

Becoming an optometrist or dispensing optician A guide for students with disabilities and health conditions



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This document was last updated in January 2020. Key updates include:

- Standards of Practice references
- contact information
- registration processes information.

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been written to provide clear information for people with a disability or other health condition who are interested in becoming an optometrist or dispensing optician in the United Kingdom.

The guide has been put together to provide information on what you can expect during your application and studies, about your responsibilities and those of your educational institution, and about the General Optical Council (GOC)'s role as the regulator of optometrists and dispensing opticians.

Teachers, parents, careers advisors and others may also find this information useful.

The guide is also intended to be useful for those working on GOC-regulated training courses who may work with students with a disability, such as:

- admissions staff
- academic and disability support staff
- anyone working with students who are interested in becoming an optometrist or dispensing optician.

If you have a disability or other health condition, you may be wondering whether you can become an optometrist or dispensing optician. This document won't be able to give you a definite answer, because each person is individual. But it will tell you:

- how to go about applying
- your rights and responsibilities
- what to do if you think you have been treated unfairly
- how to find out more.

1. Introduction

1.1 About the General Optical Council

The GOC is one of a group of organisations in the UK known as healthcare regulators. These organisations oversee the healthcare professions by regulating individual professionals and businesses. The GOC is the regulator for optometry and dispensing optics in the United Kingdom. Our governing legislation is the Opticians Act 1989.

The GOC is responsible for regulating every UK:

- **optometrist** - who tests sight. They can also fit and supply glasses or contact lenses.
- **dispensing optician** - who fits and supplies glasses or contact lenses.
- **student optometrists and dispensing opticians**
- eligible **optical businesses**.

We use the term 'registrant' in this document. 'Registrant' refers to individuals or businesses registered with us.

Ophthalmologists and **ophthalmic medical practitioners** are medical doctors specialising in eye care. They are also allowed to test sight and to fit and supply glasses and contact lenses. The GOC does not register or set standards for these professionals, as doctors are regulated by the General Medical Council.

What is regulation?

Regulators protect the public by restricting who can practise a profession. We make sure that individual optometrists/dispensing opticians, businesses and students meet the required standards of conduct, education and performance.

We:

- set standards for optical education, training, performance and behaviour
- approve the qualifications leading to registration
- publish registers of optical professionals, students and businesses
- investigate and act on concerns about anyone registered with us.

GOC registration

Optometrists and **dispensing opticians** must be registered with the GOC before they can work in those jobs in the United Kingdom.

Practitioners on our full individual professional registers have successfully completed GOC-regulated qualifications in optometry or dispensing optics (or their equivalent). They have provided evidence of meeting the required standards of education, performance and conduct, and are fit to practise in the UK. Registration with the GOC as a fully-qualified optometrist or dispensing optician is separate from employment – GOC registration is not a guarantee of employment.

Students who wish to become an optometrist or a dispensing optician are also required to be registered with the GOC before beginning their training.

Studying for an optical qualification involves learning the core competencies that are necessary to practise safely and effectively. To gain these skills and appropriate clinical experience, students work with patients and the public throughout their course of study. The patients they work with during their training need to be protected to help avoid problems arising and ensure students are aware of the professional standards required.

Both student and full professional optometrists and dispensing opticians are required to renew their registration with the GOC each year.

1.2 A career in optics

Sight is perhaps the most precious of all our five senses. It is vital to everything we do: at work, at home, driving, for sports, at leisure. Optometrists and dispensing opticians play a vital role in caring for people's sight and eye health, and therefore need comprehensive and relevant training so that they can deliver excellent standards of eye care.

Vision care is a field which demands the ability to communicate with people, and to work with precision and professionalism. As a qualified optometrist or dispensing optician you would be responsible for the visual health of your patients, working to maintain or improve the quality of their lives. This is demanding but also rewarding and stimulating, particularly in a field with many technological and clinical

advances.

Once qualified and registered as a full professional, you can earn an attractive salary and work in a variety of settings including independent and corporate practice, hospitals, and academic research and teaching.

1.3 Education and training

As a matter of principle, the optical professions should accommodate people with a range of ambitions, backgrounds and capabilities, including health conditions and disabilities. It is important that the optical professions reflect and cater to the public in a variety of ways, and that equality of access be promoted within the professions.

Optical students must be fit to undergo training throughout their studies, and professionals must be fit to practise throughout their practicing professional lives. Both optical professionals and students work with patients, and the safety of those patients is paramount.

