

Further and Higher Education Funding for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians

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1) Introduction

1.1 Education Strategic Review

In March 2016 the GOC launched its Education Strategic Review (ESR), a key priority in its 2017-2020 Strategic Plan. The purpose of the review was to ensure that as the optical sector evolves the qualifications approved by the GOC and the standards we set for the education and training of optical professionals are fit for purpose. To enable us to continue to protect the public, newly qualified registrants must have the right knowledge, skills and behaviours to meet patient and service user needs safely in the context of rapid change in the commissioning of eye-care services in each of the four nations.

The evidence supporting the review, the options considered and the case for change is published on the GOC website. This includes the outcome of a public consultation which ran from November 2018 to February 2019.

In 2019 the GOC Council produced four 'steers' to guide the development of an integrated model of optical education. These required three deliverables: **Outcomes**, which describe the knowledge, skills and behaviours individuals must have to register as a Dispensing Optician or an Optometrist. **Standards**, which describe the expected context for the delivery and assessment of the Outcomes by an educational provider acting as a single point of accountability (SPA) and **Assurance**, which describes how we will gather evidence to decide whether qualifications delivered by a SPA meet the Outcomes and Standards. We will use the standards and outcomes to decide whether to approve a qualification leading to GOC registration.

Successful implementation of the new model of optical education will depend on a number of factors, including ensuring sufficient funding to support the demands of an integrated model of education and training. Alongside the work of the Expert Advisory Groups (EAGs), tasked with developing the outcomes and standards, the GOC is organising a series of Roundtables, bringing the sector together to find solutions to issues critical to the successful implementation of the ESR. These Roundtables form part of a wider stakeholder engagement plan.

1.2 Purpose of this Paper

This paper was drafted to inform a sector-wide discussion on further and higher education funding for optometry and dispensing opticians, which commenced at a day-long Roundtable held on Friday 13th March 2020. The purpose of this paper is to describe the funding landscape for undergraduate optometry and dispensing optician programmes and GOC approved qualifications, and to begin to map potential sources of additional, increased or reallocated funding to support SPA's implementation of the new, integrated model of optical education. The paper draws on examples from other healthcare disciplines, including pharmacy, and illustrates the volume and sources of current higher education funding available to providers of approved qualifications.

This paper formed the basis for our discussions with the sector at the Roundtable on 13th May, and will continue to be updated as information is gathered, to inform discussion across the sector. It should be noted that whilst the GOC does not have the remit to secure additional funding; we are committed to facilitating and building capacity within the sector to assist SPAs, and stakeholders, in implementing a well-funded model of optical education.

1.3 Background

Current Models – Overview

In optometry, most students undertake an undergraduate degree approved by the GOC followed by a pre-registration year in either a practice or hospital setting. Experience gained in the pre-registration year is assessed by the College of Optometrist under its 'Scheme for Registration,' a qualification approved by the GOC.

Ophthalmic dispensing courses involve a variety of education and training routes to registration approved by the GOC, including a 'blended' model which incorporates academic study with clinical experience.

Auger Review

It is important to note we took the view that it would be highly unlikely for the 2019 independent review of post-18 education and funding (the Augar Review)¹, which made wide-ranging recommendations in relation to university fees, will be implemented. The review recommended reducing university fees in England for all subjects from £9,250 to £7,500 per year, with the additional cost of providing Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, which includes optometry, funded by Government as an additional teaching grant. The £7,500 cap of fees would be set until 2022/23, and after this period would only increase in line with inflation. Although this reduction would benefit students' loan load, universities offering STEM related subjects would remain potentially vulnerable and subject to annual negotiations with government regarding the volume and pricing of the additional teaching grant. We have therefore assumed that the current higher education funding regimes across the four nations will remain in place (although with minor/ incremental modification) during the implementation phase of the ESR.

Geographical Distribution

The Optical Workforce Survey 2015², commissioned by the College of Optometrists, showed that:

1. The number of full time equivalent (FTE) Optometrists in 2015 (12,099) was not enough to meet the estimated demand if all the UK population were to have eye tests at the appropriate intervals.
2. The geographical distribution of Optometrists is largely restricted to areas where there are schools of optometry,
3. That Optometrists' income had fallen slightly in real terms since 2010. This is possibly due to an oversupply of Optometrists, the growth of large national chains, increased competition and poor public perception of the value of eye care.

