

Key Information and Q&A on the new Orthoptist Apprenticeship Degree Programme

This new Level 6 Orthoptist Apprenticeship provides a new and vital alternative route into the profession, allowing Trusts to "grow their own" talent while offering students a salaried pathway to HCPC registration. Here is a structured breakdown of the key components of this new programme:

Programme Structure & Delivery

- Duration: 36 months of continuous learning plus the End Point Assessment (EPA).
- Learning Split: A 60/40 model, which is slightly different from the traditional 80/20 apprenticeship split.
 - 60% On-the-job: Immersive clinical experience within the employing Trust.
 - 40% Off-the-job: Academic learning delivered by the University.
- National Reach: Primarily delivered through online teaching and work-based exercises, making it accessible to Trusts across the country regardless of their proximity to Sheffield.

In-Person Requirements

While the majority of the theory is online, there are mandatory face-to-face elements to ensure clinical competency and allow apprentices to feel part of the University community:

- Year 1: A "Welcome Week" to establish the cohort and introduce academic expectations.
- Year 2: Two days of face-to-face teaching with the Optics team
- Annual Exams: Apprentices must attend The University of Sheffield once a year for practical clinical examinations.
- External Placements: A one-month placement in a different clinical setting each year to ensure a breadth of experience (e.g., a small community clinic vs. a large teaching hospital).

Dates for Welcome Week, teaching sessions and placements for the duration of the 36 month programme will be given at the start of the course to allow apprentices and employers to plan for these. Dates for the clinical exams will be given as soon as these are confirmed.

Assessment & Support

In line with apprenticeship requirements, we will use a helpful "tripartite" support system & both academic and local support.

- Mentorship: The employing Trust must provide at least one qualified Orthoptist clinical mentor.

- Regular Reviews: Progress (tripartite) meetings between the apprentice, the employer, and the University occur every 10–12 weeks with guided prompt questions that reflect the stage of the course. For example, between Year 1 and Year 3, the focus shifts from basic observation to independent clinical decision-making.
- Diverse Assessment: A mix of online exams, written assignments, clinical portfolios, and hands-on clinical exams.

Clinical placements

- The course includes a one-month placement in an alternative clinical setting to the apprentice's employing Trust. In very large Trusts, this could be a different clinical site within the same Trust and plans for this would have tripartite discussion.
 - The one-month placement will need to be completed in a different setting for each of the years.
 - Apprentices and employers can arrange the setting of the clinical placement with a neighbouring Trust if preferred, or our University placement teams can arrange this. Placement provision planning would be a discussion point at tripartite review.
-

Key Considerations for Employers

If you are looking to implement this within your department, you will need to consider:

1. Staffing: Ensuring your current Orthoptists have the capacity to act as clinical mentors.
 2. Funding: Utilising the Apprenticeship Levy to cover tuition costs.
 3. Workforce planning including preparation of your business case
 4. Liaison with your Trust apprenticeship lead and adherence to any Trust or region policies on e.g. banding and contracts of apprenticeship positions
 5. Workload of your current workforce and clinical tutors
-

Q&A

I have an employee who is employed as a vision screener rather than an Orthoptic apprentice. Does my employee need to have an Orthoptic apprenticeship contract in order to onboard the Sheffield degree apprenticeship programme?

No - the eligibility criteria to apply for this apprenticeship (and use your Trust levy for funding) simply states that the potential apprentice must be an employee of the Trust and must have a contract of employment that covers the entire apprenticeship. However, you

may find that there are benefits to moving your employee on to an Orthoptic apprenticeship contract, which may help to streamline their workload in line with the apprenticeship.

What banding does an Orthoptic apprentice need to be employed at for the duration of the programme?

There is no prescriptive pay banding set at a national level for this apprenticeship. Some Trusts and regions mandate that all apprentices are paid at a particular pay band, whereas others are more flexible. This allows for potential applicants from different levels of experience and prior recognition, to enter the apprenticeship programme without facing a salary reduction.

Can the external placement sites be to the same location over the three years?

No - we are aiming for all apprentices to visit three separate sites - a different one each year to ensure that they achieve both depth and breadth of practice beyond their home healthcare setting. Attendance at placement is mandatory.

Your example timetable looks to be 35 hours a week, yet apprentices can be employed a minimum of 30 hours per week. How does this work?

The online synchronous teaching day with the University of Sheffield is between 9.15am and 4.45pm on Thursdays (except for one study block as indicated on the delivery plan). Apprentices would need to be available for all of the synchronous sessions and engagement and attendance at these would be monitored quite closely as per Ofsted/DfE regulations for apprenticeship programmes. The remaining hours of employment could be worked out around this. The delivery programme includes a day of independent / asynchronous learning on Fridays and this additionally could give some flexibility.

How does annual leave work?

As an employee of the Trust, the apprentice will receive an annual leave allowance from the Trust. We share our entire apprenticeship teaching delivery plan for all three years during the onboarding process, with all apprentices and employers, to allow a transparent view of the apprentice's timetable throughout the programme. Within the delivery plan we have allocated reading weeks and identified University closure weeks during which we encourage apprentices to take annual leave. Apprentices must not miss planned teaching days or exams unless permission is sought and granted.

