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Sector Partnership for Optical
Knowledge and Education

Project 3

Admissions and Recruitment:

State of the Art and Plans for the Future

Contents

Project 3 – Admissions and Recruitment: State of the Art and Plans for the Future

1. Findings from desk-based research

Admissions data was collected from www.discoveruni.gov.uk and individual institutions' websites, as well as from the GOC Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) and from university representatives who contributed to sector-led discussions and an online survey.

Optometry

The data showed that the UCAS tariff typical offer for entry on to Optometry courses ranged from 128 tariff points to 144 tariff points, with the majority of universities requesting 136-144 points. Of the universities considered, most required three A levels, with just one institution requiring two A levels. Where three A levels were required, the grades required ranged from AAA to BBB, with all requiring at least two A levels in science subjects for entry to BSc (Hons) or MOptom courses.

When looking at BTECs, it was found that 70 per cent of universities would accept these qualifications from students applying for optometry courses, although some also require an additional A level. It was difficult to establish the full application process for each institution, due to limited information being available on the websites and a reluctance amongst a few institutions to share information through the SPOKE survey. However, it was clear that some universities are including additional steps to assess applicants with one university mentioning an online selection exercise, two mentioning a telephone or Zoom interview and one conducting a face-to-face interview as part of the process.
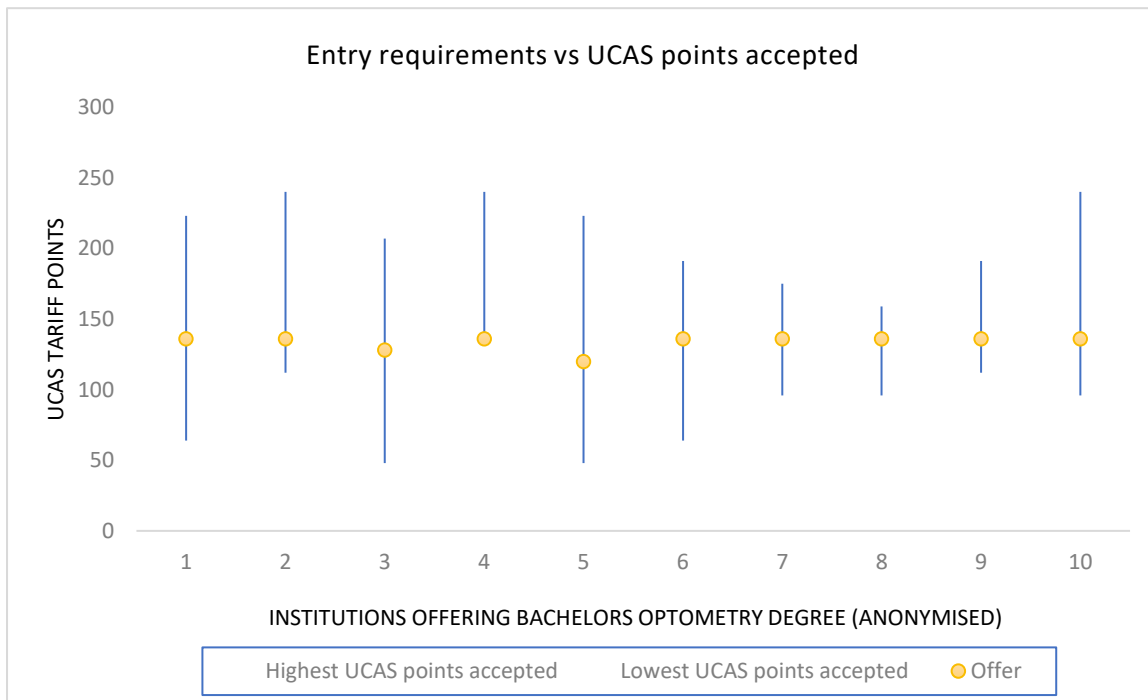
Figure 1.