Over the past two decades, the number of HE optometry degree providers has increased from six to 16. This may indicate that providers are attempting to address a projected shortfall in the number of Optometrists and their uneven distribution across the UK, as well as the attractiveness of GOC-approved degree programmes to prospective students. Combining the pre-registration element with academic study will help ensure that optometry students gain sufficient clinical and professional experience integrated within the quality-assured context of the academic award, to address concerns identified in the Optical Workforce Survey.

1.4 Methodology

This paper was written with input from leaders in the sector through telephone interviews, desk-based research exploring other healthcare professions and regulators and discussion at the Roundtable on 13th March.

The funding picture for education and eye care services across the four nations is complex and changeable, so there are gaps in our understanding, which we are working to fill.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

²<https://www.college-optometrists.org/uploads/assets/34645cb2-9582-4911-84672b5c888a2f22/Optical-Workforce-Survey-full-report.pdf>

2) Existing Funding Models for Optometry & Ophthalmic Dispensing

2.1 Optometry & Ophthalmic Dispensing Courses

Optometry

Optometry programmes are normally either a three or four-year undergraduate degree, or a four-year integrated MSc. Most graduates then complete a pre-registration year and the Scheme of Registration offered by the College of Optometrists in order to register with the GOC.

Ophthalmic Dispensing

There are three routes to registration for Ophthalmic Dispensing courses:

- **A two-year, full time course**, followed by one year of supervised and paid work as a DO in an optical practice.
- **A three-year day release** training course, combined with suitable employment as a pre-registration DO.
- **A three-year full-time degree** followed by one year of supervised and paid work as a DO in an optical practice.

Foundation and BSc degrees are offered by Canterbury Christ Church, Anglia Ruskin and Glasgow Caledonian universities, and Bradford College (accredited by the University of Bolton). The Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) provide accreditation for a Level 6 Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing. City and Islington College provide a Level 5 Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing which is regulated by Ofqual. Students can apply for a bursary award with ABDO College of up to £250, which can be put towards course or exam fees.

These courses may be delivered through distance learning while students are employed, or through full time attendance at university. The distance learning courses and diplomas require students to be employed for a minimum of 30 hours per week, and to have the support of their employer while studying. Those attending university full time will take a pre-registration year at the end of their academic study.

2.2 Higher Education – Eligibility for Undergraduate Tuition Fees & Loans

Student funding is a devolved matter, with different schemes in each of the four nations. The table in Appendix C describes the different tuition fees charged by devolved nations across the UK for courses starting in 2020.

In England; tuition fees are capped at £9,250 per year³. Student Loan Company (SLC) funding is available to students in England studying on programmes with providers who meet Office for Students (OfS) criteria. Full-time optometry and ophthalmic dispensing students may apply to the Office for Students for a student loan for tuition fees and a means-tested loan for living expenses. For high cost subjects, in England providers also receive an additional grant from the OfS. Subjects are grouped into price-bands, with optometry and ophthalmic dispensing in subject price group B of the four funding bands (see table 1 below). The price groups for other devolved nations is listed in Appendix A.

2.3 Further Education - Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

Ofqual regulates further education qualifications, examinations and assessments in England. Qualifications regulated by Ofqual do not include courses on the Register of Regulated Qualifications, which are supported through Student Loan Company funding to students, and Office for Students (OfS) funding to universities. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funds some vocational higher education qualifications⁴, including the ABDO Level 6 Diploma in Ophthalmic Dispensing.

³ <https://www.ucas.com/finance/undergraduate-tuition-fees-and-student-loans>

⁴ <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Detail/Index/19794?category=qualifications&query=dispensing>

2.4 Office for Students (OfS)

The OfS is the independent regulator for Higher Education in England. The OfS replaced the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) in January 2018 and retains responsibility for providing additional funding to support the teaching of high costs subjects as illustrated in Table A, below, to eligible HE providers in England only. The funding in Table A is per student per academic year. Subjects in **price group A** are those that enable students to qualify as a doctor, dentist, veterinary surgeon, dental hygienist or dental therapist. **Price group B** is for lab-based science, engineering and technology subjects, and some allied health professions. **Price group C2** are subjects with a laboratory, fieldwork or studio element. Table 1 shows grants for the academic year 2019-20.

