



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government



*Rewarding Learning*

# **Awarding body monitoring report for: Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO)**

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February 2008

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# Introduction

## Regulating external qualifications

Responsibility for regulating external qualifications lies jointly with three regulators:

- the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), the body for Wales
- and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the authority for Northern Ireland.

Following the accreditation of a qualification, the regulators systematically monitor awarding bodies against the requirements set out in the statutory regulations. The aim of this activity is to promote continuing improvement and public confidence in the quality of external qualifications.

Where an awarding body is found not to comply with relevant criteria, the regulators set conditions of accreditation. Even if an awarding body is compliant, the monitoring team may make observations on ways that the awarding body could change its systems and procedures to improve clarity or reduce bureaucracy.

Accreditation conditions and observations arising from this monitoring activity are specified at the end of each section of this report. Awarding bodies are required to produce an action plan to show how they will deal with accreditation conditions imposed as a result of a monitoring activity. The regulators will agree the action plan and monitor its implementation.

The regulators will use the outcomes of monitoring and any subsequent action taken by awarding bodies to inform decisions on the re-accreditation of qualifications, or, if necessary, the withdrawal of accreditation.

## Banked documents

As part of its awarding body recognition processes the regulators require awarding bodies to submit certain documents to QCA for the purposes of 'banking' centrally. Information from banked documents will be used to inform monitoring activities and may also affect the awarding body's risk rating.

A suite of documents has been identified as suitable for banking and are those considered to be those most crucial in supporting an awarding body's ability to operate effectively. In order to maintain the currency of the banked documents awarding bodies are responsible for updating them as and when changes occur. They are also reminded to review them at least annually at the time of completion of the self-assessment return.

## **About this report**

This is the first monitoring activity on the Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) and was carried out by QCA on behalf of the regulators in February 2008.

The monitoring focused on the regulatory criteria relating to the following key areas:

- corporate governance
- resources and expertise
- quality assurance and control of independent assessment
- determination and reporting of results
- registration and certification
- malpractice
- equality of opportunity, reasonable adjustments and special consideration
- customer service statements
- monitoring and self-assessment.

The monitoring activities included desk research of information already held by the regulators including the awarding body recognition application. Other activities included attendance at an awarding meeting and scrutiny of the ABDO website. The monitoring team visited ABDO's head office to conduct interviews with staff and review documentation.

This report draws together the regulators' findings from these monitoring activities.

## **About ABDO**

ABDO was formed in 1986 when its two predecessors, the Association of Dispensing Opticians and the Faculty of Dispensing Opticians, were merged following the Health and Social Security Act of 1984. The profession of dispensing opticians has been regulated

voluntarily since 1926 and, as a statutory profession, by the Opticians Act since 1958. Since then the conduct of dispensing opticians has been regulated partly by legal provisions, by advice given by the General Optical Council, and by ABDO's own Advice to Fellows. For further information on ABDO and its qualifications please see [www.abdo.org.uk](http://www.abdo.org.uk).

## Corporate governance

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 5, 6 and 7.

### Findings

1. ABDO is made up of three areas. The awarding body functions sit within the examinations and regulation area. The other areas are concerned with the wider role of ABDO, membership and the training college. The general secretary oversees all areas but his day-to-day role mostly involves the association. Any potential for conflict of interest has been managed by appointing the head of examinations and registration as the principal point of accountability for the awarding body functions. However, this responsibility is not fully reflected in the job description. This aspect of the role and the responsibility for quality assurance and standards should be clearly stated.
2. ABDO is currently located within the ABDO College but is moving to a separate office shortly after the monitoring. This move will provide additional independence for the awarding body as it will be physically separated both from the association and from the college.
3. The organisation structure provided to the monitoring team has been amended to include a new position of director of professional examinations. This is a recent addition with the post holder taking up the position from January 2008. This role has been introduced to bring technical expertise to the awarding body and to oversee the conduct of the examinations. The new organisation structure and job description for the director of professional examinations needs to be submitted to QCA for banking.
4. ABDO as a whole is overseen by a board of directors. Board members are elected by the membership. The head of examinations and registration reports to the board twice a year with information relating to candidate numbers and results.
5. An academic board meets four times a year. It includes representation from the ABDO College and the other four institutes that deliver optical dispensing degrees or other optical dispensing qualifications, lay members from within the membership and ABDO staff. The remit of this committee is to share information on any changes or potential changes to the ABDO qualifications. All minutes go to the meetings of the board of directors.
6. The level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing is a substantial, but not the only, part of the requirements to be registered as a dispensing optician. Dispensing opticians are required to be registered with the General Optical Council (GOC) and to hold the Fellowship of

British Dispensing Opticians (FBDO) diploma, for which they must also be members of ABDO. The GOC is the regulatory body for the industry and has produced a set of core competencies which link to the licence to practice.

