

A guide to degree level apprenticeships

The Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) has been invited to participate in the dispensing optician trailblazer group and we are working to ensure that professional, educational and public safety standards are maintained. Early involvement in the development of the apprenticeship standard is crucial to ensuring public safety through appropriate professional development pathways and independent end-point assessments (EPAs). ABDO will keep its view on the development of these pathways under constant review throughout the process.

A successful apprenticeship standard will need to align with the General Optical Council's (GOC) new standards and learning outcomes in order for successful candidates to enter the GOC register. Therefore, the dispensing optician apprenticeship standard application has been set at Level 6. The initial optometry application has been submitted to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)¹, who oversees the whole process. The application has currently been accepted as a degree level apprenticeship at Level 7, and the trailblazer group will look to write the detailed standard – knowledge, skills and behaviours and the EPA plan – although it is not within their remit to write the course content for delivery at the institutes. Organisations with an “interest” in the apprenticeship standard have been invited to participate in the meetings – these organisations, such as awarding bodies and higher educational (HE) institutes, will use the resultant standard to develop their own course content and mode of delivery. The dispensing optician apprenticeship is still in the planning stages.

FAQs

What is a modern apprenticeship?

An apprenticeship is a job where formal training is provided as part of the employment contract. This enables the trainee to develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to perform effectively in their chosen occupation – defined in the apprenticeship standard.

An apprenticeship course must include structured off-the-job training, which will take place before the EPA, to help develop competence in an occupation. Off-the-job training is learning undertaken outside the normal day-to-day working environment.

What is a trailblazer group and how is a trailblazer group formed?

The government requires employers to be at the centre of the process for designing and delivering apprenticeships and have specified that a trailblazer group should comprise a minimum of 10 different employers as members (in addition to any professional bodies, HE providers or trade associations) that are reflective of the range of companies employing people in the specified occupation.

Not permitted to lead the process, other organisations with an interest, such as professional bodies, training providers, industry training boards or potential assessment organisations, should be invited to provide their input and contribute to the development of the apprenticeship standard.

What is a degree level apprenticeship?

Degree apprenticeships are a new type of programme already offered by some universities where students can achieve a full bachelor's or master's degree as part of their apprenticeship, without having to pay student fees². Degree apprentices spend part of their time at a HE provider (with flexibility as to how this is structured – for example through day

release or block release working under a distance learning model) and part with their employer. Training costs would be co-funded by the government and the employer.

How are degree apprenticeships structured?

A degree apprenticeship structure is determined by the trailblazer group:

- employers, HE providers and professional bodies can come together to co-design a fully integrated degree course, designed specifically for apprentices. This would deliver and test both academic learning and on-the-job training;
- alternatively, existing degree programmes may be used, where they meet the standard, to deliver the academic knowledge requirements of that occupation. This would be combined with additional training to meet the full apprenticeship requirements. There would be a separate test of full occupational competence at the end of the apprenticeship.

Why do employers want optical apprenticeships?

From 2016, all employers that have an annual pay bill of more than £3 million and/or are connected to other companies or charities for Employment Allowance purposes that in total have an annual pay bill of more than £3 million “have” to pay an Apprenticeship Levy each month³. This payment is mandatory and cannot be returned to the employer if unused. Smaller employers do not have to pay the levy but may use it to provide training for their own employees.

What happens to the apprenticeship levy funds?

Levy-paying employers:

- can create an account on the apprenticeship service to gain access to their funds and to control the levy funds to spend on apprenticeships and pay and/or stop payments to the training providers.

Non-levy-paying employers:

- will share the cost of training and assessing their apprentices with the government in a “co-investment” scheme. The rate for co-investment is 5% financial contribution from employers, while the government will pay the remaining 95% towards apprentice training (up to the funding band maximum).

If there are no optical-based apprenticeships, all levy's paid by the optical profession will be invested in the Government apprenticeship funding pot and lost from the sector; it will be utilised to fund apprenticeship training in other professions where apprenticeships have already been developed.

Will optical apprenticeships reduce the current standards?

Each new course developed in the optical profession is still required to meet the GOC's route to registration quality assurance and professional standards; failure in this will result in candidates unable to join the GOC register of optical professionals.

Degree level apprenticeships are not in reality an easy route to a qualification; the same standard of study and assessment is required as in existing courses. However, this is also in conjunction with an “on the job training” element of the course, meaning that apprentices are assessed both vocationally and academically from the start.

The level of supervision required is without doubt more intensive, and regular reporting by the supervisor is required throughout the apprentice's course, however a high level of

supervisor support is provided for this mode of training. Degree level apprenticeships are not designed or intended to replace existing courses, merely to offer an alternative mode of training for candidates to receive an approved qualification.

There is obviously still much work to be done on the development of the new apprenticeship standard for each optical profession, and ABDO will be involved as an awarding body at every stage. We aim to ensure the voice of the dispensing optician is heard and that increasing demands on eye health services continue to be met at an appropriate standard. Parity between new and existing routes to registration will remain a priority, as will increased support for supervisors for all modes of course delivery and a strong belief that an independent EPA will ensure qualifying standards are maintained. ABDO will update their view on the process as the courses and EPAs are structured.

We strongly encourage members to actively give feedback through the correct public consultation process at every stage to ensure that the trailblazer group takes their concerns and comments into consideration.

References

1. Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education. Available from: www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/ [Accessed 8 June 2023].
2. UCAS. *Degree Apprenticeships*. Available from: www.ucas.com/alternatives/apprenticeships/apprenticeships-england/what-apprenticeships-are-available/degree-apprenticeships [Accessed 8 June 2023].
3. UK Government. *Pay Apprenticeship Levy*. Available from: www.gov.uk/guidance/pay-apprenticeship-levy [Accessed 8 June 2023].