Table 1: Rates of high-cost subject funding per student⁵

Price Group	Rate of funding	
	without scaling factor	with scaling factor
A	£10,000	£10,250
B	£1,500	£1,537
C1	£ 250	£256
C2 and D	0	0

In 2019 the OfS revised price groups for some subjects⁶. As a result optometry and optical dispensing fall into price group B, which gives the HE provider an OfS funding allocation of £1,500* per student for the 2019-20 academic year.

Table 2. Sources of funding for Optometry and Ophthalmic Dispensing (may vary in other nations).

Source	Maximum amount paid to HE provider (England) per academic year
Student	£ 9,250
Office for Students	£1,500
TOTAL	£10,750 per student (without scaling factor)

3) Funding the Pre-Registration Year - current model

3.1 Salary

In optometry, graduates apply for supervised pre-registration trainee placement posts, and if successful, are contracted for salaried employment for one year. Hospital pre-reg optometry salaries start at approximately £21k. In private practice salaries start at approximately £18k, although there are additional benefits that offset this difference (table 3). Trainee DO salaries in private practice are around £17k. There are no DO trainee placements currently based in hospitals in the UK.

3.2 Scheme for Registration

An optometry pre-reg trainee pays the College of Optometrists £3,870 to register with the Scheme for Registration. The scheme assesses trainees against GOC requirements (as described in our Quality Assurance Handbooks), enabling each trainee to sit clinical and work-based assessments throughout their pre-reg year, including a final, summative practical exam. Many employers will choose to contribute towards some or all of their student's fees to register with the College's Scheme of Registration, although this is less likely for pre-reg students working in hospital settings.

The scheme is supported by assessors appointed by the College. Assessors are required to have prior experience of supervision of pre-registration Optometrists, to be a member of the College of

⁵ https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/784a1671-6e18-45e5-8fa8-8a676f2c9530/ofs2019_18.pdf

⁶ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-collection-feedback-response/>

Optometrists and to commit to at least 3.5 days for every trainee. Assessors receive a fee of £34 per hour from the College of Optometrists.

3.3 Pre-reg Supervisor's Grant

As pre-reg trainees are supervised by an optometrist on-site at the optical practice, under the General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) contracted employers may apply to Primary Care Support England (PCSE) for a grant to cover the cost of providing supervision for each pre-registration trainee. Hospitals cannot claim this grant. Across the other three nations, supervisor's grants are similar (see Appendix B).

The supervisor and pre-reg trainee must be employed by the same GOS contractor. In addition, the trainee must be enrolled on the College of Optometrists' Scheme for Registration, and the supervisor must be a College member and have completed the College's training modules.

The employer retains the grant to cover supervision costs. The supervisor may or may not have this additional role reflected in their salary. Further investigation into how these funds are used would be helpful to understand if there is a need to develop a case for this element of the GOS contract to be increased.

There is usually a reciprocal arrangement between hospitals and high street practices to enable pre-reg trainees to broaden their clinical experience through day-release in Hospital Eye Services or private practice. Usually there are no fees associated with this arrangement. Differences and funding sources are shown in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3. Funding breakdown for pre-registration Optometrists for England

Description	Funding source	Amount	Beneficiary
Scheme for Registration	Trainee / employer	£3,870 / year	College of Optometrists
College Assessor	College of Optometrists	Approx. £35/hour	Assessor
Pre-reg supervisors grant	NHS (e.g. PCSE)	£3,549 / year	Employer
Salary	Employer	Average £19.5k	Trainee
Training courses and CET	Trainee / employer	Variable	Trainee

Table 4. Differences between optometry pre-registration year in hospital vs. private practice

Description	Hospital pre-reg	Private practice pre-reg
Salary	Approx. £21k (£25k London)	Approximately £18k
Scheme for Registration	Pre-reg trainee covers costs	Usually paid by employer
Pre-reg supervisors grant	Hospital supervisors cannot claim.	Can be claimed if GOS contractor (majority are).
CET and training	Pre-reg trainee covers costs	Usually paid or provided in-house

4) Exploring additional, new or reallocated sources of funding

There are two routes to increase funding: **existing channels** and **new sources**.

