

Optometrist Degree Apprenticeship Q&As January 2020

Introduction

The Trailblazer group proposal to set up a degree apprenticeship for optometry has attracted considerable debate. We asked Victoria Unsworth, the group's chair, for insight into the proposal, and a response to the concerns that have been raised.

ABOUT THE DEGREE APPRENTICESHIP PROPOSAL

1. Why has the Trailblazer group made an application to set up a degree apprenticeship on optometry?

Because we want patients to have access to high quality eyecare and that can only happen if there is a fair distribution of optometrists across the country.

An ageing population and overburdened NHS is increasing the demand for optometrists across the UK.

We also believe that attracting good people into optometry from a diverse range of backgrounds and locations is essential to maintaining a healthy profession.

The reality today is that university students prefer to study close to home and are reluctant to travel far after they have qualified. Almost a quarter (23%) of university students in the UK live at home and a further 50% attend a university within 55 miles of home.

For many remote and rural areas where there are no universities this means that high-calibre school leavers are less likely to study optometry and it is more difficult to attract optometrists to work there.

And university is expensive. The average student optometrist has debts of more than £50,000 when they graduate, with those from poorer backgrounds in greater debt.

Taking away the burden of debt and allowing people to study and earn locally will encourage participation, and that can only be a good thing for patients and for the profession.

2. Who is involved in the Trailblazer group?

The Trailblazer group consists of representatives from:

Employers - Asda, Boots Opticians, the Hakim Group, Leightons Opticians, Optical Express, Scrivens Opticians, Moorfields Eye Hospital, The Outside Clinic, Specsavers, Thompson Opticians, Vision Express

Universities – Aston, Bradford, City, Hertfordshire, Huddersfield and Plymouth

Optical sector – College of Optometrists, ABDO, BCLA, FODO, GOC, AIO

3. What are the key features of a degree apprenticeship?

Apprentices will gain a Level 7 Master's degree in optometry from a GOC approved university—without needing to pay student fees.

The course will last four years and will be a combination of block release to universities and supervised work in the workplace.

Training costs are co-funded by the government and the employer.

Apprentices are employed and paid a salary throughout the programme.

4. Where are we in the apprenticeship development process?

The Apprenticeship Standard has been drafted and was in the public domain for consultation initially until 9 December 2019. Due to the volume of feedback received, we as a trailblazer group decided to extend the consultation until 10 January 2020, to allow everyone to have a chance to respond.

For further clarity on all aspects of the apprenticeship development please go to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE) website.
www.instituteforapprenticeships.

5. How will the decision be made – what happens at end of the standards consultation?

All feedback received is being reviewed and categorised and will be used to build changes into the occupational standard.

The occupational standard then goes through two further quality assurance checks.

Once the Trailblazer group has completed the amendments the GOC will be asked to review the revised occupational standard to ensure that it aligns with regulatory Standards of Practice. Finally, the occupational standard, along with evidence of support from the GOC will be submitted to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to seek approval.

When the occupational standard is approved it will be published by the Institute on their website.

6. The consultation on the occupational standard has attracted a lot of attention and some are questioning the development of an apprenticeship. Will you be halting the proposal?

No.

As a Trailblazer Group we are considering all constructive feedback to enable us to get this right through consultation with the optical profession. The objective is to create a programme which, while as rigorous and comprehensive as those already available, offers the further benefit of an earlier and deeper exposure to clinical practice, producing graduates with the highest and broadest level of clinical skills. We are committed to attracting good people into optometry from a diverse range of backgrounds and locations and believe that a degree apprenticeship is good way to do this.

7. Will there be any further opportunity for feedback to shape the degree apprenticeship?

We are planning to hold a stakeholder roundtable event in March to bring together optical bodies, employers and universities to discuss the outputs from the consultation.

Once the apprenticeship standard is approved for delivery and published on the Institute's website it will be ready for universities to use to develop their degree apprenticeship offer. Employers and individual universities will then be able to work together to shape the delivery of the degree apprenticeship.

8. If it goes ahead, when will the first courses be introduced?

We are still early in the development stages and anticipate that the apprenticeship standard will be approved for delivery by the Institute later in 2020.

From that point, universities and employers will be able to begin to plan delivery of their degree apprenticeship. It is unlikely that we will see any university degree apprenticeship programme ready for delivery before Autumn 2021.

9. Has the GOC been involved and do they support this route to qualification?

The GOC has been involved from the initial concept design and continue to be involved throughout every part of the process. The apprenticeship model is in line with the Education Review and helps support the wider development of individuals within the workplace. In addition, the regulator is clear that the apprenticeship standard and end point assessment plan must align with the GOC's requirements for statutory registration.

10. Why is Skills for Health the main contact?

Skills for Health is commissioned by Health Education England to provide facilitation and technical expertise on the apprenticeship standard and end point assessment to several trailblazer groups. As part of this, Skills for Health is supporting the optometrist degree apprenticeship development group. Over the past four years Skills for Health has worked with a range of employer groups to facilitate the development of over 40 healthcare occupation apprenticeship standards and end-point assessment plans. Details of how apprenticeship standards are developed can be seen at <https://haso.skillsforhealth.org.uk/> along with a range of other materials to support employers with implementation of apprenticeships.