7. There are five institutes that deliver dispensing courses, one of which is the ABDO College. The other four institutes are delivering higher education degrees or college certificates in dispensing optics. The institutes have been granted 'exemptions' for their candidates from the theory units of the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing.
8. Each institute has met with the GOC and ABDO to confirm that their courses meet the core competencies. It is apparent that the assessment methods used by the institutes vary and there is no mapping to demonstrate where they meet ABDO's assessment strategy or any other details from which to judge the demand of these assessments.
9. The monitoring team were unable to confirm whether ABDO had sufficient control over the assessment methodologies used at the other institutes.
10. Currently the only information ABDO requires for the theory elements taken at the institutes is a result mark, which is insufficient to base a judgment on the quality of the assessment. Candidates have to pass both the theory and the practical elements in order to achieve the qualification. The practical assessments are wholly administered by ABDO.
11. There is also some confusion over the terminology used with regard to these arrangements. ABDO staff have raised these issues with the Academic Board and arrangements are being put in place to review the exemptions.
12. As a recognised awarding body ABDO is responsible for the quality assurance and standards of the qualifications it has been accredited to award. Currently, ABDO can only be assured of this for the candidates who are sitting ABDO's theory and practical examinations. The implications of this situation are to be found throughout this report.

## **Accreditation conditions**

1. ABDO must ensure that its systems and procedures produce results that are reliable (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Northern Ireland and Wales (2004)*, paragraph 56).

## **Observations**

1. ABDO is reminded to submit the amended organisation chart and job descriptions to Ofqual for the purpose of banking.



## Resources and expertise

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 8 and 10.

### Findings

1. The ABDO awarding body team consists of six members of staff. They include the head and deputy head of examinations and registration. The newly appointed director of professional examinations plans to review and enhance ABDO's systems and procedures, and these intentions are demonstrated throughout this report. Other members of the awarding body team include a full-time office manager, who is supported by two part-time administrators. This is adequate for the existing number of qualifications and candidates.
2. ABDO has a range of specialists that it contracts for specific work. These include 17 principal examiners who write and mark question papers for theory examinations. They are supported by 17 internal moderators whose role is to review and check theory papers. The selection criteria, roles and responsibilities of each are laid down in the ABDO *Guidelines and Procedures Manual*. These are repeated in separate documents entitled *Selection and appointment of principal examiners*, *Guidance notes for principal examiners* and *Guidance notes for internal moderators*.
3. ABDO has approximately 30 specialists available as theory markers. There is no laid-down appointment criteria for these. Guidance on marking is provided in the *Dispensing theory examinations guide*. ABDO's moderation systems have shown that there is a need to make the selection process for theory markers more stringent. ABDO's internal monitoring has also shown that although written feedback on performance is given to markers, it is not followed up. ABDO is aware of these issues and plans to address them. They will include an interview in the recruitment process for theory markers and will formalise the process for recording and monitoring performance for all of its specialists.
4. The examinations are conducted by a team of up to 120 practical examiners who may be utilised for some or all of each examination period. ABDO practical examiners also conduct the examinations held overseas. Guidance is provided in the *Dispensing examiners guide*, including marking guides and sample forms.
5. There are comprehensive recruitment, selection and training processes for practical examiners. There is a distance learning training course available followed by trainee examiners observing practical examinations before they can examine candidates under supervision. Examiners are also expected to attend a workshop once every 2 years.

6. There are two external moderators contracted for a 5-year period. External moderators are responsible for making judgements on whether the standards across all the examinations are at the appropriate level. They do this by reviewing examination papers, sampling completed work across all qualifications and all levels, and reporting to examination board meetings. Guidance and criteria for appointment are in the *Guidance notes for external moderator's* document.
7. ABDO has a good and secure IT system and database for tracking members' and candidates' progress. There is a contact section on each individual member's page on which every single contact with the individual is logged. There are different levels of permissions set that permit only certain staff to access relevant screens. For instance, the examination and registration section has different entry permissions to that of the membership section. Personal data such as bank details have additional securities. Data is backed up daily and the backup is stored off-site.

### **Accreditation conditions**

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

### **Observations**

There are no observations for this section.

## The quality assurance and control of independent assessment

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 13, 36 and 56–58.

