



ABDO Examinations
GOC Quality Assurance Visit
Certificate in Contact Lens Practice (FBDO CL)
Dates of Visit: 12-13 January 2017 7th February 2017 14th February 2017

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PART 1

1 Acknowledgements

The Visitors found the Programme Team to be very accommodating to their needs and wish to thank them for the successful co-ordination of the visit. The Visitors also wished to thank those who took the time to meet with the Visitors throughout the visit.

2 Introduction

This report is in relation to a Quality Assurance Visit to ABDO Examinations Certificate in Contact Lens Practice (FBDO CL) Examinations which took place between 12th January and 14th February 2017. The Visit was comprised of four stages:

Stage 1: 12-13 January 2017-Visit to observe the CL practical exams at Aston University's Department of Vision Sciences. The GOC Education Visitors were:

- Sally Powell-Lay Chair
- Markham May-Lay Member
- Julie-Anne Little- Optometrist
- Christine Harm- Dispensing Optician/Contact Lens Optician
- Paula Baines- Dispensing Optician/Contact Lens Optician
- Graeme Stevenson- Dispensing Optician/Contact Lens Optician

The Visitors were accompanied by GOC Officer Kabir Kareem and Elizabeth Jones (Observer – GOC Lay Chair).

Stage 2- 2nd February 2017-Visit to observe the ABDO Examinations Exam Board

A sub-panel of Visitors consisting of Sally Powell and Julie-Anne Little with Kabir Kareem in attendance.

Stage 3- 14th February 2017- Visit to ABDO Examinations Head Office to review past exam papers and conduct an audit trail of practice visits.

A sub-panel of Visitors consisting of Sally Powell and Graeme Stevenson with Kabir Kareem in attendance.

Stage 4- 1st-30 March 2017

A series of telephone interviews with supervisors and candidates sampled by the Visitors from lists supplied by ABDO Examinations.

The GOC is required to undertake such visits in order to obtain assurance that the organisation is compliant with the GOC's core competencies and standards.

The Visit was conducted in accordance with the Handbook: Visit Handbook Guideline for Approval of (A) Training Institution; and (B) Providers of Schemes for Registration for United Kingdom Trained Contact Lens Optician (2007).

2.1 Background

ABDO Examinations works in conjunction with a number of dispensing training providers to deliver routes to registration in both dispensing optics and contact lens. ABDO Examinations manage the practice based learning and qualifying examination elements of the route.

The GOC conducted visits to ABDO Examinations, Contact Lens in July 2002, January 2007 and July 2013. The findings from the July 2013 visit were presented to the October 2013 Education Committee. It was noted that issues had arisen with relation to student preparedness for examinations. To date the GOC had not quality assured the courses for contact lens provision only the examinations. The Committee agreed that the Visitors would be better informed to make a recommendation as to the effectiveness of the route to Contact Lens Qualification and any future approval period once they had reviewed the theory courses as well. The Education

Committee agreed that quality assurance visits should be made to the Contact Lens training providers as part of the accreditation process.

Following the October 2013 Education Committee, ABDO Examinations were informed of the following actions:

- the Visitors requested sight of the complete set of revised documentation relating to the qualification including guidance issued by ABDO Examinations to training providers, candidates, supervisors, examiners and practice visitors to demonstrate that the 2011 competencies have been fully implemented and signed off within all aspects of the qualification;
- they were required to gather feedback from candidates and employers to resolve the issue regarding the requirement for candidates to bring a contact lens patient with them to the final practical examinations; and
- The process for recruiting and appointing the team of examiners needed to be reviewed to represent a diverse pool of contact lens practitioners from different back grounds and varying experiences.

The GOC planned to conduct a series of visits to the contact lens training providers and also conduct a survey of candidates and supervisors as part of the review of the route the registration. This does not appear to have been taken forward as there is no record of the results of the review, findings from the series of visits mentioned or any decisions made by Education Committee.

3 Visit Outcomes

Below are the key findings made by the GOC Education Visitors ('the Visitors') based on the observations and discussions made during the visit.

The Visitors concluded that the ABDO Examinations Certificate in Contact Lens Practice (FBDO (CL) programme is broadly effective in ensuring that candidates who achieve this certificate meet all the requirements of the Core Competencies for the speciality of Contact Lens Practice 2011.

However, the visit has highlighted some issues with the overall Route to Registration for Contact Lens specialist process mainly with regards to Practice Based Learning and the partnership arrangements between ABDO Examinations and the contact lens programme training institutions.

1. ABDO Examinations primary area of focus with regards to the Route to Registration is the Practical Examinations. The Visitors were unable to identify how established processes or policies for working with the other training institutions ensure that the course they deliver is effective to enable candidates to pass the contact lens practical exams.
2. There is also a lack of clarity in the accountability, responsibility and management structure at ABDO examinations with regard to the contact lens programme. Much of the operational load is devolved to specialist staff outside the permanent staff of ABDO Examinations.
3. The GOC would like to know how ABDO Examinations satisfy themselves that the candidates have gained the requisite knowledge and training to prepare to undertake the practical exams.
4. There are shortcomings with regards to the management of the supervision process as part of the partnership between ABDO Examinations and the contact lens programme training institutions.
5. There is no quality assurance framework to continuously monitor the quality of individual supervisors during the Practice Based Learning element of student's training.
6. There appears to be a gap between the Education Providers and ABDO Examinations in how candidates are managed for their Practice Based Learning. There is no clear definition about who is responsible for the management of candidates' learning during this period of their training.
7. There is large variation in the type of experience a trainee contact lens optician might have in practice due to the absence of standardised requirements for supervisors e.g. the minimum number of hours they should spend with candidates.
8. As a result of limited and ineffective communication with supervisors and general lack of information, candidates are often unaware of what to expect from the Practical Examination process. Supervisors reported that, the contact lens supervision process is unstructured and onerous compared to the dispensing optician process.

