

Re:View

Keeping excellence in your sights | January 2025 | Issue 48



From Godmersham
to the GOC

Apprenticeships
launch success

Optical assistant
celebrates

Meet the new
College staff

A milestone year for ABDO College



Clive Marchant

The first cohort of Level 6 Dispensing Optician Apprenticeship students enrolled at ABDO College last September, following the General Optical Council (GOC) approval for delivering the apprenticeship course. This summer we will see the expansion of apprenticeship students as we move to the second year of delivery.

Training for a qualification via an apprenticeship has significant advantages for the apprentice and employer. Large employers, which includes the major UK optical multiples, are required to fund the government apprenticeship scheme regardless of how many apprentices they employ, so they are keen to draw back as much of their funding as possible.

Smaller employers are also eligible for government funding, which will pay between 95–100 per cent of the apprenticeship training costs. Hence the cost barriers for all employers to train dispensing opticians is greatly reduced, which will also reduce the need for students to self-fund.

I'm convinced that the apprenticeship route to qualification will drive an increase of dispensing opticians and significantly reduce the current shortage of dispensing opticians in our practices. This in turn will benefit the public, ensuring their spectacles are dispensed by an FBDO-qualified dispensing optician.

The apprenticeship course is delivered in parallel to the current FBDO Diploma course as there are some who still choose this route, including students from our devolved nations, who currently are not entitled to apprenticeship funding.

A highlight of the year is always the ABDO Graduation and Prize Giving Ceremony at Canterbury Cathedral and this year's event will be on Tuesday 20 May. We're all looking forward to it.

Clive Marchant FBDO
Chair of trustees

Back to PAC

ABDO College made a welcome return to the annual flagship Specsavers Professional Advancement Conference (PAC) which put higher qualifications in the spotlight.

More than 2,000 dispensing opticians, optometrists and audiologists attended the 30th anniversary conference at the ICC Birmingham in November.

ABDO College lecturers, Callum Wills and Charlotte Carroll, had a very busy day manning the College stand. "It was a fantastic opportunity to network with both employers and other institutions within the optical sector," said Callum.

"We saw many students attend as well and many people registered interest in our courses."



Charlotte Carroll and Callum Wills manning the ABDO College stand

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Landmark apprenticeships successfully launched

The apprenticeship programme providing a new pathway to qualification, with government funding, has been successfully launched. Recognition from the General Optical Council (GOC) meant that the Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) could begin delivering its Level 6 Dispensing Optician Apprenticeship from September.

ABDO is working in partnership with three education centres, ABDO College, Bradford College and City and Islington College, which now have 130 apprentices enrolled between them.

ABDO head of professional qualifications and education, Miranda Richardson, told *Re:View*: "We are thrilled to see such a healthy intake of apprentices at each of the ophthalmic dispensing colleges. There is a significant amount of work involved in the new enrolment process but each of our affiliated institutes has adapted to this successfully.

"The apprentices are progressing in year one of their course alongside our diploma students. The changes we have made to both courses provide greater support for trainees completing their patient encounter case records and



supports more structured and flexible supervision arrangements in their practice placements.

"We continue to work closely with the GOC to attain approval for the course overall and supporting all learners as they progress through their training."

ABDO chief executive, Alistair Bridge, said: "The launch enables students and employers in England to access government funding to pay for their education and examinations. This will lead to enhanced recognition of the profession."

For more information on the new apprenticeship programme go to page 6.

Displaying the benefits of tinted lenses

A new display showing different types of lenses and with information leaflets has been donated to the ABDO College library by Optimum RX Lens Specialists. The company has also donated goody packs for the College's first year students.

Lecturer Callum Wills said: "The Optimum tint range display shows exactly how versatile the company is. The vibrant fashion colours are fantastic, showing students from all different practices what options we can choose from."



