

# Boots Opticians Professional Services Ltd

## Inspection report

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**Unique reference number:** 51573

**Name of lead inspector:** John Grimmer HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 10 August 2012

**Type of provider:** Employer

**Address:** Boots Opticians  
Thane Road  
Nottingham  
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**Telephone number:** 0115 9493302

## Information about the provider

1. Boots Opticians Professional Services Ltd (Boots Opticians) is a high street optician with around 630 practices in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and is part of the Alliance Boots group of health and beauty and pharmaceutical wholesale businesses. Boots opticians provide a range of optical services including eye health checks, contact lens fittings and retinal photography, and offer customers a large range of own brand and designer glasses and sunglasses.
2. Optical consultants provide technical support through the optical retail apprenticeship to support professional opticians. Prior to 2009, optical retailing apprenticeship and Train to Gain training were carried out by Dollond and Aitchison. In 2009, Dollond and Aitchison was merged with Boots Opticians who now carry out all optical retail apprentice training.
3. Following the merger Boots Opticians set up and equipped five regional training centres to provide off-the-job training for apprentices, either on a block or day release basis. Boots Opticians has a contract with the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) to deliver apprenticeship frameworks nationally in optical retail skills. The number of apprentices has significantly increased since 2009 and is currently 236. Of these, 190 are intermediate and 46 are advanced apprentices. Boots Opticians also train and accredit another 182 optical retail apprentices for Boots Opticians business who are not funded by the SFA.

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2010/11
<b>Employer provision:</b> Apprenticeships	384 apprentices

## Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

<b>Overall effectiveness of provision</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>
	<b>Grade</b>
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	3
Equality and diversity	3
<b>Subject Areas</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Health, public services and care (optical retail)	2

## Overall effectiveness

4. Learners enjoy their training and quickly improve their skills, knowledge and confidence in their optical retail work. They develop very good customer service skills and improve their personal and social skills very effectively. Learners receive good support in the workplace and at regional training centres to help them to achieve their qualifications.
5. Resources in both workplaces and training centres are good. The training is very well planned and managed. Professional optical practitioners provide specialist knowledge, support and assessment in the retail practices and at the training centres to ensure that high standards are maintained and that information is up-to-date and relevant. The training in the workplace is very well linked to, and coordinated with, the off-the-job training at training centres to enhance and maximise learning opportunities.
6. Managers set and share high standards of performance, particularly around customer service expectations. Staff demonstrate high levels of professionalism and act as good role models for learners. Boots Opticians is a good place to work and this was highlighted by the company being awarded the Sunday Times 'Best place to work' large employer winners in 2010. Boots Opticians managed the period of significant change since the last inspection very well and has maintained the good teaching, learning and assessment for learners.

## Main findings

- Success rates for intermediate apprentices are above national averages and the proportion who complete within the planned duration of their training is consistently high. The number of advanced apprentices who completed within the planned time was low in 2010/11 but in the current year has significantly improved to around the national average.
- Learners are highly motivated and ambitious, achieving high standards of professionalism with many progressing onto a management development programme and/or onto further learning.
- Teaching, training, coaching and assessment are particularly effective. Individual coaching is highly responsive and meets the needs of learners. Qualified optical practitioners provide good training and coaching at work and some also act as tutors to provide good teaching of technical subjects at the training centres. However, the observation of teaching and learning does not always lead to development actions for tutors or record and identify good practice which could be shared more widely.
- A wide range of learning resources are used very well to support learning. The well-equipped and highly professional training centres provide learners with a wide variety of information and support to improve their learning and skills. Workbooks are used to integrate the Boots Opticians learning programme very effectively with the national occupational standards.
- The results of initial assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy are not used effectively to meet the needs of all learners. Most learners are not aware of their initial assessment results, and of areas that they need to improve. Numeracy skills required for learners' job roles are effectively embedded into learning sessions. However, there is an over-reliance on workbooks and self-study to improve learners' literacy skills.
- Tracking and monitoring of learners' progress towards their qualifications is insufficiently effective. Assessors review progress informally through checking workbooks and by liaising with staff in the retail practices. However, there is no formal systematic tracking of progress to ensure that each learner is on target to achieve within the planned time for their programme.
- The apprenticeship programme meets the needs of learners and of the business very well. Boots Opticians were instrumental in the development and design of the national occupational standards for optical retailing. Good quality off-the-job learning modules complement and link well with on-the-job training.
- Support for learners is highly effective. Learners are supported very well in the retail practices by practice managers, optometrists, opticians, workplace buddies and by their peers. They frequently assist learners with their learning programmes and provide good help and support with any problems. Assessors supplement the support very well whenever requested and through their formal planned assessment and support visits.
- Managers promote high standards and raise expectations. The business strategy promotes a company culture focused on providing very high levels of