Figure 1 above, contains a graph to show the UCAS tariff points typical offer (displayed as a yellow dot) by each of the anonymised institutions, with the blue line indicating the range of UCAS tariff points accepted for entry on to the

Bachelors optometry degree. It should be noted that this graph contains incomplete data due to the 'Discover Uni.' website being in the process of updating to the 2023 ETR courses.

Dispensing Optics

A review of the admissions data for dispensing optics courses found that a number of institutions, require five GCSEs at grade C or above, including Maths and English and one science based subject. All ABDO institutes also accept Specsavers Certificate 4 as a pathway to sitting the ABDO year 1 assessments and then entry to year 2 of academic studies. In addition, one ABDO institute also offers an access course as an alternative entry route. This pathway has been mapped to ensure Certificate 4 covers all of the ABDO year one content. In addition, one institution requires applicants to have at least one year of optical work experience and one institution states that they welcome applications from those who do not meet the criteria but have experience in the subject area.

Data from the GOC Approved Qualifications Annual Monitoring & Reporting 2020/21 Sector Report (AMR)

The GOC Approved Qualifications Annual Monitoring & Reporting 2020/21 Sector Report (AMR) states that the mean offer made to prospective optometry students was 136.3 UCAS points, which approximately equates to AAB grades at A level and the mean offer made to prospective dispensing optics student was 66.8, approximately equivalent to DDE at A level.

The AMR highlights that applications for optometry qualifications remains strong with applications far exceeding the number of places available, but that student numbers for dispensing optics is a concern with a fall in recruitment. However, current data indicates that the year one intake numbers for the ABDO affiliated institutes are almost back to pre-pandemic figures, showing that whilst COVID did impact student numbers for 2020 and 2021, this has since recovered.

EDI Data, used with permission, from the GOC AMR 2020/21

Figure 2 - Gender of students

|	Female	Male
Optometry	65.8%	34.2%
Dispensing Optics	63.3%	36.7%

The data on gender shows a much higher percentage of students for both optometry and dispensing optics are female with males making up just 34% of optometry students and 36.7% of dispensing optics students

Figure 3 - Ethnicity of students

	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Other	Not known
Optometry	25.1%	3.7%	63.6%	2.1%	3.7%	1.8%

As can be seen in figure 3, for optometry, the most common ethnicity is Asian (63.6%) whilst for dispensing optics the most common ethnicity is white (47.6%), followed by Asian (41.4%). For both professions there are low numbers of black students (3.7% for optometry and 3.4% for dispensing optics), although it should be noted that this is only slightly lower than the national population percentage of 4.0%.

Figure 4 – Age of students
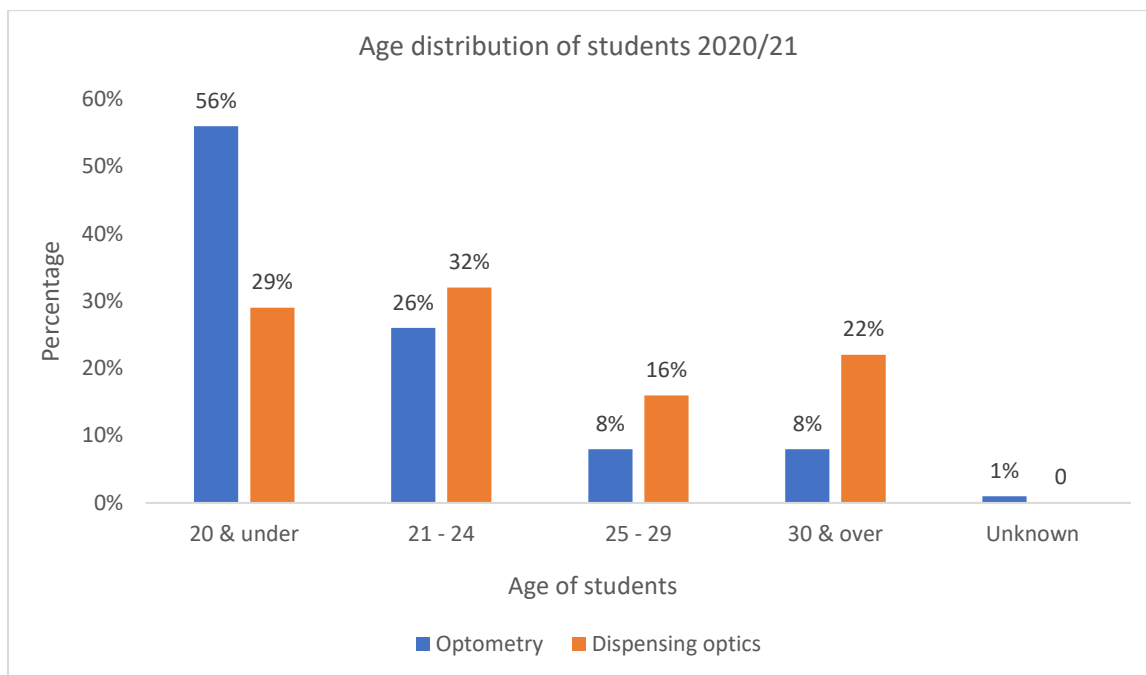
From the data obtained from GOC, 56% of students studying for optometry qualifications are aged 20 and under, whilst dispensing optics qualifications have a wider distribution of ages and a higher proportion of students aged 30 years and over; this reflects the larger proportion of mature students enrolling on part-time dispensing optics qualifications.

