British Congress of Optometry and Vision Science 2021

The British Congress of Optometry and Vision Science (BCOVS) is an annual conference, typically hosted as one of the UK universities that house an optometry degree course, and who are members of the Optometry Schools Council. Last year however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisers needed to decide whether to postpone the meeting or take the plunge into virtual conferences and attempt to host it online for the first time in BCOVS history. As some of you may remember, the committee opted for the latter option and boldly ventured into the magical world of online meetings and attending conferences from their kitchens. Thankfully, as you’ll recall if you attended, BCOVS 2020 ended up being such a success that, in lieu of the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 this past year as well, it seemed an easy decision for the new committee to host it online for a second time.

The new committee this year comprised a self-nominated group of enthusiastic and professional individuals from across the UK who put so much heart, soul and energy into the online conference that it was impossible not to enjoy the virtual atmosphere (see Figure 1; the full list of committee members and their affiliations is available at the end of this article).

As mentioned already, some of the decisions were easier to make this year as last year seemed to work so well, but in order to be successful it still required financial backing in order to secure the necessary software licences and the traditional prizes for best presentations. To this end we were very grateful to have been able to secure generous support from the College of Optometrists (through Martin Cordiner and Michael Bowen). We are also grateful to the Association of Optometrists (through Dr Ian Beasley) for their help in helping us to secure six Continuing Education and Training (CET) points for optometrists.
The benefit of this accessible digital approach is that ‘BCOVs 2021’ has become international. This means that we can attract attendees from all over the world, and in fact we’re proud to say that we were visited by 260 delegates from 16 different countries (see Figure 2). We were also able to open up the call for abstracts to an international audience, which led to an incredibly diverse and insightful programme of 24 talks and 45 posters. All talks were run through Zoom webinars and all posters were hosted through our dedicated website a number of days before the conference with poster presenters each being assigned their own Zoom meeting room at a set time to allow them to host visitors and answer questions.

![Figure 2. A pie chart showing the percentage of delegates from each of the represented countries.](image)

When scouting out the poster sessions, it was really enheartening to see early-career researchers (some of whom were presenting their first-ever poster) discussing their work in a confident and engaging way. We were also very impressed by the innovative use of the digital presentation format with some individuals sharing videos and zooming in on their posters to great effect. The quality of all posters was very high, but our panel of judges decided that the College of Optometrists’ prize for best overall poster should go to Alfredo Desiato (Aston University, UK) for his poster titled Optimised Drug Content of Bioerodible Ocular Inserts for Sustained Release of Levofloxacin. Jamie Enoch (City, University of London, UK) won best early career researcher (ECR) poster and Emily Ong (Midwestern University, USA) received an “honourable mention”.

The talk sessions this year were a real treat, with presenters expertly navigating the virtual waters to deliver high-quality talks to an average of 79 delegates in each session. The College of Optometrists’ prize for the best overall oral presentation was awarded to Holly Brown (University of York, UK), for her presentation titled Assessing the Integrity of the Optic Radiations in Bilateral Macular Disease. Bethany Higgins (City, University of London, UK)
was awarded the prize for best ECR oral presentation, and Allie Hexley (University of Oxford, UK) received an “honourable mention”.

![Assessing the integrity of the optic radiations in bilateral macular disease](image)

**Figure 3. A screen grab of Holly Brown’s prize-winning talk.**

We also continued in last year’s new tradition of nominating a “Highlighted Early-Career Researcher (ECR)”. This session allows us to give one nominated ECR the opportunity to speak for longer in order to share the great work they’re doing. The organising committee received several great nominations, but in the end we were unanimous in choosing Rebecca Sumalini (City, University of London, UK; LV Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad, India) to deliver a talk on her work titled: “Children with cerebral visual impairment: how well do we understand their visual world?”. Rebecca expertly delivered a passionate talk about her work and the context for why it’s important, and we will be excited to see how her bright career progresses in the future.