4.1 Existing Channels

Undergraduate Tuition Fees & Loans

We anticipate that students studying for an approved qualification leading to an academic award in optometry or dispensing optician from an education provider (usually a university) with degree awarding powers (such as those regulated in England by OfS) will continue to be eligible for loans (Student Loan Company or equivalent) for both tuition fees and means-tested living expenses for the full duration of their programme, including the periods of integrated professional and clinical experience proposed by the ESR. Tuition fees charged by a single point of accountability (SPA) (provided they are regulated by OfS or equivalent) may vary, up to (in England) the OfS limit of £9,250 per year.

Alternatively, students, including overseas/non-EU students who are frequently charged higher fees than UK/ EU students, may privately finance their studies.

OfS re-mapping to price group A.

The OfS has recently reviewed its subject price groups (its evidence informing this review is published on its website), so is unlikely to re-map for optometry alone, unless a more wide-ranging strategic review of the method and evidence of OfS's funding allocation is undertaken within the ESR timeframe. There may be some value in further discussion with OfS, although historically OfS (and its predecessor, HEFCE) have been resistant to changing to price-banding as a result of approaches individual subject groups, unless supported by HESA data suggesting a significant funding gap adversely effecting existing providers.

Supervisor's Grant: Primary Care Support England (PCSE)

The current model for training and assessment of optometrists provides an income for the College of Optometrists through the Scheme for Registration, and for the pre-reg employer through the supervisor's grant, part of the GOS contract disbursed by PCSE on behalf of NHSE. However, supervisors and employers frequently state that the grant is not enough to cover the true cost of supervision; one piece of independent work which might be helpful to co-commission would be to examine how the GOS contract funding for supervision might be enhanced, made accessible to placement providers other than just high-street practices funded under contract by the NHS, as well as enhancing the quality assurance around this spend, under the new integrated model.

We could make a case for an increase via the General Ophthalmic Services Contract/ NHSE and cross-nation equivalents, for the better deployment, quality assurance and distribution of the supervisor's grant to a wider variety of placement providers, including hospitals. In addition, the GOC and stakeholders could engage with HEE/ HEIW/ NES to understand the criteria for funding other HCP's placement and experiential learning, and make a case for securing additional funding (on top of the supervisor's grant) to meet patient needs in the transformation of optical services.

Ophthalmic Dispensing

It appears that there is less scope and need for changing the education delivery model for Ophthalmic Dispensing. There are already various routes to this qualification, either self-funded by the student or through an apprenticeship-style approach which involves practical, distance learning and day-release attendance. Funding has been adjusted by the OfS (from C2 to B) to reflect the clinical / lab-based elements of the dispensing courses.

4.2 New sources of funding

Clinical Commissioning Groups (or other national equivalents)

Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), via the NHS, already provide funding for upskilling Optometrists at a local level to deal with the increase in demand and pressure on hospital eye services. Schemes such as Minor Eye Conditions Services (MECS), Diabetic Retinopathy Screening and Grading, and the Primary Eyecare Acute Referral Scheme (PEARS) are provided in this way. A case could be made for CCG (or HEE, HEIW & NES) funding of undergraduate provision, if that provision included preparedness for, and acquisition of additional skills and competence currently funded by CCGs.

Health Education England (HEE) and cross-nation equivalents, HEIW, NES & Dept of the Economy, NI

In addition, avenues of support from HEE, HEIW, NES and in NI, Dept of the Economy for placement provision, interprofessional, experiential and work-based learning should be explored, underpinned by evidence of equivalent need for support to that provided to pharmacy, medicine and dentistry.

Central Government

Approaching central Government for funding to address regional differences and to retain or attract talent locally. This may be an option as Government announced assistance through grants for all degree-level Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health students, including students in regions or specialisms struggling to recruit from September 2020⁷.

Although the optical professions are not considered professions allied to medicine, it may provide a platform for the GOC to highlight the regional disparities in eye health provision and initiate further dialogue.

UK Healthcare Education Advisory Committee

Consider engaging with the UK Healthcare Education Advisory Committee (UKHEAC)⁸, which is run jointly by UK higher education funding bodies, has cross-nation membership and advises UK funding bodies on healthcare education and workforce matters.

This engagement would raise the profile of optometry, and establish the profession as a serious option in delivering extended eye health services, and may help influence funding bodies

The most recent available minutes show the GPhC attending as observers alongside other healthcare regulators, expressing concerns about the current pharmacy degree model's lack of clinical placement time, and their proposal to address this⁹.