Students must be able to demonstrate capability in all the relevant GOC competencies at the end of their training. In a small number of cases, a disability or health condition might make it impossible for a student to meet the requirements of a training course or a competency required by the GOC. However, students with disabilities and health conditions should wherever possible be offered appropriate adjustments to the training to enable them to undertake the course.

GOC professional standards

Optometrists and dispensing opticians who want to register with us must meet certain standards of knowledge, skill and behaviour. Every patient deserves to be treated by an optometrist or dispensing optician who meets high standards of personal and professional conduct.

Optometrists and dispensing opticians must meet standards in two areas:

- **competence – knowledge and skill:** the GOC publishes documents setting out the competencies in the areas of optometry, dispensing optics, and in relation to the contact lens dispensing and therapeutic prescribing specialties. The competencies explain the level of professional knowledge and skill that all registrants must have (and which students will

learn during their studies). The full competencies are available on our website at www.optical.org.

Conduct, behaviour and professional performance: these standards are set out in the *Standards of Practice* for optometrists and dispensing opticians. As healthcare professionals, optometrists and dispensing opticians have a responsibility to ensure the care and safety of their patients and the public. The care, well-being and safety of patients must always be their first concern and they must always be able to justify their decisions and actions. Student optometrists and student dispensing opticians also have their own standards to meet (*Standards for Optical Students*) which are similar to the *Standards of Practice* but recognise that students are still learning. Some optical businesses register with the GOC and when they do, they agree to meet *Standards for Optical Businesses*, which set out the behaviours expected of them.

As well as the Standards, we also publish guidance to help our registrants understand their obligations under the Standards. We do this where issues are complex or confusing, where there is conflicting external guidance and to address issues relevant to all healthcare professionals. Our guidance is complementary to the Standards and must be read in conjunction with them.

Fitness to practise

Being 'fit to practise' is a key requirement of being GOC-registered. Fitness to practise requirements also apply to student optometrists and student dispensing opticians, and to optical businesses.

Our registrants must meet and maintain the standards of performance, character, knowledge, skill, health and behaviour necessary for them to do their job safely and effectively at all times. So, 'fitness' in this does not just mean health or physical fitness.

Our registrants are required to inform us of anything that might impair their fitness to practise, and we also investigate where others raise concerns. If the GOC has reason to believe that a registrant's fitness to practise may be impaired, we will investigate the issue. If we find that a registrant cannot meet our standards in competence or conduct, we can put limits on the work they are allowed to do, or in the most serious cases we can stop them from working in the UK entirely.

Health, disability and fitness to practise

One of the reasons that a registrant's fitness to practise might be

impaired is 'adverse physical or mental health'. Other reasons include misconduct, poor professional performance, and criminal offences or disciplinary sanctions.

This does not mean that having a disability or long-term health condition infers that someone has 'adverse health' affecting their fitness to practise. Disabilities and health conditions affect different people in different ways, and there is no list of 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' health conditions or disabilities. We would not need to be informed of all disabilities or health conditions – a declaration would only be necessary if the registrant's fitness to practise might be impaired. Each situation is assessed on an individual basis, and our registrants should take medical advice on anything that they think might affect their fitness to practise.

Disabilities and health conditions can very often be managed so that an optometrist or dispensing optician can practise completely safely and effectively. For instance, people who use wheelchairs or have particular physical conditions can often work in work environments in which equipment is adjusted to suit them. Many people with disabilities and those with other long-term health conditions are fully able to practise as optometrists or dispensing opticians, with or without adjustments to policies, procedures, equipment or other kinds of support.

There is therefore no assumption that a person with a disability or someone with a long-term physical or mental health condition would pose a risk to the public while working as an optometrist or dispensing optician. The same is true of our other fitness to practise requirements, such as criminal convictions and cautions. This is why every case about someone's fitness to practise is assessed on an individual basis.

Fitness to practise is not the same as fitness to work in a particular job or at a particular time. So, temporary health conditions do not necessarily mean that someone is not fit to practise, even if they are unable to work for a time. For instance, a minor illness or injury such as a broken wrist or flu might prevent someone from working for a period of time, but this does not mean that they are not 'fit to practise' for our purposes because they would expect to fully recover. There is therefore no reason for a temporary health condition to affect someone's ability to remain registered with us.