We were also very lucky to secure two incredible speakers for our keynote sessions, the first of which was Professor David Elliott from the University of Bradford (UK). As a committee we were overjoyed when we approached Professor Elliott and he agreed to do our keynote talk, but as a big supporter of BCOVS over the years, it was also really lovely to see how much he enjoyed presenting on the day. Professor Elliott’s talk was an engaging and insightful explanation of the link between falls in the elderly and their vision, in which he summarised a wealth of innovative and important work he’s done to help investigating the link between refractive correction, cataract surgery and falls. For me, a memorable moment was when David displayed some very convincing evidence showing that spectacle magnification plays the greatest factor in how high a person will lift their foot when walking up stairs – which is important as lifting a foot too high can lead to instability and an increased risk of dangerous falls – thereby highlighting a clear link between optometric decisions and patient safety. All of this work was summarised nicely to show that where possible, avoiding making patients undergo large changes in refractive correction, and avoiding starting a patient in bifocals after the age of 70 could all help massively in helping the elderly population to remain safe and healthy. He was also able to direct clinicians in attendance to resources that might help them make confident decisions regarding patient management, which our attendees found to be very valuable indeed.

On the second day we were lucky enough to enjoy a talk from Lisa Donaldson from SeeAbility (UK), a charity which supports individuals with learning disabilities who may also
have sight loss by helping to support them to achieve their ambitions in life. Lisa discussed the NHS England Special Schools Eye Care Service, which is an important topic, she explained, because children with learning disabilities often struggle to get access to healthcare, which is a serious concern as children in particular are 28X more likely to have a significant problem with their eyes. Similarly, Lisa presented data to show that 4 out of 10 children in special schools are likely to have never been seen by an eyecare professional, which, given the overlap between symptoms associated with learning disabilities and those associated with visual impairment, she explained was a priority for NHS services to address. Lisa used case studies to drive the point home, and we were treated to a thoroughly engaging discussion at the end of the session where we struggled to have time to ask all the amazing questions we received from the attendees. We’d like to express a big thank you to both our keynote speakers for providing uniquely insightful sessions for our attendees (and ourselves) to enjoy.

Thanks to the sponsorship we received from the College of Optometrists, we were once again able to offer free registration for all attendees, and so as a token of our gratitude, we invited people to consider donating some of the money they might have spent on their registration fee (or conference dinner) to The College of Optometrists Research Fund. From the sale of very stylish BCOVS-themed merchandise alongside donations to an online charity page, we’re pleased to say that we managed to raise over £100, so we’d like to say a huge thanks to everyone who contributed.

Finally, to help us gain an understanding of how successful this year’s meeting was, we invited all our attendees to fill in a short feedback form. To date, 17% of our attendees have provided feedback, and they’ve collectively rated this year’s meeting a shiny 4.2/5. We’re also pleased to report that a large proportion of the positive feedback we received related to the accessibility of the conference to an international audience – allowing them to participate and be involved in a conference that would normally only be able to attract UK-based researchers. Overall, the organising committee are very happy that the meeting was a success and we’re already thinking of ways to incorporate some international elements into our meeting next year as well.

Next year the plan is to host BCOVS at Aston University (UK), where we will look forward to a return of the face-to-face elements, whilst also trying to incorporate some of the virtual elements where possible. This should allow us to keep running with the inclusive, bigger BCOVS that the last two years of virtual meetings has allowed us to enjoy.

Organising Committee 2021:

Angharad Hobby (Cardiff University)
Asma Zahidi (University of Plymouth)
Corinne Fulcher (University of Huddersfield)
Emma McConnell (Queen’s University Belfast, Ulster University, Belfast Health & Social Care Trust)
Howard Collins (Aston University)
Laura Young (Newcastle University)
Lindsay Rountree (University of Bradford)
Mahesh Joshi (University of Plymouth)
Megan Vaughan (Anglia Ruskin University/ UCL)
Samantha Strong (Aston University)
Sara McCullough (Ulster University)
Sonali Dave (City, University of London)
Sven Jonuscheit (Glasgow Caledonian University)