CONCERNS RAISED – AND THE RESPONSE OF THE TRAILBLAZER GROUP

1. With so many new universities created, there is no shortage of optometrists.

While there may be enough optometrists close to universities that offer an optometry degree, there is already an acute shortage of optometrists in many parts of the country.

As the AOP identified in its 'Optometrists' Futures' report in 2018, there are particular recruitment challenges in the East of England, London and Wales. Only 17% of optometrists surveyed said they would be prepared to move to another part of the UK for the 'ideal job'.

The College's Optical Workforce Survey in 2015 also found a net undersupply of optometrists, with considerable variations across regions.

If we want optometrists to take on an enhanced clinical role and if we want patients to have access to high quality eyecare regardless of where they live, then we need to increase the number of optometrists in the profession.

2. Degree apprenticeships will result in a 'dumbing down' of the profession.

Absolutely not, there is no evidence to support these comments. Standards will be assured by the GOC and by the universities.

This is not an easy route to becoming an optometrist. It is a different way to learn, but all degree apprentices will be required to meet the same GOC core competency standards that current university students are required to meet.

The employers' role is to ensure that the programme is informed by practical everyday real practice, and not solely by academic theory – something that is essential for all clinical disciplines.

While degree apprenticeships will lessen the financial burden for students, key attributes required will be the willingness to work hard, to be bright and able to learn independently, to be confident and mature – and to have excellent time management skills in order to balance study alongside work. It will not be a soft option.

3. The degree apprenticeship proposal is a threat to patient safety.

Standards will be assured by the GOC and by the universities so there is absolutely no risk to public safety. By its nature a degree apprenticeship must be as academically challenging as a traditional degree.

Degree apprentices would have to meet the academic requirements of the degree and the regulatory requirements of the GOC. This includes working under supervision until they have met the requirements for full registration with the GOC to practise independently..

4. Apprentices will not be able to equip themselves with the necessary level of clinical skills while spending their time in a work environment.

Employers and universities will be required to ensure there is appropriate and safe learning progression through both work-based and university-based learning. There will be transparent and clear agreements about the limits of degree apprentices' status, scope of practice and competence as they progress through their degree.

5. With entry being made more inclusive, and open to students with lower academic qualifications, standards will drop.

The admission requirements will require anyone who is accepted into the programme to have the potential to achieve the academic, professional and regulatory requirements of an optometry degree.

Universities will continue to set the entry requirements.

6. A degree apprenticeship will only benefit the large employers.

Any degree apprenticeship standard must be relevant to the profession wherever it is practised, not just to a particular sector.

Our aim is to create a programme that can be implemented by all optical businesses large or small and that is why we have such a broad representation on our trailblazer group.

Optical sector employers are already paying several millions of pounds in apprenticeship levy and the degree apprenticeship provides a route to ensure these funds are re-invested in the sector, ultimately to the benefit of patients.

Employers who pay the levy (companies with payroll over £3m) will be able to use it to support the entire cost of each apprentice optometrist, and non-levy payers, such as independent practices, will be able to claim 95% of the cost.

7. An apprenticeship is not suitable for a healthcare profession.

Degree options are rapidly expanding. Professions where students can choose to study and qualify through a degree apprenticeship include architect, aerospace engineer, radiographer, advanced clinical practitioner, healthcare science practitioner, midwife, nuclear engineer, operating department practitioner, paramedic, physician associate, physiotherapist, podiatrist and registered nurse.

Most universities in England are now registered to provide degree apprenticeships, which assures quality and standards.

Indeed, many intend to run 20% of their courses as degree apprenticeships within the next five years. If we don't achieve this for optometry, we will miss out on talented students who will enter other professions that do offer a degree apprenticeship.

8. Apprenticeships will undermine public confidence in the profession of optometrist.

A degree apprenticeship in any profession should not, and must not, lower the high standards of the profession concerned. Any degree apprenticeship for a profession that is subject to statutory regulation must meet the academic, professional and regulatory requirements for that profession.

The standards and outcome are the same: They will identify to the public as a GOC Registered Optometrist.

9. There will not be enough time for the necessary education in four years if 80% of time is in work.

For degree apprentices their learning will extend across the whole calendar year, rather than being limited by the shorter academic year.

This will enable the depth and breadth of learning that is required to meet the academic, professional and regulatory demands attached to pre-registration optometry education.

20% off the job learning is a minimum threshold stipulated by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. Many apprenticeships, in particularly degree apprenticeships, require a much higher percentage off the job learning. For healthcare occupations, the off the job (university based) learning will typically be in excess of 50%. The exact figure will be determined by regulatory requirements and the delivery model set up by the university.

10. Practice-based optometrists are not trained educators. The core scientific, independent fact and evidence-based training cannot be provided in practice by individuals focused on their day to day workload.

The core scientific, independent fact and evidence-based training will still be provided by the universities. The degree apprentices will have much more access to real clinical practice and will be able to gain their experience and apply their university learning while being supervised by a professional in practice.

11. This is about driving down salaries.

While on the programme, the degree apprentices would obviously be paid a lower salary than their fully-qualified colleagues, but following qualification and registration, we would expect salary levels to be the same as those who have demonstrated the same threshold requirements through a different route.