SPOKE Survey

The information gathered from the SPOKE survey, showed that 66% of respondents are recruited through clearing with no different criteria or processes used and 75% of these stated that they drop their offer for clearing. This provides a markedly different picture than that of the GOC AMR data, which suggested a buoyant recruitment situation. This might be explained by optometry being a third to fifth choice for many applicants, e.g. as a fall-back for medicine, but is of some concern. None of the respondents indicated that they made allowances on the basis of context (e.g. free school meal status) when making offers to prospective students. When asked to consider their plans for the future, all those surveyed stated that they expect their ETR course to have the same entry requirements as the current courses offered, even though the ETR requirements have increased the minimum qualification level from that of bachelors to masters All respondents reported that they have low numbers of international students with between 0% and 10% of their cohort being from overseas. Given the current financial climate, and established reliance of universities on increased numbers of international students to mitigate the impact of static funding for home students against a rapidly rising cost base, this may represent a vulnerability for the sector.

2. Attracting the right calibre of candidates

Across the sector, it was felt that there is a need to balance what is reasonable when assessing potential candidates for university courses, and what is appropriate for the course that they are applying for. Currently, A levels are used as the benchmark when considering university applications however, it is felt that these qualifications require a lot of learning by rote and learning focused on assessment outcomes and these skills are not necessarily the skills required of clinicians and dispensing opticians who need to think laterally, and be patient-centred. In addition, employers are concerned about the level of stress and drop-out levels for those students who come straight from

school to university, without any work experience. Employers have found that these students are often not prepared for the challenges that come with entering into a high-pressure customer-facing career.

Equally, concerns were raised by several HEI's that students who apply through access courses are not as well prepared for the rigours of an optometry degree, particularly assessment by examination, as those with equivalent UCAS tariff points at A level. One institution reported that they found students entering through the access course route are four times more likely to have to repeat a year than those who came through the A level route. There has been an increase in the number of students applying to universities through access courses over the past 5 years.