Based on the findings, the Visitors have noted a number of concerns about the programme as a whole with regards to the following:

9. Aspects of the programme and practical exams is not in line with current contemporary practices and the current processes and requirements seem based on historical requirements and methodologies.
10. There was no evidence of strategic review of pedagogy to justify the current structure and content of the practical examinations. There is a disconnection between the strategic oversight and the administrative process, with more focus being placed on the operational requirements of the Practical Examinations rather than the overarching strategic requirements. This also contributes to a tendency to over-assess competencies.
11. ABDO Examinations do not map their practical exams directly to each element of the GOC Core Competencies in accordance with the GOC Contact Lens Handbook 2007. This should show exactly which competencies each candidate has or has not met. Further, this did not seem embedded in candidates' learning, as the candidates interviewed knew little about the Contact Lens Core Competencies or which ones they were being assessed on during the practical examinations.
12. The units of competencies in Communication and Professional Conduct are not currently assessed in the Contact Lens programme. Rather, ABDO Examinations deem that the fact that all Trainee Contact Lens Opticians are already registered Dispensing Opticians ensures these competencies are met. Given the significant difference in the type of practice a Contact Lens Optician conducts, the Visitors were not satisfied that this is sufficient.

3.1 Conditions

Conditions are applied to training and assessment providers if there is evidence that the GOC requirements are not met. In order to ensure that the programme meets the GOC requirements, the Visitors propose the following condition(s):

Ref.	Condition	Due by
1	To conduct a review of the current Certificate in Contact Lens Practice programme that addresses the following:	30 th September 2019*
1.1	Further development of clear mapping to all GOC Core Competencies, thus making explicit to candidates and other stakeholders the structure of the Contact Lens programme as a route to registration. The mapping should include reference to competencies for professional conduct and communication in the context of Contact Lens practice.	30 th September 2019*
1.2	ii.) The overall strategy for assessment including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) reflection of contemporary practice in examinable content; b) the structure and content of theory and practical examinations, to avoid unnecessary duplication of competence assessment; c) indicators of incremental achievement during placement learning/supervised practice; d) the need for more engagement with candidates to prepare for practical examinations. 	30 th September 2019*
1.3	To give a more significant and defined role to supervisors, including signing-off hours and case records completed by candidates, thus providing assurance of appropriate preparation for practical examinations.	30 th September 2019*

1.4	Establishment of formal agreements with training providers regarding placements with supervisors for the purposes of strengthening candidates' practice-based learning;	30 September 2019*
1.5	Through these agreements or otherwise, to provide more support and practical training for supervisors.	30 September 2019*
1.6	The facilitation of an audit trail clearly showing how each candidate has developed and is fit to be assessed as competent at the time of entry to an examination, thus quality assuring the sign-off of competence.	30 September 2019*
*ABDO Examinations will be required to provide the GOC with an Action Plan which will show when each of sub-conditions listed above will be completed. The Action Plan should be submitted to the GOC by 30 th of September 2018 and all the conditions implemented by 30 th September 2019.		

3.2 Recommendations	
The Visitors offers the following recommendation to the provider. Recommendations indicate enhancements that can be made to a programme but are not directly linked to compliance with GOC requirements.	
Ref.	Description
1	Establish greater engagement and communication with Contact Lens training institutions, to ensure a 'joined-up' programme delivery for candidates.
2	To minimise organisational risk to the programme by widening staff involvement in and responsibility for the management, operation and administration of the Certificate in Contact Lens Practice.
3	To take steps to improve equity for candidates attending Practical Examinations, by ensuring consistent and accurate timetabling and providing clear, comprehensive and consistent preparatory information.
4	To further develop analysis of trends in examination results, formally reporting and discussing these with all stakeholders, and ensuring accurate and consistent appraisal of results.
5	To clarify the rationale for the criterion of 224 <i>minimum</i> contact lens practice hours required of candidates, to ensure that this adequately meets programme needs.

PART 2

4 Scheme Design and Construction

4.1 Quality Assurance

The Visitors met with ABDO Examinations Senior Management Team (SMT) the Chief Examiner (CE) Rosemary Bailey; the Head of Examinations and Registration, Mark Chandler and the Director of Professional Examinations Alicia Thompson. They provided an overview of how the practical examinations process is managed and how quality assurance standards are maintained.