1.4 Disability and the Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 (the Act) is a piece of legislation providing a cross-cutting legislative framework to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all. The Act aims to protect people with disabilities and prevent disability discrimination, harassment or victimization. It provides legal rights for people with disabilities in the areas of employment, education and elsewhere.

Who is a 'disabled person'?

Under the Act, a person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment, and if the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal day-to-day activities.

There are additional provisions relating to people with progressive health conditions (such as cancer or HIV). People with some visual impairments are automatically deemed to be disabled. Some conditions are specifically excluded from being covered by the disability definition, such as those with addictions to non-prescribed substances.

Responsibilities under the Equality Act

Education providers have responsibilities to their students and applicants to make sure that they are treated fairly and are not discriminated against.

Employers have a duty to their employees and to applicants.

Employers, education and service providers have a duty to provide reasonable adjustments to ensure that people with disabilities do not face 'substantial disadvantage' (more than minor or trivial). This includes in relation to policies and practices (such as selection criteria), and physical capabilities (e.g. barriers to access). The costs of any adjustments cannot be passed on to the disabled person.

Under the Act, the GOC is classified as a public sector body. The GOC have a duty regarding the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimization, and to advance good relations and equality of opportunity between different groups.

The same disability or health condition can affect people differently or be managed in different ways. For that reason, a list of 'acceptable'

and 'unacceptable' health conditions should not exist in considering an application for employment, study or registration. In all cases, an individual assessment of health conditions and disabilities should be carried out.

2. Becoming an optometrist or dispensing optician: a guide for students with disabilities

2.1 Applying to study optometry or dispensing optics

To work as an optometrist or dispensing optician in the UK, you will need to achieve a recognised qualification of the appropriate standard from a GOC- regulated educational institution (or its equivalent, for those who study outside the UK).

This ensures that the training our registrants receive is of appropriate quality, and that the right support is available for you during your training. Information on regulated courses is available from the GOC's website at www.optical.org.

Thinking of applying

If you are thinking about applying to study optometry or dispensing optics but are concerned about whether you will be able to undertake the programme successfully because of a disability or other long-term health condition, we strongly recommend that you contact the educational institution before you apply.

The educational institution will be able to tell you about the requirements of the course and explain what kinds of adjustments to the course have been made in the past to cater for people with disabilities and health conditions.

This will help you decide whether studying optometry or dispensing optics would be a good career choice for you. You might also find out about other training options that could be of interest to you.

When you apply

We recommend that you tell your educational provider about a disability or health condition when you apply for a course in optometry or dispensing optics. There will be a process for declaring any information about your health as part of the application process.

You do not have to disclose this information. But if your education

provider knows about your disability or health condition at an early stage, they will be able to consider how, and whether, you will be able to meet the GOC's standards and competencies, what adjustments to the way the course is delivered might be needed for you, and in what other ways they can support you.

It is against the law for an education provider to discriminate against anyone with a disability or health condition, so telling an education provider about a disability is designed to be helpful to you. The education provider can only act on information it knows about. So, if you don't tell admissions staff about your disability or health condition, you may not get support that can help you.

The educational provider has a responsibility to ensure that you can supply this information safely and confidentially. You should also feel comfortable asking about the educational provider's disability or equality policy or asking to talk to the disability support service.

How your application will be assessed

When you apply for a place on an approved training course to become an optometrist or dispensing optician, your application must be assessed fairly and consistently with the law. Education providers have duties under the Equality Act 2010 to avoid discrimination and promote equality, as well as ensuring that all graduates from those courses meet the standards required of optical professionals.

When you make an application for a placement on course, the education providers should consider your application and decide:

- whether you meet the admission conditions and requirements of the course
- whether the education provider can deliver the course to you in a way that meets your needs, including by making any reasonable adjustments to the delivery of course that might be necessary
- whether at the end of the course, after any necessary adjustments have been made during the delivery of the course, you will meet the GOC's standards of competence

The educational provider should consider your application individually and avoid making any assumptions or prejudgments about you or your disability/health condition.

It is likely to help the application process if you show insight and understanding about your disability or health condition in discussions

with your education provider. This means showing that you have a realistic, informed idea of your condition, capabilities and treatment. This will help your educational institution make appropriate decisions about what kinds of adjustments to the delivery of the course would be possible and would best help you complete the course.

'Reasonable adjustments'

Education providers have a duty to consider whether they can adapt the way that they provide the course to meet the needs of students with disabilities and health conditions. If you have told your educational institution about a disability or health condition, the institution should consider whether any 'reasonable adjustments' to the training course are needed for you.

