

FBDO Syllabus Review

Consultation document

May 2021

Association of British Dispensing Opticians



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Executive summary

The Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) supports, promotes and represents the profession of dispensing opticians in the UK.

Reviewing the FBDO syllabus

ABDO is reviewing the syllabus for its Level 6 Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing, commonly referred to as the FBDO (Fellowship Diploma of the Association of British Dispensing Opticians) qualification. The FBDO qualification enables students to register with the General Optical Council (GOC) and practise using the protected title of 'dispensing optician'. The syllabus for the qualification shows which areas students study and the depth and breadth of what they study in each area.

Throughout the review, ABDO will work closely with all its stakeholders to maintain a rigorous and integrated approach to education delivery and assessment. Subsequently, we will be seeking the approval of the General Optical Council (GOC) to provide the updated FBDO qualification under its new system of education.

Evolving roles of dispensing opticians

Dispensing opticians provide patients with expert eye care by advising on, fitting and supplying them with the most appropriate spectacle frames and lenses and other specialist optical appliances, based on their prescription, facial characteristics and visual, lifestyle and vocational needs.

Dispensing opticians play a particularly important role in dispensing spectacles to children and in dispensing spectacles and low vision aids to patients who are living with sight loss. The dispensing of specialist optical appliances, including spectacles and low vision aids, to children and people with visual impairment can be carried out only by, or the under supervision of, a dispensing optician or optometrist registered with the GOC.

In recent years there have been a number of developments in the practice of dispensing opticians, including providing clinical advice in new areas and the use of technology to support patient care. Looking ahead there are various trends which are likely to have a bearing on the roles which dispensing opticians will play on qualifying. These include the growing number of older people in the UK, the increasing prevalence of childhood myopia, increased delivery of eye care in community practice rather than in hospital, the opportunity for dispensing opticians to carry out the refraction element of a sight test, the increasing use of technology in community practice and the growing focus on preventative healthcare.

Supporting continuing professional development

This consultation relates only to the development of the FBDO syllabus, but as part of this review we need to ensure that the FBDO qualification continues to provide dispensing opticians with a good platform for continuing professional development. There will be opportunities for dispensing opticians to develop their skills and knowledge in a variety of different ways and this could involve gaining further qualifications.

In future, such qualifications could take the form of 'building blocks' that enable practitioners to build on their FBDO qualification by undertaking further blocks of study in specialist areas, in order to suit their particular practice and areas of interest.

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Developing the FBDO syllabus

Based on our analysis of the opportunities that are likely to be available to dispensing opticians in the future, some sections of the syllabus could potentially be covered in greater depth, namely:

- *Paediatric dispensing*
- *Low vision*

There are also areas that do not have specific sections in the syllabus which could be added or covered in more depth, namely:

- *Clinical imaging and interpretation.*
- *Diabetes and diabetic screening.*
- *Dispensing for patients with additional needs.*
- *Dry eye management.*
- *Extended primary care services such as minor eye conditions.*
- *Frame and lens design technology.*
- *Increase knowledge of management of impairments of binocular vision.*
- *Management and leadership.*
- *Myopia management.*
- *Practical refraction.*
- *Public health issues such as falls prevention, nutrition advice, smoking cessation, blood pressure monitoring.*
- *Use of emerging technology such as spectacle manufacture and investigative techniques and consultations.*

There is a limit to how much material can be covered during a three-year programme, so as well as considering which areas should be added or covered in more depth, we are also seeking views on areas that could be covered in less depth or potentially no longer be covered at all.

Listening to stakeholders

We would like to hear your views on how the roles of dispensing opticians are likely to evolve over the next two to five years and how the FBDO syllabus should change as a result. As well as enabling the development of the FBDO syllabus, your feedback will inform our thinking about further qualifications and which 'building blocks' it might be useful for us to develop in future.

The consultation runs for 10 weeks and will close on **12 July 2021** and we look forward to hearing from you.

We invite you to complete our online survey here
<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/QF85K8K>

Alternatively, you can send your comments by email to **Alicia Thompson, Director of Examinations**
athompson@abdo.org.uk

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) is the professional body for dispensing opticians in the UK. ABDO's role is to support, promote and represent the profession and is the only body which is focused solely on the interests of this group of healthcare professionals. ABDO's membership includes around 6,500 qualified dispensing opticians and 1,600 students.

