

# Response to General Optical Council consultation on proposed changes to Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians, Standards for Optical Students and Standards for Optical Businesses

April 2024

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care promotes the health, safety and wellbeing of patients, service users and the public by raising standards of regulation and registration of people working in health and care. We are an independent body, accountable to the UK Parliament. More information about our work and the approach we take is available at [www.professionalstandards.org.uk](http://www.professionalstandards.org.uk)
- 1.2 As part of our work we:
- Oversee the ten health and care professional regulators and report annually to Parliament on their performance
  - Accredit registers of healthcare practitioners working in occupations not regulated by law through the Accredited Registers programme
  - Conduct research and advise the four UK governments on improvements in regulation
  - Promote right-touch regulation and publish papers on regulatory policy and practice.

## 2. General comments

- 2.1 We welcome the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians, Standards for Optical Students and Standards for Optical Businesses.
- 2.2 We were pleased to see the pre-consultation work that has gone into this standards review including checking against other regulators standards and commissioning public perceptions research into their standards.

## 3. Detailed comments

### General questions

***Q1. Do you think there should be any difference in our expectations of students and fully qualified registrants?***

- 3.1 No

***Please explain your reasoning.***

- 3.2 It remains our position that we do not support full registration of students, however where students are registered it seems appropriate that expectations are consistent with those for qualified registrants to ensure a smooth transition into practice.

***Q2. Do you think any of the proposed changes could affect any individuals or groups with one or more of the protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010?***

- 3.3 Yes

***If yes, please explain how.***

- 3.4 We are pleased that the GOC has published an Impact Assessment alongside the consultation document and are satisfied that due consideration has been given to the effects of the changes on groups with protected characteristics.
- 3.5 As identified in the accompanying Impact Assessment, the new standards are expected to have a differential impact on some groups. Most notably, the new standard relating to sexual boundaries is likely to have a particularly positive impact on women.

***Q3. Do you think any of the proposed changes could affect any other individuals or groups, either positively or negatively?***

- 3.6 Not sure

***If yes, please explain how.***

- 3.7 We have not identified any additional impacts to those listed in the Impact Assessment.

***Q4. Will the proposed changes have effects, whether positive or negative, on:***

***(a) opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language, and***

***(b) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?***

- 3.8 No

***If yes, please explain your reasoning.***

- 3.9 No comments.

**Q5. Could the proposed changes be revised so that they would have positive effects, or increased positive effects, on:**

**(a) opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language, and**

**(b) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?**

3.10 Not sure

***If yes, please explain how.***

3.11 No comments.

**Q6. Could the proposed changes be revised so that they would not have negative effects, or so that they would have decreased negative effects, on:**

**(a) opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language, and**

**(b) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?**

3.12 Not sure

***If yes, please explain your reasoning.***

3.13 No comments.

**Q7. Is there anything else you think we should consider as part of the proposed changes?**

3.14 No

***If yes, please explain your reasoning.***

3.15 No comments.

**Q8. Do you think there should be a short implementation period after the new standards are published and before they come into effect? The purpose of an implementation period would be to give registrants time to adapt; to adjust their conduct and enable stakeholders to review the standards and make any necessary amendments to practice, policy, guidance, or training material?**

3.16 Yes

***Please explain your reasoning. If you consider a short implementation period is necessary, please say how long this should be for, and why.***

3.17 It seems to be standard practice across the regulators we oversee to allow an implementation period to provide registrants with time to digest the content of the new standards make any necessary changes to their practice. We do not have a view on how long this should be and suggest GOC look at how long other bodies usually allow.

## Leadership and professionalism

### ***Q9. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the introduction on leadership is clear?***

3.18 Somewhat agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.19 We support the changes made to expand on expectations relating to leadership and professionalism within the introductory wording to the standards.

3.20 Although we note that it is the GOC's intention to cover this area off more fully in the full review of the business standards, we thought there may be a case for a more specific reference within the Standards of Practice for Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians for those in leadership positions to support staff to raise safety concerns if needed and to create a safe and supportive workplace environment.