Whether or not a possible adjustment is 'reasonable' will depend on many factors, in particular the cost of the adjustment, how effective it might be, and whether the adjustment will enable the applicant to demonstrate the GOC competencies required for registration. Education providers are required to consider possible adjustments to the delivery of the course that may be requested and cannot claim that an adjustment is unreasonable just because it is expensive or inconvenient.

When you declare a health condition or disability, staff from your educational institution should discuss this with you, including options for adjustments to the course. They should also explain the reasons for any decisions they make about reasonable adjustments.

If the educational institution decides that it is unable to make reasonable adjustments to the course for you, and is not able to offer you a place, they should discuss this with you and possibly suggest alternative courses of study that might be more suitable.

What if you think you have been treated unfairly?

There are actions you can take if you think that you might have been treated unfairly or denied a place on a course because of a health or disability issue.

In the first place, you should talk to people at your education provider about your concerns. The educational institution's disability support service or a supervisor or tutor may be able to help you, or a Students Union representative might give advice. If your concerns are not

addressed, the educational institution will have a complaints process, which will hopefully resolve any issues you have.

Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities has published detailed guidance for students with concerns about unfair treatment and discrimination. These information sheets are available on the Skill website, www.skill.org.uk, Citizens Advice also publishes *Help Yourself* booklets, which are available from bureau or at www.adviceguide.org.uk, which give general information about benefit and housing entitlement and other sources of financial help.

Other organisations which may be able to help you or provide useful advice include:

- the Learning and Skills Council www.lsc.gov.uk
- the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education www.oiahe.org.uk
- the Equality and Human Rights Commission www.equalityhumanrights.com
- your local authority.

While they may be able to advise you, these external organisations will require you to have gone through your education provider's internal complaints procedures before they will consider your complaint themselves.

Registering with the GOC as a student

You will also need to ensure that you are registered with the GOC as a student optometrist or dispensing optician throughout your studies. When you begin studying, you will need to complete an application for registration as a student and pay the registration fee. The application process involves completing an online registration form and an identification form, both of which can be found on our website, www.optical.org.

As part of the application for GOC registration, you will be required to make declarations about anything that could affect your fitness to undertake training as an optometrist/ dispensing optician. These include criminal convictions/cautions, disciplinary proceedings, and physical or mental health conditions that a reasonable person would think might affect your fitness to train. More information is available on our website or you can contact our Registration team.

You are entitled to have your application for registration considered

fairly, legally and confidentially. Our standards are designed to ensure that anyone working with the public can practise safely, so our registration decisions are made on that basis alone. As discussed in the fitness to practise section above, just having a long-term health condition or disability does not itself mean you cannot register with us. Each person's circumstances and fitness to practise will be assessed individually.

If your application for registration as a student were to be refused, you can appeal against that decision. The GOC has an independent Registration Appeals Committee that considers these appeals, taking into account any extra information that you think relevant. If your appeal is not successful, you can apply to the courts for a judicial review of our decision.

Annual retention

Each year, you will need to complete an application to renew your GOC registration and pay the annual fee. This is called 'retention'. Students are required to submit your application for retention by 15 July with a final deadline of 31 August each year.

If your application is not fully completed in time, you may be removed from the student register on 1 September. If you do not complete an application for retention, you may be removed from the register and be unable to continue your training towards becoming an optometrist or dispensing optician in the UK.

Registered students can complete their applications for retention each year through our website www.optical.org in the secure 'MyGOC' area. We will contact you each year to remind you to complete your application for retention. It is important that you keep your contact details up to date so that we are able to contact you easily – you can update your contact details in the 'MyGOC' area at any time.

It is extremely important that you register with the GOC as a student, keep your details up to date, and renew your registration each year.

If you are not registered with the GOC while undergoing training towards becoming an optometrist or dispensing optician:

- you will be breaking the law
- you will not be able to sit assessments or participate in clinics or training

- you will not be able to advance to professional practice.

2.2 Studying optometry or dispensing optics: what to expect

If you are approved to start studying on an approved optometry or dispensing optics course, and you have a disability that you have told your education provider about, you may be entitled to additional support during your studies.

As part of accepting your application to study on the course, the educational institution may have agreed to make adjustments to the delivery of the course to take account of your disability. You should communicate with your education provider throughout your studies about how well the course is working for you, including the effect of any adjustments the institution may have made. Other adjustments might be possible if you are having difficulties with any aspect of the course.