### Findings

1. ABDO offers five vocationally related qualifications at levels 6 and 7. The director of professional examinations is responsible for writing the syllabi. The level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing must also be kept in line with changes to core competencies as indicated by the GOC.
2. It is also the responsibility of the director of professional examinations to ensure that the practical examination tasks are written and that any accompanying notes and guidance for examiners are kept up to date. The guidance is reviewed after each examination series. Any amendments that the director of professional examinations might make to practical examinations would be in consultation with a group of senior examiners.
3. The theory examination papers and the accompanying mark schemes are written by the relevant principal examiner. The examination paper without a mark scheme is then sent to the internal moderator, who amends the paper and writes a mark scheme of their own. All this information is returned to the principal examiner to assist them in the process of finalising the exam paper and mark scheme. The creation of two marking schemes that can be compared to make a final version is considered to be good practice.
4. A final review is carried out by the relevant external moderator, who checks the appropriateness of the demand. Whilst the above-mentioned process showed some good practice, ABDO should also ensure that reference to previous years' question papers is made during the exam paper writing process. This should be included in the guidance documentation.
5. The head of examinations and registration receives the finalised exam paper and ensures that it is put into house format before sending it to an external printing company.
6. The theory examinations were previously taken in a number of locations. In reviewing these arrangements ABDO has now opted for one central location for all of its examinations. ABDO staff found that having one central exam venue means that they are better able to control the examination process.

7. ABDO staff personally invigilate the theory examinations. They are responsible for taking examination papers to the venues. To gain entry to examinations, candidates must show the exam entry letter and a valid ABDO membership card. The card shows personal membership details as well as a photograph of the cardholder. The invigilators complete a register of all present candidates, as well as logging the finishing time of any candidates who do not use the full allocation of time.
8. At the end of the examination the papers are sent out directly from the exam venue to the markers. For standardisation purposes, all markers must send a sample of papers to the principal examiner. It was noted that some of ABDO's documentation states that the sample size is between 10 and 25 per cent, whilst other documentation suggests that it is just 10 per cent. ABDO staff stated that markers usually send in a sample of 10 per cent. ABDO staffs are aware of the discrepancy in the documentation. They are in the process of reviewing and updating all existing documentation.
9. The markers send back the results to ABDO, who update the database. ABDO also maintains a candidate *Examination record* card for each individual, which is manually updated at this stage. The database is used to create a spreadsheet that automatically shows the pass or fail grade against a candidate's result.
10. The two external moderators review all the borderline scripts as well as a selection of other work of between 30 and 34 per cent. The pass mark is set at 40 per cent. They can also seek further samples if necessary, for instance when one candidate gained a full 100 per cent. This moderation process is carried out in the two days prior to the relevant examination board meeting that confirms the marks.
11. ABDO monitors the work of the practical examiners and feedback is provided to them by the director of professional examinations. The external moderator comments on the performance of each marker used for the theory examinations. However, the monitoring process for the theory markers is not fully documented and should be strengthened.
12. The above-mentioned quality assurance procedures for theory examinations apply to all of the qualifications offered by ABDO. However, for the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing they can only be applied to candidates taking the examinations through the ABDO College. ABDO has no information on the quality assurance and control arrangements that are in place for candidates taking the theory examination at other institutes. (Please see the section on governance.)
13. ABDO undertakes all the practical examinations for its qualifications. They are conducted in the same centralised location as the theory examinations. A seven week period is

allocated for them in the summer, with a shorter two week period in the winter, which traditionally has fewer candidates. The practical examinations are made up of several different sections, which take place in different rooms. Assessments may be in the form of looking at objects and filling out an answer sheet. These sections could be for a maximum of eight candidates at a time. However, the majority of assessments involve one candidate at a time assessed through observation or viva.

14. The practical examiners are given guidance notes to assist them in conducting the examination and a marking sheet must be filled out for each candidate. There is always a supervising examiner present to monitor the examiner and the process. In the case of any borderline candidates the practical examiner and the supervising examiner will discuss the evidence to reach an agreed result. Candidates who fail any element of the practical examination receive a *Lack of knowledge* form. This provides the candidate with feedback as to what knowledge and skills they would need to show in order to pass the examination.
15. As with its theory examinations, ABDO staff are present at all practical examination sessions. This allows results to be agreed and collated on the same day.
16. All candidates are allowed three attempts at a unit with the possibility of a final fourth attempt. This is only possible if the candidate provides proof that extra study has been undertaken. This is usually in the form of a letter from a tutor.

## **Accreditation conditions**

2. ABDO must ensure that when producing assessments and mark schemes, they are evaluated against those set in previous years (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 58d).