Figure 5

Chart to show the level of students at each institution entering the course with A level results below the standard offer level
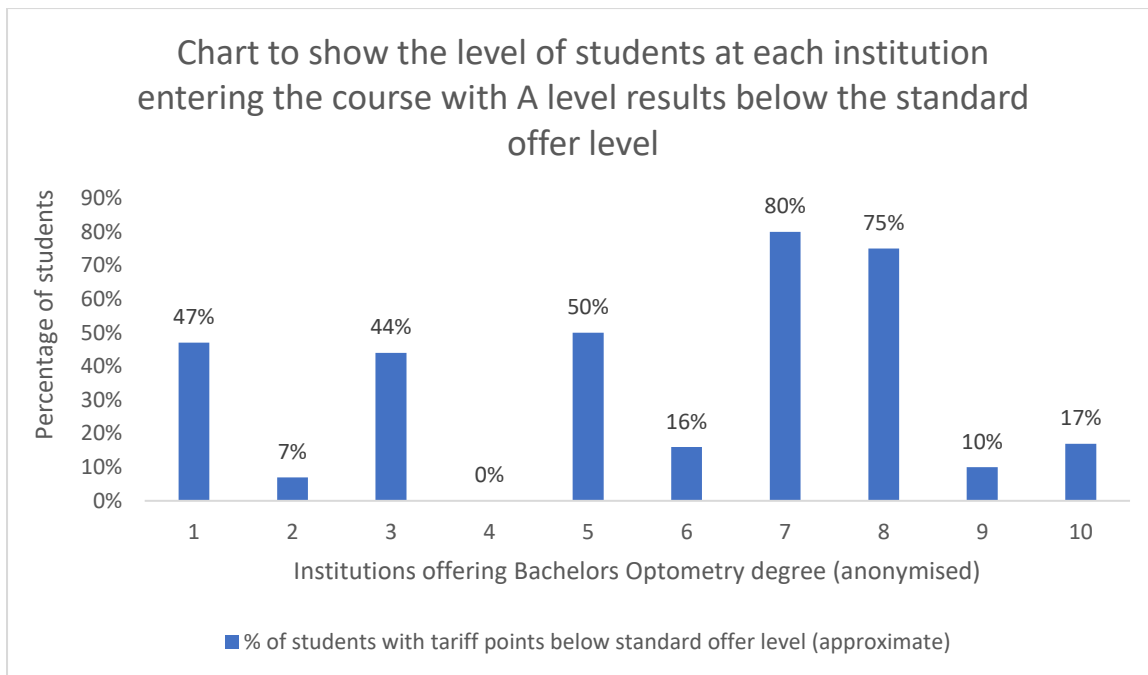
Figure 5, above, contains a graph to show the percentage of students, at each institution, entering the Bachelors optometry degree with A level results that were below the institution's standard offer. From this data, it can be seen that many institutions are taking a high percentage of students who do not meet their entry offer. It is worth noting that for institution 7, 80 per cent of their intake for this cohort did not meet their standard offer and for institution 8, 75 per cent of the intake were below their standard offer. Whilst offer levels across the sector are often a face-value "price-tag" for applicants, and actual entry grades are commonly lower in reality, it is of concern that such a large proportion of entrants are frequently admitted with grades significantly lower than the standard offer, and indicative of the need to increase interest in studying optometry.

3. How are we able to assess applicants, to include motivation as well as academic capability?

During sector-led discussions it was raised that considering how potential students approach problems, along with aptitude skills, may be a more appropriate way to assess students. Our research found that not all institutions are interviewing prospective students. A number of the universities using interviews as part of their application process reported that there can be pressure, from central admissions, to make offers to all students and there is a need to justify why an offer is not made to a student who meets the entrance requirements but is rejected due to not performing well at interview.

However, there were concerns with the narrative that 'communication skills cannot be learned' and that students have to come into the course with these skills already fully formed as it is expected that communication skills could be developed during the course. There is also the need to be cautious with making a decision based on a one-off interview as there is only a short time to see the candidate. Potential students might be very nervous on the day and this may be their first experience of a formal interview.

Most universities have set entrance requirements that relate to A level results however, is this necessary or would it be better to take someone with lower academic qualifications but who also has customer-facing experience? There may also be a need to look at students' motivation and ensuring that those who are really committed to a career in optometry are able to get on to the courses. These are all areas that should be considered when interviewing candidates.

Considerations should also be given to whether occupational health assessments and DBS checks should be carried out as part of the selection process or whether this should be ongoing. Concerns were raised within the sector regarding the implications of a university carrying out these checks and discovering that a student is no longer fit for the course and how this would affect the employer. There is a need to decide whether occupational health and DBS checks should be the responsibility of the employer or the university, and at what stage these should be conducted.