This public consultation is a key part of our review of the syllabus for our Level 6 Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing, which is commonly referred to as the FBDO (Fellowship Diploma of the Association of British Dispensing Opticians) qualification.

The FBDO qualification enables students to register with the General Optical Council (GOC) and practise using the protected title of 'dispensing optician'.

We are seeking views from a wide range of stakeholders on how we should develop the FBDO syllabus, including on the areas which students should study and the depth and breadth of what they should study in each area.

We would like to gain input from a wide range of stakeholders, including patients and the wider public, student dispensing opticians, qualified dispensing opticians, optometrists and other healthcare professionals, education providers, employers, manufacturers, professional bodies and governments. In doing so, we want to ensure that we hear from stakeholders in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, recognising that there are differences in the delivery of eye care across the four nations of the UK.

The current version of the FBDO syllabus was introduced in 2015 and, in line with good practice, we normally review the syllabus every five years to ensure that it keeps pace with and anticipates developments in the practice of dispensing opticians.

We postponed this latest review of the syllabus so that we could take into account the GOC's new standards for qualification providers and new outcomes for students, which were finalised in February 2021.

To gain the GOC's approval to provide the updated FBDO qualification under this new system, we will need to show how we meet the new standards, including how we will continue to work with education providers to maintain a rigorous and integrated approach to education delivery and assessment. It will also involve showing how our new syllabus will enable students to achieve the outcomes specified by the GOC.

In this consultation document we:

- Explain the system of education for dispensing opticians.
- Describe the role of a dispensing optician.
- Discuss how the roles of dispensing opticians are likely to develop over the next two to five years.
- Discuss the changes to the FBDO syllabus that might be needed to prepare students for these future roles and provide a platform for their continuing professional development.
- Set out questions for stakeholders to consider.

As well as carrying out this public consultation we will be holding focus groups with representation from all of our stakeholders. We will also continue to work closely with all the education providers that offer programmes which enable students to gain the FBDO qualification.

This consultation will run for 10 weeks until 12 July 2021. We will then review the responses and the feedback gathered from stakeholders more generally and discuss with education providers the changes to the syllabus that will be required and how long they will need to prepare, including developing revised course materials. This will enable us to determine when it will be possible for the new syllabus to come into effect, with the exact timing also dependent on close engagement with and approval from the GOC.

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2. SYSTEM OF EDUCATION FOR DISPENSING OPTICIANS

All students undergo a minimum of three years academic and practical training to qualify as a dispensing optician.

ABDO works with a number of education providers to provide an integrated route to registration with the GOC which includes practice-based clinical experience, generally from the start of a programme.

To gain the FBDO qualification, students must pass all units of the syllabus and the practical assessments. They must also undertake 1600 hours of supervised work in practice, during which time they must compile a portfolio of evidence.

Students can choose to study in various different ways. They can combine distance learning with supervised practice and blocks of time at college, choose day release combined with supervised practice, or study full-time followed by a period of supervised practice.

ABDO's FBDO qualification is available to students from around the world and they have the option of taking examinations in various overseas locations, as well as in the UK.

There is not currently an apprenticeship route available to students wanting to gain the FBDO qualification, although ABDO is represented on the Trailblazer Group which is in the process of developing an apprenticeship standard for dispensing opticians.

3. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF A DISPENSING OPTICIAN

The FBDO qualification enables students to practise as a dispensing optician in the UK. The syllabus for the qualification determines the areas which students must study and the depth and breadth of what they must study in each area.

What is the role of a dispensing optician?

Dispensing opticians provide patients with expert eye care by advising on, fitting and supplying them with the most appropriate spectacle frames, lenses and specialist optical appliances based on their prescription, facial characteristics and visual, lifestyle and vocational needs.

Dispensing opticians play a particularly important role in dispensing spectacles to children. Managing the optical care of paediatric patients may be carried out only by, or the under supervision of, dispensing opticians or optometrists registered with the GOC.

Providing children with the most appropriate optical appliances, taking into account their different facial characteristics compared with adults, is vital to ensure the most beneficial outcome as the child develops. Children are more likely to wear comfortable, well-fitting spectacles and therefore, achieve the full benefits of vision correction.