1. The section pertaining to supervision in Conditions of Admission Syllabus Assessment Requirement was updated in September 2016.
2. The CE is responsible for the management of the examination process and candidates are required to register to sit for either the summer or winter exams by specific deadlines.
3. New questions are always written for each exam period and a team of examiners meet to review the draft exam papers drafted by the principal theory examiner to ensure consistency.
4. Exam markers hold moderating meeting to ensure consistency and each principal examiner is responsible for the exam marking process.
5. As part of the quality assurance process, the SMT review ABDO Examinations qualifications and standard operating procedures to identify improvements and areas of good practice with the objective of implementing processes which work well across the board.
6. The Exam Boards are used to review and identify the changes that are required and as a forum for the external moderators and examiners to make improvement suggestions.
7. The CE acts as the single point of contact between ABDO Examinations and the examiners, there are no written records apart from the minutes from the Exam Boards and the theory examiners meeting agenda.
8. ABDO Examinations are waiting for the date for the release of the current visit report before their quinquennial review is completed.
9. ABDO Examinations conduct approximately 80 practice visits a year. These are usually during the last six months of a candidate's placement because it is close to them sitting for their exams. If the number of visits to practices are increased, so will the fees.
10. ABDO Examinations reported that it is very challenging to provide supervisors with training because they do not attend meetings, but they are provided with written guidance at the beginning of their supervision of a specific trainee and during the practice visit.
11. Trainee contact lens opticians' case records are audited during the practice visits and they required to fit 10 different patients with different complexities including three Rigid Gas Permeable (RGP) patients.
12. In response to the concerns raised by the Visitors about the relevance of these requirements in modern practice, the SMT stated the rationales have been reviewed and they are satisfied that these requirements should remain in the syllabus.
13. New examiners would be expected to have experience in practice and as part of the training process would have two days of training, two observation sessions and as many days of supervised examining as required to meet the assessment level before examining unsupervised.
14. As part of the quinquennial review, ABDO Examinations will engage all stakeholders and the feedback collected will feed into the National Clinical Committee.
16. The records collected during the practical examiners are kept for seven years. Supervisors are responsible for signing off the patients that their trainees see in practice and ABDO Examinations would randomly audit these records during the practice visits.
18. Examiners have a marking guide to ensure consistency in marking and the mark sheet is sent to the ABDO Examinations Head Office for storage.
19. The Visitors raised concern about the practice of instructing examiners to keep their notes for at least one year. The SMT stated that it would be logistically challenging to keep all the records from the exams.
20. ABDO Examinations would be reluctant to provide candidates with elements of the marking guide. The trainees should demonstrate they are capable of rising to the increased level of clinical responsibility.
21. The Visitors stated that, some of the questions asked during the practical exams were similar to a viva and some of the candidates were surprised by the technique and not prepared for the experience.

22. They were informed that the objective of the questioning is because ABDO Examinations want to ensure that candidates have product knowledge, in addition there is questioning on topics covered in the theory exams.

4.2 Programme Design

23. The Visitors sought to investigate/identify the probable reasons for the high failure rate amongst candidates who have taken the exams by asking for the pedagogical rationale for the pass mark being set at 60%.
24. The SMT suggested that there is no specific rationale for the pass mark being set at 60%, it was inherited and they are of the view that it is at the appropriate level and there is no plausible reason to review or lower the current pass mark.
25. They stated that the probable cause of the high failure rates could be the result of candidates being unaware of the major differences between dispensing optics and contact lens requirements. The quality of experience candidates have in practice prior to taking the exam could also be major factor. Some candidates pass because they have the practical experience to support their theoretical knowledge.
26. The Visitors questioned why a contact lens training institution would allow candidates to continue to take the exams with the knowledge that the majority won't be successful.
27. The SMT stated that a training institution would be investigated if they were concerned with low pass rates. Past investigations have not identified any correlation between the pass marks and the institutions candidates completed their study.

4.3 Meeting with External Moderator (EM)

The Visitors met with the External Moderator Judith Morris (JM) during the stages 1 and 3 of the Visit. Below is the information provided:

28. JM has held the role of External Moderator for approximately five to six years and is currently serving her second term in the role. She is responsible for observing the overall exam process including the practical examiners performance and the theory markers in the CL Practice paper.
29. She has autonomy over how the observations are conducted and she has the opportunity to discuss any issues at the Exam Board.
30. ABDO Examinations respond to the findings from the observations and take action based on the recommendations in the reports produced. The ABDO Exam Board is used to monitor actions that have been completed and any that are outstanding are discussed during the meetings.
31. There is consistency in the level of questioning amongst the examiner and they are at the same level when judging competencies.
32. With regards to the low pass rate amongst contact lens candidates or the low pass rate, JM believes that the exam level has not changed and it is the responsibility of the training institution to ensure candidates are taught to the appropriate level.
33. JM also suggested that the efforts candidates put into preparing for the exams contributed to the challenges they faced and theory candidates could better prepare by practicing past exam papers.
34. The probable reasons why candidates answer questions poorly is because they have not prepared for the requirement to change their approach in 'thinking' about the step by step processes. They may also require support and further guidance/training on how they answer questions.
35. Communication between ABDO Examinations and the training institutions can be improved, they are not provided with feedback about the common questions or topics that have the highest failure rates.

4.4 Support to Candidates

The Visitors met with the Head of Examinations and Registration to discuss the type of support provided and were given the following information.

47. The candidates who require reasonable adjustments during their practical exams are given an extra 15 minutes to complete the sessions. The CE would be informed of candidates that would require reasonable adjustments and decisions are made on a case by case basis.

48. A formal letter would then be sent to the individual candidate informing them of the decision made before the exam. If requested, candidates will be provided with coloured paper or scribe to write the answers down if they need it.
49. Candidates are required to complete a form and attach a medical record/note. The requirements for reasonable adjustment does not occur often for practical examinations and only occasionally for the theory exams.
50. The CE and the administrator are responsible for the management of the supervision process.
51. Candidate complaints received after practical examinations are reviewed by the CE and a letter of acknowledgement is sent to the candidate.
52. The complaint is discussed during the Exam Board, and the CE makes recommendations to the Chairman in order for a final decision to be made. Marks are not changed from pass to a fail; it is very difficult to change a mark after a practical examination.
53. The examiner/s involved and the examination supervisor of the day (which may be the CE) would review borderline 57-59 marks and make the decision.