The new Optimum display

New appointments at the College

ABDO College has appointed some new members of staff. Laura Stratton has been appointed to the new role of apprenticeship manager and you can read more about her and the apprenticeship programme on page 6. A new lecturer, Molly Pinder, has also been appointed and you can find out more about her on page 8. In addition, Mark Tuffin, Sue Deal, Jas Glassop, Nicky Martin and Andrew Newens have become distant learning coaches.

Date to remember

The milestone event which enables students to celebrate their success with family and friends is just a few months away. The ABDO Graduation and Prize Giving Ceremony will be held on Tuesday 20 May at Canterbury Cathedral.

Providing lens education in comfort

Students are now relaxing and studying in comfort during their break times thanks to donations from major lens and frames company – Rodenstock.



The Rodenstock Snug is a comfortable, quiet area at Godmersham recently upgraded with new cushions, a clock



and various posters. It features a screen which runs a programme that educates students on a range of Rodenstock

products and their performance.

A new display in the snug contains varied tint samples and leaflets on Rodenstock's progressive lenses, the B.I.G Norm and Exact, as well as a full range portfolio catalogue of the company's products.

"The Rodenstock Snug is a wonderful place for students to relax between lectures and during their breaks, however, it is also a place to fill students with a great wealth of knowledge," explained lecturer Charlotte Carroll. "Students can be immersed in a world of quality optical appliances which they may not have been exposed to in their own practices."

ABDO College enjoys a close relationship with Rodenstock with students visiting the UK headquarters in Dartford in December for a lab tour and showroom visit.

Sharing opportunities at 100% Optical to boost career advancement

The ABDO College team will be out in force at 100% Optical to highlight the opportunities available for career development. The new apprenticeship programme is sure to be a hot topic for practitioners and employers, along with the courses for optical assistants and support staff to help them improve their optical knowledge and career prospects.

On the stand there will also be information available on the ophthalmic dispensing courses and the popular contact lens courses. The ABDO College

bookshop will make a welcome return, with free postage offered so that customers do not have to carry their purchases around at the event.

This will be the first tradeshow since the UK's largest optical event was acquired by CloserStill Media, a specialist events company delivering tradeshow for pharmacy and dentistry.

CPD workshops will once again be provided by ABDO at this year's 100% Optical which is at ExCeL London on 1–3 March. Registration is free at www.100percentoptical.com



Reflecting on a major advancement for optics and even greater collaboration

By ABDO College principal, Nina McDermott



Last year was a busy time of change at ABDO College and across the whole sector. Our mission is to advance the profession through the provision of high quality, innovative education and training. Our aim is to deliver sector-leading education as the specialist training provider of choice for all aspects of optical education. Our focus across 2024 was therefore collaborating with all our different stakeholders to build towards these aims.

The year was dominated by the rapid development and then launch of higher-level apprenticeships across the sector, following General Optical Council (GOC) final approval in July. It took a huge amount of sustained collective effort by many to launch the apprenticeship route in such a concentrated time period. It is testament to the passion and dedication of all those involved in the education

side of optics that we, collectively, did this. It's fair to say that the training institutes have also learned a lot along the way and that spirit of collaboration, support and constructive challenge is stronger than ever.

The launch of higher-level apprenticeships is a key optical milestone and ABDO College was thrilled to be able to welcome our first intake of apprentices, alongside traditional route students, onto the FBDO Diploma programme in late August. Around half of our first-year intake are following the apprenticeship route, showing the sector's appetite for this type of opportunity. There are many areas of good practice in apprenticeships that will be extended across all year groups, so the benefits will be felt by all.

Funding

For employers, there is a lot of information to understand about accessing apprenticeship funding, alongside a not insignificant amount of compliance and expectations connected to this funding. I would encourage employers to take the time to look into the requirements and expectations and to take advantage of this route to registration, if eligible and they feel it works for them. The process can feel a little overwhelming initially, but ABDO College is here to support employers, as well as students, through this process.

In this *Re:View* there is an interview with Laura, our new apprenticeship manager, who outlines some of the key features of apprenticeships and how they are funded. Any employer can reach out to us for guidance on setting up apprenticeships that succeed and we are always happy to come and talk to you or guide you through the key steps of accessing this funding route. Our new employer guide will soon be published to provide additional layers of support.

