current networks are the Diabetic Retinopathy Network (DR-NET), Retinoblastoma Network (Rb-NET), the Glaucoma-NET and the more recent Human Resources for Eye Health Network (HReH-NET).

The networks have the underpinned long-term, trusting relationships of LINKS partnerships but some are individual hospital departments who are keen to share learning in a particular area and all are aligned with the local and national priorities of Ministries of Health. However, many longstanding LINK partnerships are now part of the networks providing support beyond the past single institutional partnerships. New partnerships are now mainly formalised through an MOU with the LINKS & Networks Programme at the International Centre for Eye Health (ICEH), allowing experts from different LINKS institutions to contribute.

International Centre for Eye Health (ICEH)

[The International Centre for Eye Health](#) (ICEH) as above, works to improve vision and eye health worldwide. ICEH engages in a large variety of activities, spanning research, education, capacity development and technology. All of the work is done in partnership with colleagues in low- and middle-income countries, and is focused on populations with the greatest needs.

ICEH is based at the [London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine](#).

HReH-NET (Human Resources for Eye Health Network)

This more recent network strengthens health workforce capacity through mutually beneficial partnerships. It aims to improve the training of eye health professionals in the chosen countries through high quality and sustainable ophthalmology training structures in Africa. The LINKS & Networks team has recently participated in the development of the Central Southern and Eastern Africa Human Resources for Eye Health Strategy (2025-2030). The HReH-NET is contributing to the strategy through:

1. Establishment of a Public Eye Health and Clinical Fellowship in Africa. This is an expansion of the Fellowship delivered by ICEH in partnership with LVPEI, India. The first cohort of the India-based fellowship finished at the end of December 2024.

This African Fellowship aims to enhance the skills of ophthalmologists in an early stage of their career (within five years of finalising their ophthalmology training) through combined training in public health with key clinical skills needed to address common eye conditions affecting adults – cataract, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy.

2. The LINKS & Networks team has offered to run the HReH-NET to bring together partners working on HR strengthening in Africa and create a discussion forum and

community of practice that can ensure coordination of HR policies across countries. This plan will be further developed as the new strategy starts to be implemented.

NETWORKS:

DR-NET

The DR-NET is finalising the report and publication with the Nigeria MoH of the mapping of DR treatment services.

DR-NET Virtual Workshops continue to be held six-monthly, in June and November each year.

DR-NET member programmes now collect gender disaggregated data for screening and treatment, which has revealed differences in gender access to screening and treatment services.

The training in DR-NET programmes globally continues. Firstly, via the quarterly online live group training sessions for graders - 'Grading Grand Rounds' (GGRs) - where retinal images are shown and each is graded anonymously by the participating graders. Secondly, through formal enrolment on the University of Gloucester Higher Diploma in DR Screening.

Rb-NET

Through Rb-NET, online retinoblastoma multidisciplinary team meetings (MDTs) have been held, during which difficult cases are presented by the overseas Rb team then the details are discussed together, and advice is offered from Rb-NET member experts in countries including India, Israel, USA and the UK to assist the African partners and offer learning for the future.

Going forward, and learning from the Glaucoma-NET workshop experience, the MDT programme will now become a bimonthly meeting for all of Africa to join so everyone has an opportunity to learn on a regular basis.

Rb-NET MDTs have been held in Indonesia, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa and Asia. A dedicated website <https://www.rb-net-mdt.org/> is used to host the clinical case discussions; over 650 Rb ophthalmologists, oncologists and their teams from 40 countries are registered on the website and can access MDTs.

In 2017 the Global Rb Research Study Group was founded at a meeting in Hyderabad – with the objective of understanding the causes for late Rb presentation. The group now has representatives from over 153 countries and more than 450 centres worldwide, so that over half of the new cases/year are represented.