5 Assessment

5.1 Meeting with Practical Examiners

The Visitors met with the Practical Examiners who were examining candidates and were informed of the following points:

54. They contribute to the overarching examining process by holding formal meetings regularly to discuss topics and issues such as changes in regulation. They believe the feedback they have provided to the CE has contributed to improvements in the supervision process and overall standards.
55. They are not provided with the pass/failure rates from the exams, the Exam Board minutes, or the full external moderator report. There is a general consensus amongst PEs that being aware of this information would improve the process.
56. They are of the opinion there are sufficient checks and balances from the formal and informal feedback process and there is a constant evaluation of the marking scheme based on the feedback from external examiners.
57. There is currently no process for ongoing training/development for PEs apart from the attendance at examiners meeting. They are observed at least once a year by a senior examiner during their examination of candidates and receive feedback via a discussion upon conclusion.
58. They reported overall satisfaction with the examining process, the current facilities, equipment and Birmingham being a central location makes the site easily accessible.
59. They also conduct practice visits to observe candidates in practice where they hold discussions with candidates and supervisors, review the candidate's diaries and record cards to confirm they are receiving a range of patient experience and that the practice has the range of equipment required.
60. The practice visits are also used to assess how well the supervisors are supporting the candidates and provide guidance to candidates to help them prepare for the practical exams.
61. A visitor report is completed at the end of the visit and the examiner signs off approval for supervisor to have a trainee to supervise for three years, the practice and the competencies.
62. Three forms are completed giving approval for the practice, the supervisor and the competencies.
63. If the practice or supervision are not approved or a provisional approval is granted, the PE is responsible for writing the text for the letter that is sent to them informing them of this.

5.2 Meeting with Theory Examiners

The Visitors met with the Theory Examiners who are responsible for setting the exam papers for the summer and winter exams theory exams and were informed of the following points:

64. They would meet with the markers to discuss the marking scheme before the marking begins and have meetings to discuss common errors made by candidates and how to deal with it.
65. All the marking scripts are sent to the external moderator for second marking who then chooses a sample to mark and produce a report.
66. Changes have been made to how the questions have been structured to show how many marks questions are worth. There is a direct correlation between the marks and the amount of time candidates spend on a question.

67. They were of the opinion that one of the reasons candidates fail could be down to the challenges of working and studying simultaneously which means they are not spending enough time studying. The training institution should be responsible for preparing the candidates for the amount of work they have to do.

6 Practice Based Learning

6.1 Practice Based Element of the Route to Registration Process.

The Visitors asked the SMT to provide an explanation of the Practice Based Element of the Route to Registration Process and were informed of the points below, with regards to the Supervision requirements, the practice visits by ABDO Examinations Visitors and the Quality Assurance process.

68. Candidates are required to register their supervisor with ABDO Examinations as soon as they begin the practice based element of their course. The supervisors are required to sign off on the candidate's application for the practical examination and the form is not accepted unless signed by the primary supervisor and these events are logged.
69. Approximately six months before a candidate is due to take an exam, an examiner (visitor) will conduct an in-practice assessment to confirm if the candidate is meeting the requirements of this stage.
70. Candidates are required to log a minimum of 10 cases and are required to have a minimum of 224 hours of practice during their placement.
71. During the in-practice visits, the visitor would speak with the candidates and supervisors individually and candidates are asked to provide feedback on the suitability of their supervisor.
72. The findings from feedback collected from placement providers, supervisors and candidates during the in-practice assessments are provided to the CE at the end of each visit.

6.2 Practice Supervisors

The Visitors spoke to two Supervisors during the visit and conducted telephone interviews with four supervisors post visit and were informed of the following points:

73. They informed the Visitors that during the practice audit visit, the ABDO Examinations visitors discussed their trainees' progress with them, held discussions with the trainee and inspected the equipment in the practice.
74. They found the Notes for Guidance of Supervisors useful and it helped with teaching their trainee about being a Contact Lens Optician; but stated that the visit would have been more beneficial if it had occurred at the start of their trainee's practice placements rather than midway through or near the end.
75. The supervisors have not been invited to or have attended a training event for supervisors which they would find extremely useful. It would enable them to gain a better understanding of how to perform their role, how to support candidates and keep up to date with changes that have been implemented since they completed their practical exams.
76. They raised concerns to the Visitors about the ability of candidates to complete all the records and visits within the scheduled timeframe of 1 year of the programme. In addition, they questioned the rationale of requiring candidates to fit different types of lens and have so many records of patients because it does not reflect the types of patients the trainee sees in practice.
77. They described the practical assessments as 'old fashioned' and the high failure rate could be as a result of issues with the difficulty of the practical exams or the supervisory process as a whole.
78. They reported that trainees have sufficient contact time with patients to practice, they see approximately 3-4 patients a day and they spend between 30mins and 1hr with each patient.
79. Overall, they have had good experience as supervisors because they are dedicated to the role and have dedicated candidates.

7 Review of Resources and Facilities

The Visitors observed a number of practical sessions on both days during the visit and also observed the briefing provided to the candidates and patients on the morning of day 2 of stage 1 of the visit. Below is a summary of their findings of the observations and discussions with the CE.