ABDO College is, of course, about so much more than apprenticeships and it has been wonderful to welcome our new and returning students to the College this academic year. Our current first and second year FBDO students are studying the 2023 syllabus and we have focused this year on detailed programme developments to ensure a future-facing approach to blended learning.

We continue to improve and evolve our online and on block learning materials across all our years and programmes. Our third years are taking great strides towards the end of their qualification and are well on their way to succeeding in their studies, as are our engaged cohorts on our contact lens and optical assistant courses. Studying while working full time is really challenging, so please do continue to offer support, encouragement and time to study for all your students.

Finally, thank you from the College to all those who have worked with, and supported, ABDO College this year. We very much look forward to building even stronger relationships across the sector in 2025.

On course for an interesting and fulfilling career

Optical assistant Emily Steele of Edmonds & Slatter Opticians successfully completed ABDO College's optical assistant course a few months ago. Here she and her employer talk to *Re:View* about her career journey so far.



Emily Steele

Emily's move into optics began when she was looking for a change from her job in pharmacy, which still encompassed healthcare and working with patients on a personal level.

"I decided to go down the optical route as it is much more in depth and there is so much more to it than I ever realised," Emily revealed. "Since working in optics, I have found a particular interest in the effects of coloured overlays and coloured lenses in terms of alleviating visual stress, which isn't something I even knew existed before entering optics professionally, plus all

the technology and knowledge advancements in myopia management."

Emily has worked at Edmonds & Slatter Opticians in Leicestershire since December 2022. Explaining why she did ABDO College's optical assistant course she said: "To expand my knowledge base and I wanted to feel more confident and comfortable with different aspects of optics as it was all totally new to me."

Over 26 weeks, Emily balanced the demands of full-time work across five practices while staying committed to her studies on the course. She consistently achieved high pass grades on weekly assignments, participated in webinars and attended a practical skills workshop.

"My favourite part of the course was the practical workshop day at the ABDO National Resource Centre in Birmingham, particularly the simulating eye conditions section as it really helped to put myself in the perspective of someone with cataracts or glaucoma and enables me to relate more to their individual circumstances," said Emily.

"It was also interesting to discuss with other students who were at different stages of the course and in different sorts of optical jobs, such as people who were more lab-focused, or people who worked in multiples

rather than the independent company I work for."

The optical assistant course has helped Emily to feel more confident in certain aspects of her role, such as aiding in frame styling and taking measurements. "The practice-based tasks also helped me engage more with my colleagues and their individual knowledge bases, with them able to advise on what they have learned through experience."

Emily concluded: "I would certainly recommend the course to others. It is a lot of work, particularly if working full time as well, but it is rewarding with the amount of knowledge it provides, the options of progression it opens up and the improvement I feel it has made to my professional life, both in how helpful I can be for patients and as a colleague."

Should Emily wish to extend her career options, successful completion of the optical assistant programme gives the entry requirements to the FBDO Diploma course run by ABDO College.

The employer's view

Explaining the employer's view on why Edmonds & Slatter Opticians chose the optical assistant course, operations manager, Linda Southin, told *Re:View*: "The course was a perfect match for Emily's existing knowledge, and it was clear that it would not only build upon what she already knew, but also provide valuable skills that she could apply in her day-to-day responsibilities.

"Emily's dedication has enhanced her skills and deepened her already

extensive knowledge of optics and the practice environment."

The company supported Emily by providing a mentor who worked closely with her, but she also had the full support of the entire team. "I frequently overheard Emily collaborating with colleagues, discussing the best ways to approach a question, or enhance her skills for upcoming modules. This teamwork and shared knowledge were key in helping her progress," Linda emphasised.

What have been the benefits to the company? "Emily's confidence and expertise have significantly grown, enabling her to take on a more active role within the team and contribute to the practice in a much more informed and effective manner," said Linda.

