



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES OPTOMÉTRISTES

Why Canada Needs a New School of Optometry

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Canada's eye-care system is facing growing pressure from demographic change, rising rates of chronic disease, and increasing demand for primary eye-care services. At the same time, Canada's ability to develop and educate optometrists domestically remains constrained. With only two optometry schools — the University of Waterloo School of Optometry and Vision Science and the Université de Montréal School of Optometry. Canada doesn't have enough seats to train our own students at home.

As a result, Canada has become heavily reliant on foreign training programs, particularly in the United States.

50%

Today, approximately half of practising optometrists in Canada obtained their Doctor of Optometry degree in the United States.

For the 2026–2027 cohort, 308 new optometrists are expected to be licensed in Canada, with 156 trained domestically (51%) and 152 trained in the United States (49%).

Expanding domestic training capacity through the creation of additional schools would reduce this reliance, strengthen Canada's health workforce, and improve access to care in underserved communities.

According to a March 2026 survey by Abacus Data:

80%

Canadians are concerned that limited domestic training may force future optometrists to study in the U.S.

86%

Canadians agree that governments should invest in expanding optometry education capacity in Canada

Canada's Reliance on U.S. Optometry Schools

Canada's limited education capacity has created a structural dependence on U.S. optometry schools to train Canadian students. Each year, many qualified Canadian applicants are unable to secure seats in Canadian programs due to limited capacity. As a result, they pursue their education in the United States, where tuition costs are substantially higher.

Program	Estimated Annual Tuition (CAD equivalent)
University of Waterloo	~\$18,000–\$28,000
Université de Montréal	~\$8,000–\$10,000 (Quebec residents)
Typical U.S. optometry schools	~\$50,000–\$70,000

Canadian Graduate Debt

Over a four-year Doctor of Optometry program, the average student debt load for a new optometrist graduating from a **Canadian school** is approximately **CAD 93,500**.

U.S. Graduate Debt

The average for a graduate from an **American school** is approximately **USD 238,400 or CAD 327,240**, often topping \$400,000 USD.

Beyond the financial implications, reliance on foreign training programs raises broader workforce concerns. Students who study abroad may be more likely to establish professional networks and career opportunities outside Canada, reducing the likelihood that they return to practise in Canadian communities.

By Comparison:

Profession	Number of Schools in Canada
Dentistry	10
Physiotherapy	16
Audiology	6

❑ Canadian students interested in pursuing optometry should not be forced to leave the country — and take on substantially higher debt — to obtain the education required to serve Canadians.

Growing Demand for Eye Care & Workforce Pressures

Demand for optometry services is projected to increase significantly over the coming decades due to several reinforcing trends.

Changes in eye health

Demand for eye care is increasing. An aging population is driving higher rates of conditions such as cataracts, macular degeneration, and glaucoma that require ongoing management. At the same time, myopia is rising rapidly — now affecting an estimated 42% of people in North America, up from 28% two decades ago — starting earlier in childhood and progressing more quickly. Increased screen use across work and education is adding further pressure.

Primary Care

Optometrists are increasingly providing care that would otherwise be seen in emergency departments, walk-in clinics, or by family physicians. In a context of limited primary care access, this is improving patient access and reducing pressure elsewhere in the system. As this role continues to grow, so does the need for a well-distributed optometry workforce.

Expanded Scope of Practice

Optometrists are playing an expanding role within Canada's health system. Scope-of-practice changes across provinces allow optometrists to diagnose and manage a wider range of conditions and to work collaboratively with ophthalmologists and family physicians in managing chronic disease.

Workforce Aging & Shortages

Nearly one-third of practising optometrists are aged 50 or older, and the median retirement age is approximately 63. Federal labour market projections indicate a strong risk of optometrist shortages by 2033.

Together, population growth, aging demographics, and expanded scopes of practice are expected to significantly increase demand for optometry services in the coming years. Without expanding domestic education and training capacity, these pressures will translate into reduced access to care — particularly in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

A Canadian problem, requiring provincial and federal support

There is growing interest across Canada in expanding optometry education capacity with **2 schools having signed MoUs with the University of Waterloo's School of Optometry and Vision Science,**

Atlantic Canada

The University of New Brunswick, Saint John is committing to developing an optometry school to serve the Atlantic region.

Alberta

Mount Royal University (Calgary) has received **\$300,000 from the Government of Alberta** to conduct a feasibility study for the establishment of a new optometry program. and is working with both the Alberta College of Optometrists and the Alberta Association of Optometrists.

These discussions reflect broader recognition that Canada's current training capacity is insufficient to meet long-term workforce needs.

Why Federal Support Makes Sense

→ Health Workforce Capacity

Federal investments in health workforce capacity will fall short if training seats do not increase. Canada is not currently producing enough optometrists to meet projected demand. Without expanded training capacity, access gaps will widen — particularly outside urban centers.

→ Infrastructure-Ready Opportunity

A new optometry school aligns with federal priorities to expand health training and clinical infrastructure. Budget 2025 includes a **\$5B Health Infrastructure Fund** over three years to support upgrades to health facilities. Where provinces identify it as a priority, new optometry schools could be eligible for this funding.

→ Workforce Sovereignty at Risk

Canada already relies on the U.S. to train roughly half of its optometrists. With Canadian training capacity stagnant, that reliance will grow. **On the current trajectory, the U.S. will soon be training more optometrists for Canada than Canada trains itself.**

→ Public Expectation

Nearly 9 in 10 support increasing optometry training capacity in Canada, including 3 in 5 who strongly support it. There is clear public support for building a self-sufficient health workforce.

→ Access in Underserved Communities

Training location drives practice location. A new program can be designed to recruit and retain providers in rural, northern, and Indigenous communities.

→ Cost Pressure on the System

Optometrists reduce pressure on specialists and hospitals through early detection and ongoing management. Expanding the workforce supports lower-cost, community-based care.

Health Canada Priority & National Strategy on Eye Care

Health Canada Priority

The establishment of a new optometry school aligns directly with Health Canada's departmental priority to support the current and future health workforce by expanding capacity within Canada's health education and training system.

National Strategy on Eye Care

A new optometry school should be treated as a core pillar of a national eye care strategy — advancing workforce capacity, access, and system integration.

Expanding training capacity directly supports the development of a skilled workforce equipped to prevent, detect, and manage eye disease. It also improves access to care, particularly in underserved regions, through a "train where you practice" model, while strengthening research, data, and interdisciplinary collaboration in vision health.



Workforce Capacity

Advancing a skilled workforce equipped to prevent, detect, and manage eye disease.



Access to Care

Improving access to care, particularly in underserved regions, through a "train where you practice" model.



Research & Collaboration

Strengthening research, data, and interdisciplinary collaboration in vision health.

For More Information

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