80. The Visitors were of the opinion that insufficient information was provided to candidates and their patient during the morning briefing about the structure and requirements of the day. They were informed of the order of the day but not given timeframes about the times they would be needed and for how long, and when/where to have lunch.
81. The timetable is complicated and not rigid, candidates were informed of which order they would be examined but were not provided with a time.
82. The Visitors raised concern about the possibility of candidates being disadvantaged because there is no time keeper or process to record/monitor the time during each practical session which could lead to the risk of inequity to the time allocated for each candidate. A time keeper is required to ensure that all candidates are given the same amount of time during each examination.
83. The Visitors were unable to determine the rationale for the marks candidates were allocated, for example, 13 marks are allocated for 'handwashing' but there is no explanation of how those marks are attained or if failure to wash hands is an automatic failure.
84. Candidates are asked questions during the practical examinations; the mix of practical and viva makes the examination process unclear for candidates.
85. The Visitors held discussions with the CE with regards how ABDO Examinations ensure that the practical exams taken by candidates are mapped to the GOC Core competencies. The CE explained that candidates will not achieve the competencies until they pass the exam and stated that the assessment does map to the competencies.
86. The Visitors suggested that candidates lacked understanding about which GOC Core competencies the assessment in each section covered, the GOC would expect a mechanism which would explicitly show the link between the assessments and the core competencies.
87. The Assessment Table refers to the GOC Competencies in a general way and the Visitors would like to know why or how each section refers to certain competencies, it can be mapped across in more detail than it is now.
88. The Visitors requested an explanation or rationale behind why the practical exam is split into six sections, the CE explained that it was designed to replicate the progress of patients in real life. She also stated that candidates being able to fit complex lenses would give them a competitive advantage.
89. The CE explained to the Visitors that the structure and design of the assessments pre-dates the core competencies and that it is more important for candidates to believe that they are competent to do the job. She also confirmed that Examiners are required to sign off that each candidate have met the core competencies.

8 Candidate Feedback

The Visitors met with three candidates during the visit and conducted telephone interviews with a further seven to gather their views on the Contact Lens Route to registration process and were informed of the following points.

90. Candidates were not provided with sufficient information during the practical exams about the plans for the day and the times they would be required for some of the sections.
91. The patients the candidates brought for the assessments were not provided with sufficient information or support, they were not properly briefed about when they would be required so they sat waiting for most of the day.
92. Candidates stated that it would have been beneficial if they had more practical time while studying at their relevant training institution. There was insufficient time to conduct practical elements while on block release and suggested that two weeks to practice the contact lens elements would have been more effective than the one week they had.
93. Candidates stated that they had to increase the level of reading required for the Contact Lens programmes but it was very challenging to build up practical skills as well as knowledge for the exams. In addition, they found it challenging to complete all their cases within a year.

94. A key challenge that students faced while completing their practice based element was that they did not receive sufficient support from the practice (owners) to conduct contact lens clinics, they needed more clinic time in practice to enable them to prepare for the practical examinations.
95. Candidates stated that they were asked a lot of theory questions during the practical exams, some of the questions were not relevant to their 'real-life' everyday work. For example the keratometry machine they were assessed on is not used in practice and they were unaware of what they would be assessed on during each section.
96. Candidates stated that they were able to see a range of patients to meet their Portfolio Requirements but it was very challenging to get the Rigid Gas Permeable (RGP) patients. They also questioned why this element was 40% of their marks and suggested that it would have been better if they were asked for multi-focal fittings as these are more common
97. The length of time it took for candidates to complete their portfolios is determined by how busy the practice is and how many patients they are able to see.
98. The amount of time candidates spent with their supervisors in practice varied but overall they spent sufficient time with them.
99. Candidates get to use the equipment in practice but do not feel they get sufficient time to practice during their on block training at the training institution.
100. The Visitors recognises many of the comments related to the training providers or practice settings' are similar.

9 Exam Board

9.1 Exam Board Visit- 2nd February 2017

A sub-panel of Visitors comprising Sally Powell (Lay Chair Visitor - SP) and Julie-Anne Little (Optometrist Educationalist Visitor - JAL) attended the Winter Examination Board of ABDO Exams, held at 199, Gloucester Terrace, London W2 6LD. The Board was followed by a series of meetings as follows:

- 1) External Moderator Judith Morris. The two other external moderators (David Whitaker and Byki Huntjens) were unable to stay due to delays at the Board meeting, and were to be contacted separately by arrangement.
- 2) Lay Chair of the Examination Board, Graham Stevens
- 3) Alicia Thompson, Director of Professional Examinations, ABDO Exams
- 4) Rosemary Bailey, Chief Examiner ABDO Exams (by request of Rosemary Bailey)

Kabir Kareem, GOC Quality Assurance and Accreditation Officer, attended the venue to record notes of the above meetings, but was not present at the Examination Board. The following note is drafted by Sally Powell and agreed by Julie-Anne Little.

Prior to the meeting the visitors received documentation electronically as follows:

- 1) External moderators' reports from JM and BH for theory examinations and JM for practical examinations, Winter 2016 (DW report given verbally at meeting)
- 2) Chief Examiner's response to external moderators' reports

101. The agenda and copies of the minutes of the previous meeting were circulated to members at the meeting and had been sent after that Board meeting to the attendees in August 2016 and again with the agenda of the February meeting. The minutes were available to the GOC Visitors through their pre-visit documentation.
102. The GOC Visitors and the new External Moderator, BH, were welcomed to the meeting and apologies noted.
103. Minutes were considered and a few minor alterations agreed. There appeared to be a full and accurate record of previous proceedings.
104. The theory and practical elements of examination were considered separately during the course of the board meeting.