So would Linda recommend the course to other employers? "Definitely," she replied. "The information and training provided were a great boost for Emily, and the team's support not only benefited her, but also gave others an opportunity to gain insights into the course as well."

The course proved so successful that the company plans to send other members of staff on further courses. "We continuously review the available training opportunities, and we currently have plans for some of our dispensing opticians to begin ABDO's Professional Certificate in Paediatric Eyecare course in the near future," Linda concluded.

**For more information
on the College's courses,
visit www.abdocollege.org.uk**



Optical Support Courses from ABDO College

Optical Support Courses from ABDO College are great for new staff induction and development of your existing support teams.

Optical Support Courses lead to qualifications awarded by the Association of British Dispensing Opticians.

They are for all staff, whether you work in retail optics, manufacturing, sales or technical support.

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The closing date for applications is
2 February 2025.



KEEPING EXCELLENCE IN YOUR SIGHTS

An alternative route to qualification

To support effective apprenticeship delivery, ABDO College has created the new role of apprenticeship manager and Laura Stratton took up the position in September. Here Laura answers *Re:View's* questions.

What does your new job entail?

Looking after the running of the apprenticeship programme, which includes compliance, funding and branching into quality of provision.

What is your career background?

I have worked within apprenticeships for many years now. I started my working life by completing my own apprenticeship and went on to work as a tutor within

further education and independent training providers. I then progressed into education management.

How successful has the launch been?

It's been great. It was a somewhat hectic start to apprenticeships as there are a lot of steps to move through in effective apprenticeship enrolment and onboarding, but we can see that our learners are thriving.

How is the apprenticeship scheme at the College going?

Really well. All learners have an assigned coach they meet with regularly to facilitate their way through the apprenticeship standard. The feedback so far has been good, learners are developing and responding well to the work.

What are the key differences between apprenticeships and the traditional diploma route?

While learners across the 'traditional' FBDO programme and the new apprenticeship pathway will achieve the same end qualification, FBDO, there are certain areas around the delivery of the new programme which are the same, and some which are different.

What are the benefits of the new scheme for apprentices and their employers?

Skilled workforce development:

Apprenticeships enable employers to train and develop skilled workers tailored to their specific needs.

Increased productivity:

By integrating apprentices into the workforce, employers often see increased productivity as apprentices contribute fresh ideas and enthusiasm.

Cost-effective training:

Apprenticeships can be a cost-effective training solution, as employers may benefit from government funding and incentives which offset training costs.

Employee retention:

Apprenticeships foster loyalty and commitment as employees are more likely to stay with the company long-term, reducing turnover costs.

Succession planning:

Investing in apprentices helps create a pipeline of talent for future leadership and specialised roles.

An enhanced company reputation: Employers who offer apprenticeship programmes can enhance their brand, showcasing their commitment to workforce development and community support.

By embracing apprenticeships, employers not only fulfill their immediate staffing needs but also contribute to the long-term growth and sustainability of their business. For more information, visit the College website at www.abdocollege.org.uk or call us if you'd like guidance around any aspect of our traditional and apprenticeship routes.

Examples of similarities are generally within the academic side of delivery:

Learners complete the same programme of study with ABDO College, for example blended learning of online assignments, block release and practice-based development tasks and the anticipated duration of the full programme is the same, three years.



Learners also complete the same examinations with ABDO exams, both theory and practical and must be working under a registered General Optical Council (GOC) supervisor for the same minimum hours per week. All learners must fulfil the ABDO entry criteria to study the qualification. Finally, all our learners work in peer groups, regardless of their funding route.



Examples of differences are generally in relation to funding, required employer responsibilities and external regulations from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA):

The traditional route is commercially funded, whereas the apprenticeship is funded through the government – levy accounts, in the case of levy-paying employers, or through specific government funding and employer co-investment in the case of non-levy paying employers.

Apprentices cannot be charged any costs directly related to the learning plan, for example travel and accommodation for block release, practice-based equipment to fulfil the minimum ABDO standards if not already available, GOC and ABDO registration. Employers are liable for these expenses.