## **Observations**

2. ABDO documentation should be updated to ensure consistency and to reflect current procedures.
3. ABDO should strengthen and document its process for monitoring the performance of markers for the theory examinations.

## Determination and reporting of results

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 63–67.

### Findings

1. It is the responsibility of the board of directors to review the pass marks for qualifications. Last year in 2007, after comparing the pass rate of the theory examination papers for the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing with those of the institutes, the board decided to lower the pass from 50 to 40 per cent.
2. The pass marks for all qualifications can be found within the syllabi and vary from qualification to qualification. For example, for the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing, the preliminary qualifying practical examination has a pass mark of 50 per cent, and the final practical examination has a pass mark of 60 per cent. All theory papers have a pass mark of 40 per cent.
3. After scripts have been moderated, examination board meetings for each qualification take place to formally confirm the results. These results are then issued. Results are available on the Internet and via the telephone for candidates who can confirm their identity. A result letter is also posted out to each candidate. The letter shows a breakdown of the candidate's entire result history.
4. The monitoring team is confident that ABDO's processes of determining results for candidates who sit the examinations wholly at the ABDO College are robust.
5. However, the results for candidates who sit their theory units for the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing at one of the other four institutes are not reliable. The theory results are forwarded to ABDO by the institutes' administration services. This is the only contact ABDO has with the institutes with regard to verifying results. The lack of information from the institutes means that ABDO's ability to determine results on the basis of sufficient evidence is severely compromised.
6. ABDO does not currently carry out any statistical evaluation or review of its examination results to ensure consistent demand year on year. This is something that ABDO must do.

### Accreditation conditions

3. ABDO must ensure that the results are determined on sufficient evidence (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 63b).

4. ABDO must ensure that standards are comparable from year to year (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 63d).

## **Observations**

There are no observations for this section.

## Registration and certification

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 11, 12, 21 and 22.

### Findings

1. Candidates taking ABDO qualifications have to first become student members of the association. They enrol individually for the relevant examinations to a published timescale. Summer examination entries are received from January to the end of March and winter entries from September to October.
2. Upon registration members are allocated a unique number, which is used for all dealings with ABDO for the lifetime of the candidate. A full contact history is attached to each member's profile on the database.
3. Following the examination board meetings the office manager enters the confirmed examination results onto the database. This is done manually from a spreadsheet. An IT programmer is also on hand to assist in case any technical problems occur. The monitoring team considers that the provision of additional expertise at this critical point is good practice.
4. The office manager carries out a random spot check for errors after all the entries are made. A result letter is printed out for each candidate and this is checked by an administrator against the result on the spreadsheet before it is sent out. Reports are also run to check that all candidates who entered the examination have a result.
5. A paper examination record card is maintained for each candidate and results are recorded on this. Although the process of entering results is thorough, it is reliant on one person. ABDO should consider producing an internal procedure that could be followed by other staff in case of absence.
6. The result letter asks candidates whether they wish to receive their certificate in the post or attend a graduation ceremony. Certificate printing is outsourced to an external organisation. The contract for managing this is overseen by the ABDO finance section. Blank certificates are kept in a secure environment. Only 500 blank certificates are kept on site at any one time for additional security. All the certificates processed are logged. Checks in the form of site visits are made by ABDO staff twice a year.

### Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.



## **Observations**

4. ABDO should consider drawing up documented procedures for all of the administrative functions of the awarding body.

## Malpractice

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 28–31.

## Findings

1. The malpractice policy is the same as that submitted to QCA at the time of recognition and meets the regulatory requirements.
2. The policy is published in the *Guidelines and Procedures Manual*. However, it is not provided to candidates, nor are candidates made aware of the consequences of cheating.
3. ABDO is not aware of the arrangements for dealing with malpractice where candidates are taking the theory element of the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing at the other institutes.

## Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

## Observation

5. Candidates should be made aware of the consequences of cheating or plagiarism.

## Equality of opportunity, reasonable adjustments and special considerations

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 9, 14–20 and 38–42.