There is particular concern about the growth of childhood short-sightedness or myopia. Myopia is most likely to occur between six and 13 years of age, with nearly one in five UK teenagers now being myopic. It is now more than twice as prevalent among UK children compared with the 1960s.¹

Dispensing opticians are ideally placed to critically evaluate the relevant research and offer informed advice on different forms of myopia management and the possible long term eye health benefits.

Dispensing opticians also play an important role in providing expert eye care to patients who are living with sight loss. Dispensing spectacles or low vision aids to people with visual impairment can be carried out only by, or the under supervision of, a dispensing optician or optometrist registered with the GOC.

1. See the Northern Ireland Childhood Errors of Refraction (NICER) study: Six Year Refractive Change among White Children and Young Adults: Evidence for Significant Increase in Myopia among White UK Children (plos.org)

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0146332>

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According to the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), there are almost two million people in the UK with sight loss and of these, there are around 350,000 people on the registers of blind and partially sighted people.²

Dispensing opticians use their expert knowledge of spectacle frames, lenses and specialist optical appliances to help patients with sight loss to maximise their vision. They dispense and provide advice and guidance on the use of low vision aids, magnifiers and non-optical aids to patients whose vision has been affected in a way which cannot be solved by spectacles alone. In doing so, they use their understanding of the psychology of sight loss and the impact this has on a person's lifestyle.

Dispensing opticians take account of the patient's personal, visual, lifestyle and vocational needs, providing advice and dispensing appropriate safety, vocational (such as sports appliances) and specialist optical appliances in accordance with personal eye protection regulations, VDU requirements and relevant standards.

Most dispensing opticians work in community practice, but they also provide domiciliary care and work in hospitals, industry and academia.

How is the role of a dispensing opticians likely to evolve?

In recent years, there have been a number of developments in the practice of dispensing opticians, with involvement in providing clinical advice in new areas and using technology to support patient care. It is difficult to predict with certainty how the role of a dispensing optician is likely to evolve over the next two to five years. However, there are several trends which are likely to be significant and which could lead to a more clinical and expanding scope of practice:

1. The UK population will continue to increase, with a growing proportion of older people. The most recent population projections published by the Office of National Statistics suggest that by 2025, the UK population will be 68 million, up from 67.1 million in 2020. Of the total population, a third is predicted to be over 55 compared with 31 per cent in 2020 – an increase of 1.75 million people.³

This is expected to lead to:

- Increasing demand for spectacles, particularly as people are likely to remain in employment and stay active for longer.
- A growing number of people with eye conditions and sight loss, meaning increased demand for low vision services and devices and increasing opportunities for dispensing opticians to provide clinical services, such as using ocular coherence tomography (OCT) to carry out clinical imaging and interpretation and monitor stable glaucoma patients.⁴
- A growth in the number of patients with dementia and co-morbidities, with dispensing opticians needing to be able to provide eye care for these patients and signpost them to other health and care services.

2. We expect to see continuing growth in childhood myopia leading to increasing demand for the dispensing of spectacles to children. This could potentially lead to a greater need for and interest in myopia management, with dispensing opticians well-placed to advise on the various evidence-based approaches that can be used to slow down the progression of myopia.

3. Governments across the UK are seeking to deliver more eye health care in the community to relieve the strain on hospitals and make eye care more

2. See the RNIB website for more information: Key information and statistics - RNIB - See differently.

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics>

3. This is based on the ONS mid-2018 population projections, details of which are published on the ONS website: National population projections table of contents - Office for National Statistics

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/dataset/2014basednationalpopulationprojectionstableofcontents>

4. The RNIB predict that by 2050 the number of people with sight loss in the UK will double to over four million: *Eye health and sight loss stats and facts.pdf* ([rnib.org.uk](https://www.rnib.org.uk))

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accessible to patients. This trend is likely to increase the opportunities for dispensing opticians to provide clinical services. In England, for example, the National Eyecare Restoration and Transformation Programme has the aim of moving almost 30 per cent of outpatient appointments into the community.⁵ This should give momentum to the development of new pathways, including for people with long term eye conditions, children's vision screening and low vision. Similarly in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland there is likely to be a continued focus on delivering more eye health care services in the community.