customer care. Learners are trained to provide very good levels of customer care and they perform their job roles to high standards. Managers are aware of the need to improve the use of management information to manage the provision.

- Boots Opticians have a very good commitment to investing in the training and development of apprentices. The company invested in five well-equipped regional training centres with full-time managers. Full-time assessors work closely with retail practice optical specialists to provide good assessment opportunities for learners at work. Optical practitioners willingly give their time to provide good off-the-job teaching and on-the-job coaching and assessment for learners.
- Safeguarding arrangements meet current government requirements. Learners have an appropriate understanding of the relevant issues for their work and training requirements. Learners are well protected whilst staying in hotels to attend technical training sessions at the regional training centres. However, the company fail to adequately identify and monitor their vulnerable learners.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Learners are aware of their rights and responsibilities around equality and diversity. However, managers do not analyse data to identify trends in the performance of different groups of learners sufficiently.

### **What does Boots Opticians Professional Services Ltd need to do to improve further?**

- Plan assessors' time better to visit the retail practices when individual learners may be falling behind and ensure that systematic monitoring of learners' progress is carried out and managed to continue the improvement in success rates.
- Ensure that results of the diagnosis of learners' literacy and numeracy abilities are used to plan required learning in functional skills and share the results with learners so that they know the areas they need to improve.
- Develop the teaching and learning observation process to enable staff to improve their teaching techniques and to allow managers to capture and share best practice across the regional training centres.
- Further develop the management information system to provide managers with meaningful data to plan, review and develop the provision. Make use of data for analysing trends, improving performance and identifying vulnerable learners and the performance of different groups of learners.

## **Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors**

### **What users like:**

- feeling safe and being highly valued by Boots Opticians
- feeling empowered and excited about their future progress
- the job with good career prospects, job security and qualifications that really matter
- the training when everyone gets together away from the retail practice
- the training and support from the practice managers and opticians
- learning new skills and the challenges provided at work.

### **What users would like to see improved:**

- more time needed at work to complete the workbook.

## **Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**

### **What employers like:**

- the well trained staff that are versatile and add value to the business
- the support and underpinning knowledge provided by the training centres and the assessors
- the dedicated block release training sessions away from the retail practices.

### **What employers would like to see improved:**

- more information provided in the retail practices about the programme.

