About the WCO Advocacy for Eye Health Program

The WCO “Advocacy for Eye Health” program, presented by the WCO and the Brien Holden Vision Institute (BHVI) Academy, aims to develop advocates who can return to their world regions and help move optometry forward by building the WCO’s advocacy strategy and enabling the course for future advocates. The program is a combination of online and in-person training that was first held following the 2nd World Congress of Optometry in Hyderabad, India in September 2017.

When the WCO asked Dr. Yazan Gammoh for his view on the WCO Advocacy for Eye Health 2017 program, he was happy to report on his own personal experience and provide insight as to his own perspective on the importance of advocacy for eye health and the greater good of optometry.

“When some optometrists who go beyond their clinical career and join the world of teaching, policy making and advocating for the profession find it difficult to continue this path without support,” Dr. Gammoh said. “However, it is not easy to find support when it comes to training in the art and skills of advocacy, especially in eye health.”

When the call for enrollment came for the WCO Advocacy for Eye Health course in 2017, Dr. Gammoh was encouraged to enroll as the need for acquiring the rights tools to advocate for eye care issues in the Eastern Mediterranean region was critical.

The WCO advocacy course ran from August to December 2017 and was delivered in a blended learning format. Online lectures, tutorials, live webinars and weekly assignments were offered to the participants along with a face to face workshop held in Hyderabad, India following the Second World Congress of Optometry.

Dr. Gammoh continued, “Managing the education affairs of the Eastern Mediterranean Council of Optometry (EMCO) is a complex task as optometry is still new in many country members in EMCO, while some countries have had years of experience in developing optometry curricula.”

“The online element of the program helped the participants to prepare for the practical workshop. I thoroughly enjoyed the weekly topics as most of the information given to me was new as they do not teach you in college about advocacy, he said.”

The Advocacy for Eye Health course covered the following aspects, and how to:

1. Identify and analyse the issue
2. Identify stakeholders and build strategic relationships
3. Set goals and objectives
4. Develop an advocacy campaign
5. Develop an advocacy action plan
6. Plan for monitoring and evaluation

The most demanding aspect of the course and the most crucial was the capstone assignment where each participant was asked to develop their own strategic strategy based on all the tools taught throughout the course.

Dr. Gammoh chose to advocate for the development and implementation of a unified optometry undergraduate curriculum in the EMCO region. The first step was to collect information about the current curricula offered in the region and to use the WCO curricular support elements along with the European Council of Optics and Optometry accreditation resources to design a 4-year optometry curriculum which took a period of 9 months. “The newly designed curriculum was sent to regional and international educators for their input. Then meetings were set with the region’s heads of associations to identify if certain changes needed to be made to meet the needs of these countries. The EMCO unified optometry curriculum was then approved by the EMCO council members.

Implementing the unified program in the region’s universities is a very complex task and the advocacy tools that Dr. Gammoh attained were instrumental in kickstarting the process where collaboration, direct persuasion and building support from influential stakeholders were the techniques used since the beginning of 2018.

The first step was during a capacity building and research initiatives visit to the Optometry department at AlNileen University in Khartoum, Sudan. The message “We make hope” was adopted throughout the campaign in Sudan, inspired by the slogan of the contact lens department in the university.

Dr. Gammoh and Dr. Mustafa Abdu at AlNileen University in Khartoum, Sudan.

“We make hope” was the message used during the advocacy campaign, inspired by the slogan at the optometry department at AlNileen University.

The campaign continued in Lebanon where the “Educate then Legislate” message was used as Lebanon was in a unique position where both education and legislation are facing major changes and both needed guidance and support to attain the most benefit for optometry in Lebanon.

Dr. Gammoh, along with the president of EMCO, Dr. Younis Doudin, have met the president of the Lebanese Syndicate of Optics and Optometry where the optometry curriculum was discussed and the need to unify the curricula offered in
Lebanon was highlighted as a priority. Dr. Gammoh was able to show that discrepancies in learning outcomes and competencies among optometry graduates will hinder the efforts of the Syndicate to regulate the profession as the regulators will see these discrepancies as barriers to develop regulations that recognise the full scope of practice for optometry in Lebanon.

Dr. Gammoh used the building support and direct persuasion techniques to meet with the Dean of School of Health Sciences at the Modern University of Business and Science (MUBS), Dr. Nisreen Alwan and the acting chair of the optometry department, Mr. Ahmed Cherri. The need to upgrade the current optometry program offered at MUBS was discussed where Dr. Alwan encouraged the fact that a well planned EMCO approved program is what MUBS needs. “A well-designed program enables universities to use it as a model or adopt it in its entirety. Further meetings were scheduled to monitor and evaluate the optometry program offered at MUBS,” Dr. Gammoh said.

Dr. Sandra Block added, “The journey of advocacy for a unified optometry education in EMCO region has just started and Dr. Gammoh hopes that with the continuous support of EMCO and WCO he will be able to unify the optometry education in the EMCO region to ensure that the competencies attained by the graduates will enable them to implement the full scope of practice.”

For more information about the WCO’s Advocacy for Eye Health program, contact:
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