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-backs-nhs-staff-with-5000-annual-payment-for-nursing-students>

⁸ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/funding-for-providers/health-education-funding/ukheac/>

⁹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/7053f352-88df-4105-b604-8b6f4fbb9585/ukheac-june-2019-minutes-min36.pdf>

5) Other Considerations

5.1 Pharmacy and optometry qualifications

Despite the similarities between pharmacy and optometry qualifications and routes to registration (for most, a degree followed by a pre-registration year in practice), there are significant differences between the professions in the financial and organisational support for available for placements, pre-registration experience and experiential learning, as illustrated in Table 5 below.

Over the past decade pharmacists have positioned themselves as a readily accessible, qualified alternative to the general practitioner, as well as securing advanced and consultant level roles within secondary and community-based care. Of note is the significant difference between the financial and organisational support pharmacy students and pre-regs receive from HEE, HEIW which is not replicated for optometry or DOs (but could be).

Table 5

	Optometry	Pharmacy
Degree level	BSc	MPharm
Length of course	3 years	4 years
Assessed by	College assessor	Pharmacist tutor
Supervised by	Optometrist supervisor	Pharmacist tutor
Pre-reg supervision grant	£3,549 / year	£18,440 / year
Significant hospital presence	No	Yes
Significant high street presence	Yes	Yes
Source of pre-reg supervision grant income	GOS contract	HEE/ HEIW/ NES & NI

5.2 Regional Differences

To seek to address regional disparities we could discuss and scope out, with HE providers / SPAs, the possibility of country-wide pre-reg placements. Placements could be coordinated through a single agency or organisation, such as the UK wide portal for recruitment to postgraduate medical, dental, public health, healthcare science and pharmacy training programmes, the Oriel scheme¹⁰, with students selecting regions in order of preference. A region would be allocated to the student depending on demand, and would change for each placement environment. This could have the potential to expose students to a range of demographics and working environments, with the advantage of preparing student for a variety of situations and patients.

¹⁰ <https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/Account/LandingPage>

6) Next Steps

The first funding Roundtable took place Friday 13th March 2020. The ESR project team circulated the funding paper to attendees on the day of the roundtable and continue to work with the sector to check information, as well as follow up agreed actions. The consensus at our Roundtable event was that although funding was the prime topic of the event, we should not lose sight of the purpose of the ESR, which is to ensure the qualifications we approve are responsive to the rapidly changing landscape in the delivery of eye-care services across the United Kingdom as well as the needs of patients and service users.

Whilst we were particularly interested in understanding how current sources of funding might change, what might we influence, where new funding might be found, and what evidence might be required to access it, we are also acutely aware that other healthcare professions have secured financial support for additional experiential and practice-based learning underpinning routes to registration. A key question is therefore how we can learn from the example of other healthcare professions, particularly pharmacy, in securing additional funding, and what further action we need to take to help SPAs navigate the further and higher education funding landscape to successfully implement the new model of optical education.

Appendix A: Cross-nation Higher Education funding bodies

Country	Funding Organisation	Accountable to:
England	Office for Students (OfS)	Department for Education
Scotland	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)	SFC is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) of the Scottish Government
Wales	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)	
Northern Ireland	N.I. Department of the Economy	

Appendix B: Cross-nation pre-reg supervisor grant

This table shows how much Employers (GOS contractors) can claim for providing Supervision for pre-registration trainees.

Country	Amount per pre-reg trainee	Number of pre-reg trainees (2018/19)	Total amount claimed	Claim processed by
England	£3,549	575	£2,040,675	Primary Care Support England (PCSE)
Wales	£3,549	25	£88,725	Primary Care Services NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership
Scotland	£3,619	73	£264,187	NHS National Services Scotland
Northern Ireland	£3,409	7	£23,863	Ophthalmic services, Business Services Organisation.

Appendix C: Tuition fees by region for courses starting in 2020

Student's home region	Studying in England	Studying in Scotland	Studying in Wales	Studying in Northern Ireland
England	Up to £9,250	Up to £9,250	Up to £9,000	Up to £9,250
Scotland	Up to £9,250	No fee	Up to £9,000	Up to £9,250
Wales	Up to £9,250	Up to £9,250	Up to £9,000	Up to £9,250
Northern Ireland	Up to £9,250	Up to £9,250	Up to £9,000	Up to £4,395
EU	Up to £9,250	No fee	Up to £9,000	Up to £4,395

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