9.2 Theory examinations:

105. A results list, without redaction of full candidate names, was tabled. The Visitors asked was this usual, and were informed that their inclusion was not usual practice.
106. The results list was accompanied by further tabled papers - a session breakdown of previous sittings by candidates, and overall results for the award, as well as a comparison bar chart showing pass rates for summer and winter sittings for the past three years. It was not clear if these charts were normally provided or if they were compiled as a result of the GOC Visitors' interest in the (low) pass rates for the examinations. It was also not clear from the data presented how many candidates were undertaking examinations for a second, third or fourth time.
107. The number of candidates sitting and the success rates varies significantly between summer and winter sittings. The CE considered that there had been a trend towards 'evening out' although from the data presented this was not particularly clear to the Visitors.
108. It was felt some candidates were adopting a strategy to use to their advantage the practice of taking the highest four marks from answers to five questions. The CE also noted that the timing of sitting the theory paper in relation to undertaking the practical experience bore no relation to candidates' likelihood of success.
109. Overall it was reported that candidates who had studied the ABDO College course performed better than those from other training providers. It was not stated if these were candidates who had undertaken the revision course available at ABDO College as opposed to the initial training course.
110. One candidate had had five attempts at the examination and had exceeded the seven years maximum registration period due to career interruptions etc. Although officers claimed the maximum period was generally well known to candidates, there seemed to be some doubt over whether the candidate in question had been individually advised of their position. AT also reminded the Board that ensuring relevancy / being up-to-date was a factor in limiting the period of time in which all components of the examination should be passed.
111. The Exams Chair asked what was being done to better prepare candidates. AT advised that past question papers for the Dispensing examinations are sent to training institutions, but RB stated that those for the Contact Lens examinations are not automatically sent but were always available on request, and that this could be considered.
112. The External moderators were invited to give their reports. Rather than being permitted to deliver their views (as reflected in their written reports) and then receive questions or comments, the responses of the CE were interjected during each report. This caused some frustration. The Chair was a little slow to manage the situation but the firm stance of one moderator helped in keeping the reporting on task. The Visitors were subsequently informed that, unusually, the CE had her responses prepared in advance of the Board and they were no doubt fresh in her mind.
113. A discussion took place on the various marking styles of examiners. Each examiner receives feedback from the Principal examiners at the practical examinations. One external moderator commented on the usefulness of the moderator feedback form (allowing the moderator to comment on individual marking of scripts). The Visitors subsequently asked for sight of this document.
114. Some examiners had adjusted marks to compensate borderline positions, but the Director of Professional Examinations stated that there had been a clear statement (in 2016 to the dispensing markers) advising markers not to adjust their marks and to leave borderline judgments to external moderators' consideration. This would now be introduced to the CL markers.
115. The value and effectiveness of the External moderation system was reinforced by the identification of a small number of marking errors, including attribution, collation and addition, which presumably might otherwise have passed unnoticed. The Visitors observed, however, that each moderator had adopted differing approaches to sampling and therefore wish to further enquire about guidance given with regard to this aspect. In addition, there seemed some confusion as to the agreed strategy for how scripts were selected for moderation.

9.3 Practical Examinations

116. A results list, without redaction of candidate names, was tabled. This was accompanied by a session breakdown of previous sittings by candidates, and overall results for the award. Again, it was not clear if these charts were normally provided nor how many candidates were undertaking examinations for a second, third or fourth time.
117. Regarding the practical examinations, the External Moderator made detailed comments about processes and arrangements as well as noting the conduct of each examiner observed. This is doubtless invaluable information for ABDO Exams. Amongst factors noted was the value of maintaining cubicle continuity for candidates and the challenges of ensuring an equitable experience for all candidates – timing, complexity of case, age and alacrity of patient to name but a few. *(The challenges of operating practical examinations and offering an equitable experience was recognised by the visitors during their visit to the practical examinations)*
118. In connection with the above, the report included a reference to an atypical situation with a candidate who became acutely distressed during their exam. The examiner stopped the exam because of concerns about inappropriate practice and the demeanour of the candidate. On the day (on which the GOC Visitors was visiting the exams – not however being witnesses to this event) the situation was managed by the Chief Examiner and colleagues, who restructured the examination timetable to facilitate the candidate undertaking the examination, which the candidate had gone on to successfully pass with an alternative examiner although the original examiner needed to be involved in the examination as she had pre-read the case records which form part of the sections involved. .
119. An unusual discussion then took place. During the Exam Board, one of the ABDO officers revealed (for the first time, it seemed) that they had had a previous difficult experience with this same candidate, who had exhibited aggressive and threatening behaviour. It was not clear how it was that the Exam Board became the forum for this significant revelation for which none of the officers, nor the Chair, were prepared.
120. The Chair took the view that advice was required and that the GOC Professional Conduct department should be informed. He also noted that there were important health and safety considerations. Members of the Board, after significant discussion in which the Visitors became involved, agreed with this view whilst feeling that results obtained by the candidate should be recorded, ratified and the candidate informed. Discussion centred on the candidate's existing registration as a Dispensing Optician, the protection of the public and the seeming 'happenstance' of discovery of the issue.
121. While an incident form had been completed, there seemed to be a lack of policy on how this was reviewed by ABDO examinations, and this had not be addressed prior to this examination board taking place. The Visitors also noted the relative uncertainty of the board members as to their remit to advise/make any decisions in this matter.
122. As the original difficulty with the candidate occurred sometime previously, it seemed likely that no intervention had taken place at the time and possibly that no management policy or guidance was in place to assist staff finding themselves in difficult situations.
123. Equally, although those present were unequivocal in their view that any inappropriate or unprofessional behaviour should be referred to the GOC, it seemed doubtful that any distinct policy or guidance for this process was in place. The necessity and advisedness of these will now be apparent to ABDO Exams officers.
124. The 'standard operating procedures' of the contact lens certificate was an item on the agenda, but appeared to be confined to a candidate feedback survey. AT advised the Board that the candidate feedback survey (circulated to candidates after the examination and prior to their results becoming available) had had a very poor response, with only one reply. (This was apparently usual)
125. MC advised the Board of succession plans for the operation of ABDO Exams including the intended adjustments to the heavy workload of the Chief Examiner prior to her intended retirement in winter 2019/20
126. RB advised the Board that 2 probationer examiners had now been confirmed in position, there had been an enthusiastic response to an advertisement during the autumn for new ABDO examiners.
127. RB advised that there had been a change to the previous practice of the marking guide (with any personal notes) being taken away and retained as a record by examiners. In future all documentation would be retained by ABDO Exams. *(The Visitors were aware of correspondence from an examiner to*