4. There are also likely to be opportunities for dispensing opticians to carry out the refraction element of an eye examination as a delegated function. This would enable dispensing opticians to apply their expertise during the sight-testing process and add value for patients and any resulting optical appliance. This change would require the GOC to revise its 2013 policy statement⁶, although following engagement with ABDO, it has committed to reviewing this.
5. The increasing use of technology in practice will have a bearing on the roles which dispensing opticians play. For example, dispensing opticians may have the opportunity to use OCT machines to gather data and then interpret and explain this to fellow healthcare professionals and patients. And with technology enabling optometrists to focus more on the clinical aspects of their role, including through virtual clinics, this could reinforce the benefit of dispensing opticians carrying out refraction.
6. The growing focus on preventative health care throughout the UK could lead to more opportunities to become involved in promoting 'healthy living', including advising on and signposting to services relating to smoking cessation, obesity, nutrition, falls prevention, blood pressure and glucose monitoring.

Providing a platform for continuing professional development

As well as understanding how the role of a dispensing optician is likely to evolve, we need to ensure that the FBDO qualification provides dispensing opticians with a good platform for continuing professional development after they qualify.

ABDO offers a wide range of support for members' professional development, including peer review and peer discussion workshops, webinars and articles. This enables members to develop their skills and knowledge, as well as meeting the GOC's continuing education and training (CET) requirements. ABDO also offers a range of additional qualifications, such as in low vision and contact lenses. In future, such qualifications could take the form of 'building blocks' that enable practitioners to build on their FBDO qualification by undertaking further blocks of specialist study.

Dispensing opticians who specialise in low vision may work in community practice or a hospital setting, and to support professional development in this area, ABDO offers a Level 6 Honours Diploma in Low Vision.

ABDO also offers a specialist Level 6 Certificate in Contact Lens Practice. This enables dispensing opticians to register with the GOC as a contact lens optician and fit contact lenses. And the expertise they gain in relation to the anterior (or front of the) eye means they are able to provide additional clinical services. In England and Wales, for example, contact lens opticians with the appropriate training and accreditation are involved in delivering Minor Eye Conditions Services (MECS), Covid Urgent Eyecare Services (CUES) and in carrying out glaucoma repeat measures such as measuring the intraocular pressure and visual fields of glaucoma patients. Other clinical services open to contact lens opticians include providing elements of pre- and post-cataract check-ups, treating dry eye disease and myopia management via the fitting of specialist contact lenses.

5. Presentation to National Optical Conference, 25 November 2020, "Transforming NHS Outpatient Care", published on the LOCSU website <https://www.locsu.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NHSEI-NOC-2020-25112020.pdf>

6. The statement is published on the GOC website: Statement on testing of sight (optical.org) https://www.optical.org/en/news_publications/news_item.cfm/statement-on-testing-of-sight

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For contact lens opticians who wish to further develop their skills and knowledge in relation to contact lenses, ABDO provides a Level 7 Diploma in Advanced Contact Lens Practice.

ABDO also offers an in-depth course in the design and performance of spectacle lenses, which leads to the Honours Examination in Spectacle Lens Design.

Dispensing opticians also have the option to further develop their expertise in management and leadership, building on what they learn in gaining the FBDO qualification. ABDO offers a Level 5 diploma and a range of Level 5 certificates in management and leadership. These courses are accredited by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), which also awards the qualifications.

To support students' longer-term career development, the FBDO syllabus will need to continue to provide an appropriate grounding in particular clinical areas of practice, such as low vision, contact lenses, and paediatrics. It will also need to ensure that practitioners have the skills and knowledge to adapt as practice changes and develop their interest in new areas. For example, it is likely to become increasingly important to be technologically literate and able to review and critique evidence.

4. POTENTIAL CHANGES TO THE FBDO SYLLABUS

In the previous section, we examined the role of the dispensing optician and how this is likely to evolve. We also highlighted the need for the FBDO qualification to provide a platform for continuing professional development.

This section builds on that analysis, by:

- *Outlining the areas covered by the current FBDO syllabus.*
- *Considering the changes that will be needed as a result of the GOC's new standards for approved qualifications and new outcomes for students.*
- *Exploring the changes that might be required to reflect how the role of the dispensing optician is likely to evolve.*

In considering what changes to the syllabus should be made, however, we do need to bear in mind that there is a limit to how much material can be covered during a three-year programme. As well as considering which areas should be added, therefore, we need to consider which areas should no longer be covered or which should be covered in less depth.