Won't it be boring to be online all day for the University synchronous teaching day?

We are very experienced at delivering learning online and will make sure that the teaching sessions are interactive and engaging, with plenty of opportunities for breaks and movement. Some apprentices may do their online learning day from home and some may

come into their Trust to work from a communal office as part of the team and either experience is fine for us.

Is the content "easier" than the traditional degree? Not at all. The modules and academic content are identical to the BMedSci Orthoptics programme. Only the delivery method and certain assessment formats differ to suit the work-based environment. Students graduating from both degree programmes will be eligible for HCPC registration and must therefore meet the Standards of Proficiency for this.

How will attendance and engagement be monitored? Attendance and engagement monitoring for the Orthoptist Apprenticeship at the University of Sheffield is a rigorous process designed to meet both academic standards and Department for Education (DfE) funding requirements. Because this is a level 6 degree apprenticeship with a significant online component, the university uses a "multi-touchpoint" digital approach. Apprentices will need to regularly log in to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which is Blackboard Ultra. This includes:

- Frequency and duration of logins.
- Accessing mandatory reading materials and recorded lectures.
- Participation in discussion forums or interactive work-based exercises.
- Completion of formative (practice) quizzes.

The AHPNM Apprenticeship Team will notify employers when/if their apprentices are absent from study days, so that this can be followed up with the apprentice as appropriate. Where absence is unavoidable, apprentices can evidence learning which covers their absence, effectively making up any missed hours.

How is "on-the-job" learning monitored? This will be captured through your Clinical Portfolio and Off-the-Job (OTJ) hours log. You are required to record the time spent on learning activities at your Trust (60% of your time). These logs are reviewed during your Tripartite Reviews every 10–12 weeks to ensure you are meeting the required training hours.

Is attendance at in-person events mandatory?

Yes. Attendance at the Year 1 Welcome Week, the annual clinical exams at the University of Sheffield, the 2 days in Year 2 for Optics teaching, and the month-long alternative placements, are all mandatory.

Who will make the decision as to whether an apprentice's engagement is sufficient?

This is a Tripartite responsibility. While the University monitors the academic data, your Clinical Mentor at the Trust provides feedback on your work-based engagement. Every 10–12 weeks, all three parties (Apprentice, Employer, University) meet to sign off on your progress.

What happens in a tripartite meeting? This will be a mandatory online meeting with the apprentice, a member of the academic team at the University and the Clinical Mentor. It is a check-in every 10-12 weeks to make sure that the clinical learning in the workplace aligns with the academic requirements of the degree. Each meeting will have a different focus, but essentially the purpose is to discuss the progress of the apprentice since the last review, checking on the apprentice's well-being and making sure their workload is manageable and setting some targets for the next quarter.

What is your cohort size?

For 2026 entry we are looking to have a cohort of 15-20 and will review numbers for successive years after this and look to increase the cohort size if demand is high. We are looking to provide apprentices as a continuous pipeline, so we would ideally rather have steady, similar sized cohorts rather than huge cohorts initially and then lesser numbers.

How do you anticipate this will affect your traditional route entry?

We don't expect this new route to affect our traditional route entry numbers. For other AHP courses such as prosthetics and speech and language therapy courses, numbers for both apprenticeships and traditional-route entry have each increased after apprenticeships were launched due to the increased visibility of the profession that apprenticeships bring. The apprenticeship is intended to attract different and diverse learners through the blended learning, national reach approach, allowing talent growth and nurture from local communities.

If a department has an apprentice, is this considered when calculating allocations for traditional route student placements?

Apprentices will be key members of the Orthoptic team, employed by the Trust and able to contribute to Orthoptic care and team responsibilities progressively, as the course develops. The Orthoptic apprenticeship plan has been purposefully frontloaded educationally, so that apprentices can be as useful as possible from day one on the job. As apprentices develop, their Orthoptic skills will increase. We anticipate that by third year, apprentices will be highly useful pre-registration professionals, able to help the team meet capacity. They are therefore not considered in student placement numbers in the same way as the other pre-registration traditional route programmes. Apprentices and traditional students bring different, yet equally valuable, experiences to their

placements—we believe they have much to learn and benefit from one another whilst gaining clinical exposure.

How will apprentices and traditional route students work together?

We will bring both apprentices and traditional-route students together for an introductory week in Sheffield. Both groups of learners can trade their clinical insights - their different paths offer unique perspectives that can significantly enrich each other's learning.

What other funding is available in addition to the Apprenticeship levy?

For 2026-27 and possibly onwards, NHSE have an allocation of grants to support the Orthoptic apprenticeship - offering ~£8000 per apprentice per year, to support employers to mitigate the challenges of apprenticeships in this small and vital profession. This is in addition to the apprenticeship levy and final clearance and further information on this is expected from NHSE imminently.

Additionally, [NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSF\) | NHSBSA](#) can provide training grants to support apprenticeships. This has been used by other apprenticeship employers to buy items such as laptops, anatomy models, backfill for apprentice education; and travel costs - including the cost of staying overnight for University located teaching and exams. For further information please see: [Training Grant | NHSBSA](#) or discuss with your apprenticeship lead.