ABDO Exams concerning this issue). RB also referred to a change in the maintenance of record cards.

9.3 Summary Points: (compiled prior to receipt of unconfirmed minutes)

128. Overall the Board operated in a manner that allowed results to be discussed and ratified fairly.
129. The ABDO Lay Chair created a formal environment and generally encouraged a professional approach to the proceedings.
130. The Visitors have yet to review the Board membership but on this occasion only one examiner was present.
131. Board administration appeared to be the sole responsibility of the Examiner with support from the contact lens examinations administrator.
132. The system of external moderation helps ensure that internal marking is fairly conducted and accurately recorded. There is however a lack of clarity over sampling methods.
133. From the external reports it sounds as if there is some variation amongst the way in which marks, and specifically 'extra' marks are used. We may wish to look at internal marking in a little more depth. (NB The sub-panel Visitors did not look at examination scripts at the Exam Board but have asked to do so at the Old Dairy).
134. The Exam Board does not seem to receive overall results in a manner in which these can be fully considered prior to discussion. There was opportunity for discussion, and numbers are not great, but there were some issues which did not appear to be fully addressed.
135. Subsequently the sub- panel Visitors heard about the link to a committee called the Academic Committee, and await further information on how this interfaces with the Exam Board and addresses any points referred. How the feedback of the external moderators is taken into account with the management of the overall CL certificate is not clear.
136. In connection with the above, there is a sense that issues such as the low rates of success amongst candidates, and the disparity between winter and summer sessions, have been acknowledged for a significant period of time but have not been fully addressed.
137. Systems for evaluating the examinations may need review.

9.4 Meeting with Director of Professional Examinations

Below is the information provided to the Visitors following the meeting with Alicia Thompson (AT)

138. AT stated that although she is 'technically' the CE's direct line manager, it's not a formal working relationship. AT has a good a good working relationship with the CE but could see ways in which it could be enhanced. The Visitors suggest that this shows that she does not have any direct responsibility to the decisions made with regards to the CL provision.
139. AT has the overarching responsibility for all qualifications contents and the syllabus which includes ensuring best practices that have been identified is shared across all departments within the organisations. She has no authority with regards to administrative procedures or contribute directly to the management of the specialist areas such as Contact Lens.
140. She made an observation approximately eight years ago with regards to the risk associated with the over-reliance on one person on the management of the administrative processes in the organisation.
141. Administrative support was brought in with the objective of standardising the administration process and a succession planning process was implemented. AT acknowledged and agreed with the Visitors' comments with regards to the high risk of 'single point of failure' with regards to the current process.
142. Her objective with regards to the contact lens provision is to share best practices and standardise processes across the Dispensing Optics and Contact Lens Syllabus.
143. The Contact Lens syllabus is usually reviewed and changed every five years but changes will be made if necessary based on specific requirements e.g. GOC Requirements. The last review was in 2011, the next review will be completed based on the findings/outcome from the current GOC QA Visit.
144. The review process involves consultation with all stakeholders, candidates, supervisors, examiners and teaching institutes. A team from the Academic Committee would be involved with review of issues relating to governance and committees.