The first paper was published in JAMA Oncology in 2020. The cohort included 4351 new patients from 153 countries and showed that patients from LICs are diagnosed with advanced disease. 50% are diagnosed with extraocular tumour spread compared to 1% in HICs. Children were monitored for three years and reported in Lancet Global Health in 2022. The three-year survival rate was 95.5% in high income countries, 80.3% low and middle-income countries and 57.3% low-income countries. Factors for worse survival included advanced tumour stage and older age at diagnosis. Although essential treatments are available in nearly all countries, early diagnosis and treatment in low-income countries are key to improving survival outcomes. A new prospective study - Rb Presentation from 2024 to outcome in 2027, will aim to increase capture rate from 4000 to 5500, map all Rb centres globally, include more clinical details and hopefully show improvement compared to 2017-2020.

Glaucoma-NET

Glaucoma-NET was established in 2021 to improve the diagnosis and treatment of glaucoma, resulting in preservation of sight of people with glaucoma in LMICs through knowledge-sharing and development of clinical services. Monthly online Glaucoma DISC meetings continue, offering a mixture of teaching, discussion and case presentations.

It has allowed learning to be cascaded to reach all regions of Nigeria. Twelve ophthalmologists from twelve of these regions had an opportunity to be trained and undertake surgical simulation training to broaden their surgical skills and improve confidence and outcomes when performing trabeculectomy. Additionally, four eye nurses from three LINK partnerships have been trained in performing investigative tests for glaucoma with the aim of improving flow and throughput in eye clinic.

Publications and links

[About Us - ICEH](#)

[LINKS - ICEH](#)

For any questions or comments regarding LINKS partnerships or networks please contact Marcia Zondervan: Marcia.zondervan@lshtm.ac.uk

Our international members

1. International membership

The College welcomes ophthalmologists from all over the world to join as international members. By joining, you can connect with a global network of eye care professionals, share best practice, and help raise standards of eye care worldwide.

International members also receive updates on research, training opportunities, and College activities.

There are different routes to join the College as a Fellow, Member, Associate, or Affiliate. You can find full details here: rcophth.ac.uk/our-work/join-rcophth.

2. International examinations

The College runs internationally recognised postgraduate exams, including the FRCOphth, which are open to candidates worldwide. These exams are delivered in centres across the UK and overseas, with remote and online options being developed in some regions. They are designed to uphold and advance the highest standards of ophthalmic practice.

At the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, our examinations are designed to assess the quality, safety and efficiency of patient care provided by ophthalmologists. We offer a range of exams for ophthalmologists in training, medical students and consultants, all set and marked by highly experienced ophthalmologists to ensure the highest professional standards.

We warmly welcome overseas candidates. Eligibility to sit our examinations is not restricted to UK trainees, though we recommend at least four years of ophthalmology training before attempting the Part 2 FRCOphth Written and Oral exams. While there is no minimum training requirement, passing the Refraction Certificate typically requires substantial practical experience. Please note that success in our exams does not automatically grant eligibility for UK ophthalmic specialist training posts.

[Examinations | The Royal College of Ophthalmologists](#)

3. Access to college materials

International members have access to College guidance, clinical resources, and educational materials.

Key benefits include:

- Access to *Eye* (the College's scientific journal)
- *College News* magazine and EyeMail newsletter

- Guidelines, standards documents, and policy updates.
- Receive a 15% discount on open-access publishing fees when submitting their work to *Eye* or *Eye Open* journal
- Learning resources, webinars, and CPD opportunities.

4. Professional opportunities

- Opportunities to join College committees
- Become an examiner or assessor

5. Research and advocacy

Through funding and publishing research in our flagship journal – *Eye* – as well as in our open-access journal – *Eye Open* – we work to advance understanding of eye diseases and promote evidence-based practices. International members also benefit from a 15% discount on open-access publishing fees when submitting their work.

6. Setting standards

The College sets professional and clinical standards in ophthalmology that are recognised and used worldwide. These standards help shape training programmes, clinical guidelines, and best practice documents internationally.

[Standards and guidance | The Royal College of Ophthalmologists](#)

7. Global links

The College advocates for the highest standards of patient care and training, both in the UK and internationally. The College works closely with organisations such as the **College of Ophthalmology of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (COECSA)**, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), the **European Board of Ophthalmology (EBO)**, the **American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO)**, and the **Irish College of Ophthalmologists**. These collaborations help address global eye health challenges, support workforce development, and strengthen the fight against avoidable blindness.