4. How do we increase interest in optical careers?

GOC are reporting that applications for optometry are buoyant but much less so for dispensing (although ABDO report that the year one intake numbers for the ABDO affiliated institutes are now almost back to pre-pandemic figures). However, when taking into consideration the UCAS end of cycle data for 2022, which shows 1,700 applications for optical courses of which 1,200 students were accepted onto these courses, it is probable that universities accepted all applicants who met the course entry requirements, and more, as the figures above imply. Optical careers have also not seen the level of COIVD-associated growth seen in other healthcare-related professions, such as pharmacy. It is likely that the optical sector is in 'recruitment' rather than 'selection' mode meaning that institutions are not able to be selective for vocational characteristics at this time. It is also worth noting that whilst a number of candidates entering university optical courses are over-qualified academically, their motivations for selecting these course are unclear and it is possible that students were unsuccessful applicants for medical courses, who are consequently in the position of having to adjust to joining their "second choice" profession.

When looking at barriers for entry to ophthalmic dispensing as a career choice, a major factor is believed to be salary. Salaries appear to have stalled over time for dispensing optics and have not kept up with equivalent professions. For example, graduate salaries can be considerably less than nursing but, under ETR, the profession now has equivalent entry requirements. The salary gap is particularly notable in Scotland, making the profession less attractive than it was in the past.

In recent years, there has been a reduction in the number of schools offering science at A level which may be due to difficulties recruiting teachers for these subjects or a lack of uptake by students. This will affect the number of potential students who are able to meet the entry requirements for optometry courses at university. This issue is exacerbated by markedly increasing interest in other degrees and professions that require science A levels. It is therefore important to encourage an interest in science and ophthalmic careers from an early age. Data from outreach projects in other subject suggests that it will be important to engage with schools, including primary school age children, about the role of optometrists and dispensing opticians to raise awareness of and engagement with these as future careers. When considering promoting optometry at a local level, this required UK-wide action, but is often down to individual volunteer employees within an organisation and this can mean that if they leave that employer or move on to another role, the task of promoting optometry can get left behind and forgotten and it can be hard to find the right person to continue to engage with the community.

5. Recommendations

There is resounding support for employer-led outreach across the sector. This would need national collaboration to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and contribute as required to ensure that the right people are attracted into the profession for the future. Increased interest in the profession and a higher number of applicants for each course, would also allow for increased opportunity for selection and may result in a higher percentage of students on each course who meet the stated entrance requirements. This in turn, will reduce the vulnerability of the sector to course closure.

There is a clear need for the promotion of optical careers through both practicing clinicians and educators engaging with schools, at a local level, to give talks or attend careers fairs to promote optical professions and generate more interest in our sector. These talks should discuss the range of career options and possibly include the potential salary ranges available, as well as the less concrete benefits. If the scope of practice for ophthalmic dispensing is to increase, post ETR, to provide better support for optometrists as they develop their clinical role, it is recommended that work is also carried out with employers to highlight the value of dispensing opticians to the multidisciplinary team offering a full range of optical services.

It was felt that national collaboration is needed to enable local activity. Clear and engaging materials, refreshed for ETR, should be produced at this national level that can be easily used locally by a variety of employers and institutions at the local level. The support of SSISG would be welcomed to promote a refreshed 'careers in optics' programme to go out to schools. When planning work in this area, it is important to ensure that visits are made to schools across the country to include outreach work in schools in more remote areas, where workforce recruitment is most challenging.

There is a clear and recognised need for a psychological shift towards all registrants taking responsibility for recruiting, training and educating the next generation, to attract, develop and retain future optical professionals. Whilst this project set out to establish patterns in course recruitment, it has revealed that there is a real need to ensure that, as a sector, we adapt for the future, and continue to attract aspiring professionals who may want a different work-life balance and who have different career needs to previous generations.