145. AT recognised that there could be better clarity on management structure and lines of communication of the Contact Lens programme at ABDO Examinations.
146. The Academic Committee meet twice a year, and involves all academic institutions who deliver Contact Lens and Dispensing Optics and the Head of Examinations and Registration is currently responsible for writing meeting minutes. However, she noted that Contact Lenses is perhaps not always a standing item, as the focus is necessarily more on Dispensing optics training.
147. AT stated that she does not believe it is a “quantum leap” for candidates to move from being a Dispensing Optician to being a Contact Lens Optician.
148. AT believes that the analytical skills of Dispensing Opticians are being underutilised in practice where they are mainly used as problem solvers. These skills are not taught particularly well and it was suggested that there is a need for better critical research.
149. A research fund has been set up at ABDO College to enable candidates to learn the basic research; there is very little research surrounding dispensing.
150. The Chair asked AT for her thoughts as to the reason for the low pass rate for the CL Practical exam and asked if she thought it was pitched at the appropriate level.
151. AT responded that the exams are pitched at the appropriate level for individuals aiming to be a specialist, and suggested that the level of the exam would have to drop for the pass rates to increase.
152. The reason for the high failure rate may be because candidates are “on their own” through the majority of the learning and training period. The courses are great but there is not enough support in practice, this is based on feedback that has been received from candidates and supervisors which suggests that candidates do not do enough in practice.
153. There is a perception that the 224 hours practice time is seen as what is required rather than the minimum hours required. The level of quality of the supervisors also has an impact on the time candidates get to examine in practice.
154. The proposal to review the 224 hours practice has not yet been discussed at the academic committee but will be discussed at the next meeting in March 2017 which are currently not minuted.
155. ABDO Examinations conduct the quality monitoring of the Contact Lens practical exams through the use of student feedback. Candidates are informed on the morning of the exam that they will receive a feedback questionnaire when they have completed their exam.
156. They are re-assured that their feedback will not affect their results and its sole objective is to improve the process. It is preferable to capture the feedback straight after they have completed their exam while the experience is still fresh.
157. Anything significant would be reported to the Exam Board and feedback relating to the quality of teaching goes to the education committee.
158. ABDO Examinations have a good relationship with Aston University and one of the reasons they chose the site was because of its central location. The facilities meet their requirements and are safe and they provide feedback to the University after each session.
159. AT stated that the Examination Board went really well, the introduction of a standardised agenda made the process more effective, but it can still be improved by providing more support to the Chief Examiner.
160. Progress is being made at each board meeting because actions are being executed but it would be useful to review the paperwork prior to the meeting. The minute taker was unable to attend the meeting.
161. There are terms of reference available and succession for the Chair has been discussed, the Head of Exams and Registration will review the Chair’s tenure.
162. The Directors who sit on the board at ABDO and are also examiners declare their conflict of interest.
163. The external moderators contribute to the improvements of the process because they provide valuable feedback at every session.
165. The Chair asked how communication is maintained during the gaps between exams, how are the links kept active? AT was unable to confirm absolutely but she believes that the Chief Examiner keeps in contact with them because she is solely responsible for communications with the moderators.
166. As part of the quality assurance process, the examiners who are also supervisors provide feedback to the Chief Examiner who also communicates with practices informally to collect feedback during the practice visit.
167. The QA and underpinning structure of practice visits have not been formalised but AT reported that the Chief Examiner reviews all the practice visit reports. The Visitors strongly suggested that there is a need to confirm that the chain is robust.
168. There is a plan to introduce the new syllabus in time for the candidates who have sat the new first year exam and the final year exam in the summer 2018. Feedback will be provided to the Head of Education at the GOC.

9.5 Meeting with Lay Chair of ABDO Exam Board - Mr Graham Stevens

169. Mr Stevens has held the role of the lay chair for 14 years and has observed the Dispensing Optics practical exams but not those for the Contact Lens examinations.
170. The Board has been streamlined since he became Chair and he is satisfied with the current structure of the Board and the direction it is moving in. Discussions with moderators are very important and the actions from the last set of minutes have been completed.
171. There is a lack of clarity in the distinction between the Exam Board and the Academic Board. As the Chair of the Exam Board, he does not see the minutes from the Academic Board meetings. The line of communication is very important to his role as the Chair, and it would be very useful for the Board to provide feedback on his performance in the role. Mr Stevens feels the structure is very important and people have to be held accountable.
173. There is a risk with regards to the amount of responsibility held by ABDO Examinations Examiner. The administration function is not being fully utilised which is one of the reasons the Chair has insisted on the process of succession planning to be implemented which has been acted upon.

9.6 Additional Documentation Review

The Visitors visited ABDO Examinations to speak to the Head of Examinations and Registration (Mark Chandler) and review the following past theory exam papers:

- Contact Lens Practice-Winter 2016
- Ocular Anatomy- Winter 2016
- Contact Lens Practice- Summer 2016
- Contact Lens Visual Optics- Summer 2012
- Visual Optics- Winter 2015
- Ocular Anatomy- Summer 2016

The findings from the visit are below:

174. With regards to the annotations of scripts, three sets of marks appear on the scripts. They have been remarked by the original marker and the marks between 57-59 were reviewed internally and then reviewed by the external moderator.
175. All marks and comments are annotated on the scripts and the second marker knows the first marker. The External Moderator informed ABDO Examinations that having the marks on the scripts helps with the moderation.
176. Candidates will only receive comments if they formally request feedback, this will be charged at £50. The Principal Examiner will write a report explaining that the assignment will only be remarked if marks are between 57-59.
177. ABDO Examinations are aware of the challenges some candidates face with regards to their supervisors in practice, ideally it should be 'partnership' between the supervisor and the trainee but which is not always the case.
178. ABDO Examinations captures some data, they do not capture information about institute statistics but the Examiner has attempted to capture trends in the past.

10 DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this document, the following terms used throughout this report are defined as follows:

GOC: General Optical Council

Institution: ABDO Examinations

Education Visitors/Visitors: All members of the visiting Education Visitors representing the General Optical Council.

Programme(s): Certificate in Contact Lens Practice (FBDO CL)

Senior Management Team (SMT)*: Senior members of staff such as programme leads, heads of department, decision makers and budget holders who are responsible for managing the programme(s).

Programme Staff: Staff involved in the delivery of the programme that were interviewed by the Visitors.

Supervisors/Employers: Qualified/Registered Dispensing Opticians Contact Lens Opticians and Optometrists who supervise candidates whilst they are working in practice.

External Examiner/Examiner: Examiner(s) contracted by the College/University for the purposes of ensuring quality control of programme content.