Get involved

- **Become a member:** Join our global network for resources and professional development
- **Collaborate with us:** Partner on projects that improve eye health worldwide
- **Attend our events:** Join conferences, workshops, and training courses

Working and volunteering overseas toolkit

Volunteering and working overseas can be rewarding experiences. Find out how you can start your journey to ophthalmology overseas.

In this section

- [Our Strategy](#)
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- [Your Guide to Working and Volunteering Overseas](#)
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Many of our UK members are working on a temporary basis, some on a volunteering basis, internationally. They may require advice and support from the College in a number of different ways and promoting engagement is an important aspect of our International strategy.

Volunteering and working overseas can be rewarding experiences. Working with new partners, organisations and individuals in new locations and clinical settings gives you a sense of achievement and helps you develop new skills, learning and life-time friendships. Not only are you contributing to practice in ophthalmology overseas, but also learning to appreciate practice in the UK and helping you vitalise and sustain a career that could last for 35 years.

Continuing professional development

Those working and volunteering abroad who wish to return to the UK will need information about revalidation and retention of a licence to practice. They may also need advice regarding the policies and potential barriers about returning to work in the UK. Online CPD can be organised by the College, please contact cpd@rcophth.ac.uk.

Two routes to volunteering and working abroad

There are primarily two ways to prepare for volunteering and working abroad:

1. Through linking with organisations/institutions
2. By charting your way as an individual.

What's important is to be clear about why you want to do it, whether it is about making an impact by supporting communities in developing countries with additional skills and expertise, or you just wish for a change of lifestyle and scenery and the experience of working abroad in another country.

Choose a country, region or culture you are drawn to, or have a personal interest in. A good place to start is by organising an exchange planning visit:

- Find someone who knows both UK and overseas parties to help you facilitate your trip
- Make sure there is a pre-arranged timetable with contact names and telephone/mobile numbers ahead of the trip
- Listen and learn, taking notes at meetings. Writing down everyone's full names. A report is often needed for a funder; try and write it on the way home while everything is fresh. Take good photos – get permission first!
- Follow up with an exchange visit to the UK; making time to be a good host
- Develop a three-year activity plan and memorandum of understanding (MoU)
- Raise funds to carry out the agreed activities.

Whatever you chose to do, you can be certain that there will be personal and professional benefits for both overseas and UK colleagues, their institutions and importantly the patients. Visit the same place on repeated trips with an aim of developing relationships.

Institution to Institution volunteering

By working with recognised organisations or programmes, you have the benefit of a more structured process and identified countries where support and training is welcomed. A link programme (institution to institution) benefits the UK institution by offering staff development and job satisfaction through 'hands on' work in a developing country, improving

teaching skills, morale and increasing the status of the UK partner as an instrument for change in global eye care.

VISION 2020 LINKS Programme

The VISION 2020 LINKS Programme is managed by the International Centre of Eye Health and works with overseas institutions like the College of Ophthalmology of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (COECSA). Being part of an organised hospital to hospital partnership means that a proven process can be followed but you will need support from your trust.

When using a LINKS programme you can:

- Prepare your case for volunteering/working abroad as you will need trust senior management support
- Ensure you have a committed team and co-ordinator
- Think about a start-up fund
- Read up on the country, its health system and your partner institution
- Carry out a needs' assessment and priority objectives with your partner institution
- Work out your aims and objectives in collaboration with the partner institution
- Arrange an exchange planning visit well in advance.

Individual volunteering and working abroad

There's never a perfect time to do it and there are all sorts of reasons to put it off like your career in the UK, family or finances. If you are going it alone, you should prepare and plan well in advance.

As an individual volunteer, you can:

- Speak with like-minded people, including senior management in your hospital
- Share your aims, motivation and commitment
- Find a potential overseas partner through personal contacts, V2020 LINKS Programme or THET
- Use the readily available information from these organisations as there are tried and trusted methods of getting the process started. It will help make your trip a success and avoid pitfalls.