Employers must provide their apprentices with time to complete their 'off-the-job' learning tasks, for example weekly coursework and block release, within paid working hours. These tasks are detailed within each apprentice's learning plan. As a guide, weekly coursework is designed with seven to eight off-the-job learning hours and apprentices attend block release for one week, twice per academic year. There may also be further sessions delivered to support learners, which will be arranged as needed.

Employers, learners and training providers participate in progress reviews, a minimum of every 12 weeks, to check in on the development of the apprentice.

Should an apprentice change employer, their apprenticeship moves with them and they are not liable for any fees or costs incurred by the previous employer.

The on-boarding process of an apprentice is significantly more complex than the traditional route as we need to ensure compliance with, not only the GOC/ABDO regulations, but also ESFA and OFSTED policies. Overall, apprenticeships carry a lot more regulation for training institutes but clearly also bring many opportunities for the sector.

Returning to ABDO College to inspire pride at being a dispensing optician

Former student Molly Pinder returned to the College in September as a new lecturer for the FBDO Dispensing Diploma, teaching across the entire FBDO programme.



Molly has worked in optics for over 10 years, starting out as an apprentice optical assistant at Specsavers in her hometown of Whitby. From there she worked her way through the ranks of in-store trainer, certificate 3, certificate 4, dispensing optician and supervisor.

After leaving Specsavers, Molly worked as a locum dispensing optician, mainly within independent practice, helping her to expand her lens knowledge. After completing a management and leadership diploma, Molly offered practice support and training alongside locuming.

Prior to returning to Godmersham, Molly was a business development manager for the lens manufacturer Norville. So what attracted her to her new role?

"As a student at ABDO College, I got so much out of my experience," she

explained. "The lecturers were incredibly supportive and inspiring. I was not someone who would understand information through reading and block release really put the meat on the bones for my learning."

Great fit

"I had come to a place where I was really reflecting on where I saw myself within the optical industry and I love being a dispensing optician. It is something I am immensely proud of, so when I saw the job advertised, it felt like fate. This felt like a great fit for me."

Molly is now enjoying supporting students in their careers to become fully qualified dispensing opticians. "I have a lot of experience which I really encourage students to draw from,"

and maintaining a life outside of all this too. It is a lot to take on.

"I hope to share my passion for optics," Molly emphasised. "I encourage students to learn from my mistakes, but I also hope they can gain from my in-practice knowledge and experience."

"We should be offering patients the best possible experience we can. It is a great feeling when we have those patients in practice that know us by name. Dispensing opticians are an integral part of any practice and there are so many ways we devalue ourselves, but I want to give students the confidence to take steps forwards where others may take a step back."

"It is my job to ensure students are armed with the know-how and self-assurance to do this."

Molly's advice for students is to try to be as organised as possible. "Take it from someone who would chronically leave everything until the last minute, it really is best," she emphasised.

Molly also recommends: "Make use of your practice education lead, your

'I hope to share my passion for optics.'

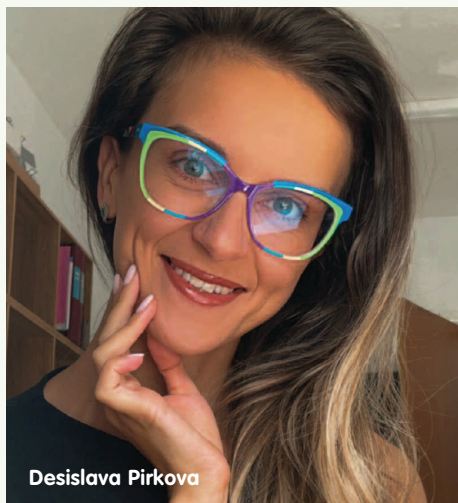
she said, adding: "I am excited to share with students the things that have gone well in my career, but also things that have gone wrong too. I'm very much an open book."