The current FBDO syllabus

The current FBDO syllabus covers the following twelve areas:

1. *Theory of general optics and ophthalmic lenses*
2. *Ophthalmic dispensing practice – practical unit*
3. *Theory in ophthalmic dispensing*
4. *Advanced theory of ophthalmic lenses*
5. *Abnormal ocular conditions and standards of practice*
6. *Ocular anatomy*
7. *Paediatric dispensing*
8. *Communication*
9. *The assessment and management of refractive errors*
10. *Low vision in ophthalmic dispensing*
11. *The basic principles of contact lens wear*
12. *Advanced ophthalmic dispensing practice – practical unit*

The full syllabus is published on ABDO's website and provides more detail about each of these areas: ABDO Level 6 Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing syllabus 2015.⁷

7. <https://www.abdo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ABDODiploma-Syllabus-2015-PAGES-MAR19.pdf>

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Changes required as a result of the GOC's new standards and outcomes

In February 2021, the GOC approved new standards for providers of approved qualifications, new outcomes for registration which students must achieve and a new quality assurance and enhancement method. These documents replace the GOC's current quality assurance handbooks and the GOC's current competencies.

The current FBDO syllabus is designed to ensure that students are able to demonstrate all the competencies on qualifying, whereas in future students will be required to achieve the new outcomes for registration.

A significant change introduced by the new standards is that approved qualifications must be at Level 6 or above on the recognised qualification framework (Level 10 or above in Scotland) rather than at Level 5 or above.

ABDO welcomed this decision as the FBDO qualification has been a Level 6 qualification for many years and requiring this learning for all students will help to ensure consistently high standards among dispensing opticians joining the profession for the benefit of the public.

The GOC's new outcomes for registration cover seven areas:

1. *Person centred care*
2. *Communication*
3. *Clinical practice*
4. *Ethics and standards*
5. *Risk*
6. *Leadership and management*
7. *Lifelong learning*

The outcomes are the same for optometrists and dispensing opticians, with the exception of the 'clinical practice' outcome. Here some of the requirements for dispensing opticians and optometrists are different, in recognition of the different roles that they play.

The outcomes are published on the GOC's website and can be found here.⁸

Compared with the current competencies, the outcomes for registration provide a higher-level framework. They are designed to allow greater flexibility in relation to clinical practice and therefore, accommodate changes in the role of the dispensing optician over time.

8. <https://www.abdo.org.uk/regulation-and-policy/syllabus-review/>

The new 'clinical practice' outcome is noteworthy in that it includes the requirement for dispensing opticians (and optometrists) to be able to analyse visual function from a range of diagnostic sources, including refractive management. However, before dispensing opticians will be allowed to carry out refraction as a delegated function as part of the sight test, the GOC will need to revise its 2013 policy statement. Following engagement with ABDO, it has committed to reviewing this issue.

More broadly, the new outcomes have a greater focus on the generic skills needed of healthcare professionals, building on the requirement that was added to the current competencies to ensure that students are able to meet the GOC's standards of practice.

Potential changes to the syllabus to reflect the changing role of the dispensing optician

Based on our analysis of how the role of the dispensing optician is likely to evolve and the career pathways that are likely to be available – and recognising that there will be differences across the UK owing to the devolved management of health care – we have identified some sections of the syllabus that could potentially be covered in greater depth, namely:

- *Paediatric dispensing*
- *Low vision*

There are also areas that do not have specific sections in the syllabus which could be added or covered in more depth:

- *Clinical imaging and interpretation.*
- *Diabetes and diabetic screening.*
- *Dispensing for patients with additional needs.*
- *Dry eye management.*
- *Extended primary care services such as minor eye conditions.*
- *Frame and lens design technology.*
- *Increase knowledge of management of impairments of binocular vision.*
- *Management and leadership.*
- *Myopia management*
- *Practical refraction.*
- *Public health issues such as falls prevention, nutrition advice, smoking cessation, blood pressure monitoring.*
- *Use of emerging technology such as spectacle manufacture and investigative techniques and consultations.*