### ***Q10. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the introduction on leadership sets appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.21 Somewhat agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.22 See comments under question 9.

## Care of patients in vulnerable circumstances

### ***Q11. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the introduction on providing care for patients in vulnerable circumstances is clear?***

3.23 Somewhat agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.24 We support the addition of wording relating to provision of services to vulnerable patients. We wondered whether it may be appropriate to link this addition to wider expectations relating to safeguarding of vulnerable individuals and ensure that registrants are clear on what their obligations are if they become aware of a safeguarding concern (covered under Standard 11).

### ***Q12. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the introduction on providing care for patients in vulnerable circumstances sets appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.25 Somewhat agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.26 See comments under question 11.

***Q13. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards are clear?***

3.27 Somewhat agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.28 See comments under the relevant standards.

***Q14. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.29 Somewhat agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.30 See comments under the relevant standards.

### **Effective communication**

***Q15. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards are clear?***

3.31 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.32 No comments.

***Q16. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.33 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.34 No comments.

### **Use of digital technologies including artificial intelligence (AI)**

***Q17. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards are clear?***

3.35 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.36 We welcome the additions to the standards that the GOC has made to respond to changes in the context of practice through greater use of digital technologies and AI.

***Q18. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.37 Somewhat agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.38 No further comments

## Equality diversity and inclusion

### ***Q19. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards are clear?***

3.39 Somewhat agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.40 We support the changes made to the standards to strengthen those relating to equality diversity and inclusion in particular the explicit reference added to being inclusive and non-discriminatory with colleagues as well as with patients and the public.

3.41 We thought the standards could be stronger on emphasising the need to provide appropriate care to diverse groups of patients. Although there is a specific reference to providing reasonable adjustments for disabled patients at 13.8 there appears to be limited reference to the need to be equipped to provide suitable care to other groups, including culturally competent care. This is alluded to but not explicitly stated in the requirements outlined under 7.1.

3.42 One of the indicators for Standard 3 of our Standards of Good Regulation is 'Standards and/or guidance for students and registrants are designed to equip them to provide appropriate care to all patients and service users.' We also highlight in *Safer care for all* the need to consider more directly the role of healthcare professionals in tackling health inequalities.

3.43 Although the consultation notes that the standards don't currently cover health inequalities, we think there is scope for the GOC to be stronger on expectation around providing appropriate care to different groups.

### ***Q20. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.44 Somewhat agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.45 See comments under standard 19.

### ***Q21. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the business standard is clear?***

3.46 Strongly agree

#### ***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.47 We welcome the additions to the business standards to make clear expectations in relation to inclusivity and supporting staff who have faced discrimination, bullying or harassment. We note that the GOC Registrant Workforce and Perceptions Survey 2023<sup>1</sup> found that registrants faced a high level of harassment, bullying and abuse in the workplace. In light of this,

---

<sup>1</sup> GOC Registrant Workforce and Perceptions Survey 2023: [goc-registrant-workforce-and-perceptions-survey-2023-research-report.pdf \(optical.org\)](https://www.goc.org.uk/goc-registrant-workforce-and-perceptions-survey-2023-research-report.pdf)

making clear that optical businesses have a responsibility to support staff in these circumstances is particularly welcome.

***Q22. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the business standards sets appropriate minimum expectations of business registrants?***

3.48 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.49 See comments under question 21.

**Social media and online conduct and consent**

***Q23. To what extent do you agree the revised standards are clear?***

3.50 Somewhat agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.51 We support the changes made to the standards to strengthen expectation around social media use. Given that social media use has been a particularly high profile issue within healthcare regulation and a focus for other regulators; in our view the content on the standards on this issue is quite minimal, in particular in relation to the balance between expressing personal views and maintaining appropriate professional standards.

3.52 Whilst we don't have any specific additions to propose at this time, we note the GOC's comment that there was a request for further guidance in this area and therefore suggest they keep the content of the standards on this issue under review when developing further expectations in guidance.

***Q24. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.53 Somewhat agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.54 See comments under questions 23.

**Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries**

***Q25. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards are clear?***

3.55 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.56 We welcome the additions made to the standards in relation to professional boundaries. We have previously highlighted concerns about regulators not always taking boundary violations between colleagues seriously enough and the changes should help to address this issue. This issue has also been

prominent in the media and external environment with some registrants reporting poor behaviours in the workplace.

***Q26. To what extent do you agree the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.57 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.58 See comments under question 25.

**Preventing sexual harassment**

***Q27. To what extent do you agree with the inclusion of an additional standard that specifically addresses the issue of sexual harassment?***

3.59 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.60 In relation to the proposed new standard regarding the requirement not to act in a sexual way, whilst we agree with the sentiment and support the addition, we suggest that further consideration should be given to the wording. Whilst we recognise that the wording: 'with the effect or purpose of causing offence, embarrassment, humiliation, or distress' may be intended to avoid outlawing consensual relationships between colleagues, we believe it could be strengthened to make clear that 1) there should be no acceptance of sexual behaviours with patients given the power imbalance, and 2) sexualised language or behaviour is not appropriate in the workplace, irrespective of its purpose or effect.

3.61 While we appreciate that the language chosen reflects that used by other regulators, we are concerned that it may permit behaviour which is inherently inappropriate (for example, sexual banter). Research we commissioned into sexual misconduct and dishonesty<sup>2</sup> found that organisational cultures where banter or explicit sexual talk is tolerated may facilitate further (and more serious) wrongdoing. The language used in the standard should seek to avoid the possibility of registrants being able to claim that their (inappropriate) behaviour didn't have any of the effects described.

***Q28. To what extent do you agree that the additional standard is clear?***

3.62 Somewhat agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.63 See comments under question 27.

---

<sup>2</sup> Searle, R et al, 2017, *Bad Apples? Bad Barrels? Or bad cellars? Antecedents and processes of professional misconduct in UK health and care*: [antecedents-and-processes-of-professional-misconduct-in-uk-health-and-social-care.pdf](https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/antecedents-and-processes-of-professional-misconduct-in-uk-health-and-social-care.pdf) ([professionalstandards.org.uk](https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk))



## Registrant health

***Q29. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards are clear?***

3.64 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.65 We support the additional wording under standard 11.4.

***Q30. To what extent do you agree that the revised standards set appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.66 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.67 No further comments.

***Q31. To what extent do you agree with the inclusion of an additional standard that specifically addresses the issue of serious communicable diseases?***

3.68 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.69 We support the additional standard on communicable diseases.

***Q32. To what extent do you agree that the additional standard is clear?***

3.70 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.71 No further comments.

## Other changes and areas for consideration

***Q33. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the introduction on compliance with legislation is clear?***

3.72 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.73 No further comments.

***Q34. To what extent do you agree that the addition to the introduction on compliance with legislation sets appropriate minimum expectations of registrants?***

3.74 Strongly agree

***Please provide comments to explain your response.***

3.75 No further comments.

***Q35. Do you have any other comments about the proposed revisions or additions to the standards?***

- 3.76 Although the GOC hasn't made any specific changes to the standards relating to 'Reputation of the profession' (17) and we don't have any significant concerns about the content of the standards themselves, we note that our report looking at the role of public confidence in the fitness to practise process highlighted that a focus on reputation can be confusing as it suggests professional self-interest rather than concern about how behaviours may impact on confidence in the profession (which could impact on trust/willingness to seek out care etc).<sup>3</sup> The GOC may wish to consider this point in future reviews of the standards.

**4. Further information**

- 4.1 Please get in touch if you would like to discuss any aspect of this response in further detail. You can contact us at:

**Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care**  
16-18, New Bridge St,  
London, EC4V 6AG

Email: [policy@professionalstandards.org.uk](mailto:policy@professionalstandards.org.uk)  
Website: [www.professionalstandards.org.uk](http://www.professionalstandards.org.uk)  
Telephone: 020 7389 8030

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/detail/how-is-public-confidence-maintained-when-fitness-to-practise-decisions-are-made>