"Having successfully completed the course myself, I can definitely empathise with the students around balancing workload, exam pressure, a full-time job

practice task supervisor and your tutors. They have all been through this too. Even when it is something simple, do not be afraid to ask questions. When you are under pressure with exams, coursework and regular work, even simple things can feel complex. Work hard but find the time to have fun too," she concluded.

Helping others find their passion

Graduating from ABDO College opens up the door to many interesting and fulfilling roles within optics. Here *Re:View* finds out more about graduate Desislava Pirkova, pictured on the cover, who took up a new role as an associate of the General Optical Council (GOC) last April.



Desislava explained what her new role entails: "The GOC associate positions aim to increase the diversity of experiences and perspectives on our council, while providing registrants with the first step towards a board, committee or a panel role."

Desislava's interest in the optical regulator was inspired when she met a member of the GOC team after attending a CPD session and he emphasised how the council plays a crucial role in supporting healthcare providers and their patients. "This inspired me to learn more and get involved in shaping the future of our professions," she said.

Desislava's educational journey in optics began when she did the Fellowship Dispensing Diploma at the College and

qualified as a dispensing optician four years ago.

Hands-on experience

"ABDO College prepared me for my future career by providing hands-on experience during the distance learning course," she highlighted. "The practical sessions were thoughtfully integrated with the tasks we regularly performed in practice, making the learning process highly relevant."

Desislava's favourite parts of the ABDO College course were the two weeks spent at Godmersham twice a year. "I loved every minute of meeting new people and learning from the amazing lecturers," she said.

"I met some fantastic people who later helped me when recruiting fellow dispensing opticians, as I already knew first-hand how skilled they were."

Desislava now manages a small chain of independent practices in Birmingham and bought her own practice in Leicestershire, which she runs simultaneously.

"Running my own practice keeps me connected to the community, which has always been the core idea behind having an independent business," she emphasised. "We're involved in several community projects, including supporting

individuals with sight loss, cancer patients and even sponsoring the local football team."


Desislava would recommend ABDO College to others as it offers 'exceptional lecturers who are passionate about their work.' "Their enthusiasm was clear to us as students, making the learning experience enjoyable, engaging and effective. The beautiful surroundings also create a peaceful atmosphere, perfect for focused learning," she added.

Desislava's love of lifelong learning is evident as she had an economics degree from Coventry University before graduating from ABDO College and is now a second-year optometry student at Aston University.

She urges students to make the most of their time at ABDO College. "Take full advantage of all the resources available to you," she advises. "Learning new things is incredibly powerful, and the knowledge you gain is something no-one can ever take away from you. Embrace every opportunity to expand your understanding, as it will serve you for life."

Desislava strongly believes in the power of inspiring and enabling others. "I like to think that I'm doing this now by empowering young people in the apprenticeship scheme to discover their passion for optics, build a career and inspire those around them.

"I encourage anyone with the opportunity to take that step, whether by sharing knowledge about a course or recommending someone for a job. Helping someone find their passion is one of the greatest gifts you can offer."

A photograph of two young people, a man and a woman, both wearing white lab coats and glasses. They are smiling and looking towards the right. The background is a blurred laboratory setting with various pieces of equipment.

‘ABDO College has given me a chance to further my career in ways I never thought possible.

This experience has changed my life.’

Current student

Apprenticeship and Traditional Routes FBDO Dispensing Diploma

Develop your career and learn while you earn

Want to become a dispensing optician?

ABDO College offers you the chance to combine online learning with in-practice experience and block release.

Apprenticeship and self-funded (employer or student) routes available. Contact us for more details.

The course:

- Has a proven track record of success with consistently high theory and practical exam results
- Gives you a platform to advance your career
- Will improve your earning potential and leads to a variety of careers aligned to dispensing optics.

Entry requirements

GCSEs level 4 or above in English, mathematics, science and two other subjects (Grade C pre-2017).

You must be working in practice as a trainee dispensing optician for a minimum of 20 hours per week under a GOC-registered supervisor and have the support of your employer.

For more details and to apply: visit www.abdocollege.org.uk call **01227 738 829 (Option 1)** or email info@abdocollege.org.uk