It is important that during your studies you continue to be realistic about what tasks you can do safely. You should continue to keep your educational institution informed about your disability during the course, especially if your health condition changes or if you are having difficulties with it due to a disability. This will enable your educational institution to see whether any additional adjustments or support might be needed to help you meet our standards and practise safely.

How do you get help if you need it?

Most educational institutions will have a dedicated support service for students with disabilities, which may be able to provide you with any additional help or advice you might need during your studies. Your tutors, supervisors and other staff at your educational institution should also be able to advise you during your studies.

There may also be financial support available to you. The most significant of these is through the Disabled Students' Allowance. Eligibility and the amount of support available will depend on your situation. The educational institution's disability support service should be able to advise you on how to go about applying for the Allowance, and any other support that might be available to you in your area.

There are a range of charitable organisations which provide advice and support for students with specific disabilities. Information on these organisations is available on the DirectGov website

(www.direct.gov.uk) and the Skill website (www.skill.org.uk). Other advisory services are also available; for example Connexions Direct provides information and advice for young people in person and on its website www.connexions-direct.com, including on health and disability issues.

2.3 After finishing your training

Registering with the GOC as a full professional

Once you have graduated from an approved training course, before you can begin work as an optometrist or dispensing optician you will need to transfer your registration to the appropriate register for fully-qualified professionals.

The process for registering as a full professional is similar to that for your initial registration as a student. The application process involves completing an online registration form and an identification form, both of which can be found on our website, www.optical.org. Once your application has been accepted, we will transfer you to the appropriate fully-qualified register, and you will be able to begin working in your chosen field.

You will also need to apply to renew your full GOC registration each year, by completing an online application for retention on the register of optometrists/dispensing opticians and paying the appropriate retention fee.

It should be noted that GOC registration is not a guarantee that work will be available or that you will be offered a job. Employment decisions are made by individual employers.

Working as an optometrist or dispensing optician

Once you are registered with the GOC, you will be able to start working as an optometrist or dispensing optician. You can apply for jobs while your application for registration is being processed, but in order to start work you will need to be GOC-registered. We therefore recommend that you apply for registration as soon as possible after graduation.

Like educational institutions, employers also have duties under the Equality Act 2010 not to discriminate against you, to consider your application for employment fairly and to make reasonable adjustments so that you can work safely and effectively. As a qualified and fully registered optometrist or dispensing optician you will have already

shown that you meet our standards and are fit to practise as a professional.

If you are offered work, your employer might ask you to complete a health declaration and/or occupational health check as part of the pre-employment process. This might involve attending a meeting or interview to talk about your disability or health condition. It may be helpful to discuss any adjustments made during your practical training in relation to your health condition or disability, which ensured you were able to practise safely.

Continuing education and training

It is essential that optometrists and dispensing opticians maintain the up-to-date skills and knowledge needed to practise safely and effectively throughout their careers. To ensure this, we oversee a mandatory Continuing Education and Training (CET) scheme.

CET is a statutory requirement for all fully-qualified optometrists and dispensing opticians. The CET scheme is points-based and runs over a three-year cycle. CET points are gained by undertaking various types of study and training, attending relevant optical sector events, and so on. All full registrants must earn a minimum number of CET points by the end of each cycle to show that their skills are current and that they are eligible to continue working as a professional. More information about the GOC's CET scheme is available on our website.

3. Where to find out more

There is more information on our website for current and prospective students. This includes information on the registration process, education options and our standards and other requirements. Websites of the optical bodies also have useful information for students.

If you have specific questions about registering as a student, you can also contact our Registration Department on 020 7580 3898.

The professional bodies for optometry and dispensing optics also have information for students and professionals on their website and can provide you with other types of information and support.

Contact Us:

General Optical Council
10 Old Bailey
London
EC4M 7NG

Phone: 020 7580 3898
Website: www.optical.org
Email: goc@optical.org

Other useful contacts:

Association of British Dispensing Opticians

199 Gloucester Terrace, London, W2 6LD

www.abdo.org.uk

020 7298 5100

The Association of Optometrists

2 Woodbridge St, Farringdon, London EC1R 0DG

www.aop.org.uk/

020 7549 2000

The College of Optometrists

42 Craven Street, Charing Cross, London, WC2N 5NG

www.college-optometrists.org/

020 7839 6000