### Findings

1. All requests for reasonable adjustment and special considerations come in to the head of examinations and registration. Requests are reviewed by the head of examinations and registration and the director of professional examinations. They are considered on an individual basis. The reasonable adjustment form is included in the guidebook for members.
2. In order to request special considerations the *Guidance handbook for members sitting theory and practical examinations* advises that candidates must write in to the head of examinations and registration. Although ABDO ensures that each case is looked at on an individual basis and that each candidate receives fair treatment, there is a possibility of inconsistency. ABDO must create a documented internal process for applying reasonable adjustments and special considerations.
3. ABDO staff stated that the extremely low levels of requests for these arrangements meant that they did not currently monitor their use. ABDO has a procedure, 'Compliance with the regulatory authorities' requirements' for annual review that includes annual reporting on requests for special consideration and reasonable adjustments. However, at the time of the audit this procedure had not been implemented. (See also the section on monitoring.)
4. ABDO has in the past provided letters to candidates who could not complete the qualification in order to confirm their achievements. However, it would not be able to issue an aegrotat award. ABDO needs to document its stance on the application of aegrotats.
5. ABDO is not aware of the arrangements for dealing with reasonable adjustments or special considerations for candidates taking the theory element of the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing at the other institutes.

### Accreditation conditions

5. ABDO must produce a documented internal procedure for how it deals with reasonable adjustments and special considerations (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 9a).

6. ABDO must clearly document how it recognises the achievements of a candidate who cannot complete the award (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 19b).

## **Observations**

6. ABDO must ensure that it implements its monitoring process for reviewing the use of reasonable adjustments and special considerations.
7. As part of its review of arrangements for exemptions, ABDO should seek to obtain an understanding of how the other four institutes deal with reasonable adjustments and special considerations.

## Customer service statements

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 32 and 33b.

### Findings

1. The customer service statement is the same as that submitted to QCA at the time of recognition. It is published in the *Guidelines and Procedures Manual* and in the *Guidance handbook for members sitting theory and practical examinations*.
2. ABDO has a candidate questionnaire prepared but to date has not sought any customer feedback. This will be implemented from spring 2008 following the issue of results for the winter examinations. Initially the questionnaire will be in paper format but ABDO hopes to send this out electronically in future.
3. To date no monitoring of the published customer service targets has taken place.

### Accreditation conditions

7. ABDO must have procedures in place to monitor its customer service targets (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 33b).

### Observations

There are no observations for this section.

## Enquiries and appeals

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 23–27.

### Findings

1. Any candidate who is unhappy with their result has the right to appeal. The instructions on how to request an appeal are included in the *Guidance handbook for members sitting theory and practical examinations*, which advises candidates to write to the head of examinations and registration with the relevant fee. However, the fee amount is not stated on any of ABDO's documentation, which may lead to some confusion.
2. If the appeal relates to a practical examination, the paperwork relating to the examination will be looked at by the director of professional examinations, who will write a report and send this to the candidate. When the appeal relates to a theory examination the principal examiner will write the report.
3. If on the receipt of the report the candidate is still dissatisfied, they may continue to stage two of the appeals process. ABDO staff advised that no appeal has ever got to the second stage. However, if it were to do so they would use two of their external moderators to look at the marking of the script to ensure the correct procedures were followed. The second stage of the appeal must be undertaken by someone who is entirely independent of ABDO and as such the awarding body must identify someone wholly unconnected with them.
4. The head of examinations and registration maintains a log of all appeals that come into ABDO. ABDO must also implement its procedure for evaluating and reporting on these appeals. The exam board looks at appeals for each exam series and ABDO has a procedure 'Compliance with the regulatory authorities' requirements' for annual monitoring. However, at the time of the monitoring this procedure had not been implemented. (See also the section on monitoring.)
5. ABDO is not aware of the arrangements for making enquiries and appeals where candidates are exempt from the theory element of the level 6 Diploma in ophthalmic dispensing at the other institutes.

### Accreditation conditions

8. ABDO must identify an independent person to conduct a second-stage appeal (*The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraph 25a).

## **Observations**

8. ABDO should signpost candidates to where they can find out what the appeal fees are.
9. ABDO should implement its procedures for evaluating the operation of its appeals process.
10. As part of its review of arrangements for exemptions, ABDO should seek to obtain an understanding of how the other four institutes deal with enquires and appeals.

## Monitoring and self-assessment

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)*, paragraphs 33a, 34, 35 and 37.

### Findings

1. The *Guidelines and Procedures Manual* contains a standard operating procedure entitled 'Compliance with regulatory authorities' requirements'. This is a documented process for reviewing the awarding body systems and making reports to the board of directors. However to date no review has taken place. ABDO staff are aware of this and intend to implement this procedure.
2. ABDO employs an external auditor to carry out two or three reviews each year on specific aspects of the awarding body systems. The external auditor then makes an annual report with recommendations for action. The monitoring team saw the most recent report. This is extremely good practice.
3. The documented procedure and the external audit makes ABDO well prepared to carry out self-assessment and review.

### Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

### Observations

There are no observations for this section.