## Main inspection report

### Capacity to make and sustain improvement

**Grade 2**

7. Boots Opticians has made, and sustained, improvements to the apprenticeship training over time. Senior managers have maintained the high quality of the provision during a period of substantial change and reorganisation for the company since the last inspection. The company's strategic and improvement plans provide an effective framework for improvement and include realistic performance and quality improvement actions that managers monitor appropriately. Boots Opticians has made good progress towards achieving targets for increasing and improving the training provision. The high quality learning resources are used very well to support learning. Outcomes for learners remain good. A high proportion of learners achieve their learning objectives, including developing very good work-related skills and knowledge.
8. Managers use self-assessment effectively as a quality improvement tool. They make satisfactory use of arrangements to consult with learners, supervisors and other staff to accurately evaluate and improve the provision. Managers and staff make good use of their intimate knowledge of individual learners' comments to make effective adjustments to the training programme. The quality of teaching and learning is good. The coaching and support by optical practitioners is very effective in helping learners to progress and achieve. Staff assess the learning and support needs of learners very accurately.
9. Managers have clearly identified the need for greater capacity to collect and analyse data. A clear strategy is in place to address this and work has commenced through the introduction of a new management information system. The new system has been selected to enable managers to receive more up-to-date and relevant data about learners to allow them to manage the programme more effectively. The system was not fully populated and operational at the time of the inspection and so it was not yet possible to judge its effectiveness.
10. Although teaching and learning are good the revised system for the observation of teaching and learning, introduced since the previous inspection, requires further improvement to become a reliable quality improvement tool.

### Outcomes for learners

**Grade 2**

11. Success rates for intermediate apprentices were very high in 2009/10 but in 2010/11, following the introduction of the new qualification framework, fell to just above the national average rate. The proportion of learners who complete within the planned duration of their training is high.

12. Success rates for advanced apprentices were just above the national average in 2009/10, falling to just below the following year. The proportion of those learners completing their programme within the planned duration of their training was low in both years. However, current learners are making very good progress and the proportion of those completing within planned timescales in the current year has improved significantly.
13. Learners develop good workplace skills and make very good progress. They demonstrate exceptional customer service skills and product knowledge. They are highly motivated and make significant gains in confidence as they progress through the apprenticeship. Learners complete complex tasks routinely in their daily work and to high standards.
14. Learners enjoy their learning and feel safe. They demonstrate safe working practices and have a good understanding of relevant legislation. Learners are very enthusiastic and ambitious, demonstrating high standards of professionalism in their work. Many learners progress further onto the management and development programme or onto further learning.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 2**

15. Teaching and learning are very good. Learners develop a wide range of skills through well-planned coaching sessions in the work place and formal learning modules at the regionally-located training centres. Learners are provided with time at work with their practice manager or work 'buddy' to develop their knowledge and understanding. Learners quickly develop complex skills, enabling them, for example, to adjust single vision lenses for customers. Tutors and assessors readily provide additional learning sessions in response to learners' needs.
16. Assessment practice is very effective. Assessors use very good questioning techniques to assess learners' knowledge and understanding for the qualification and to test any areas still in need of completion. They also use professional discussion well to cover a wide range of evidence required for the qualification. Accurate records are kept of this evidence. Spelling and grammar are corrected effectively by assessors and by workplace managers. Full-time assessors work closely with optical specialists to assess learners' competences at work. Qualified optical practitioners provide off-the-job teaching and on-the-job coaching and assessment for learners.
17. A wide range of learning resources are used particularly well to support learning. Training centres are well resourced with practical tools and equipment, enabling learners to practise and develop a range of vocational skills. Workbooks and the company intranet provide an invaluable tool for learners to carry out independent research and gain further knowledge and understanding towards their qualification.



18. The results of the initial assessment of literacy and numeracy are not used well to plan learning for individual learners. An initial diagnosis of learners' literacy and numeracy needs is completed. However, learners are not informed about the results of their assessment or about what they need to do to improve. Some literacy and numeracy skills development is included in the qualification where it is required for the job role. However, not all basic skills requirements are included. Some learners fail exams but do not know what additional basic skills they need to improve to be successful.
19. The apprenticeship programme meets the needs of learners and Boots Opticians exceptionally well. The company was instrumental in the development of the qualification with the sector skills council and the awarding body. The company learning programme is integrated very well into the qualification and the standards have been cross-referenced to the apprenticeship programme. Learners benefit from the very good training and promotion opportunities, with many learners taking advantage of the management development programme and/or further learning following completion of the apprenticeship.
20. Support for learners is very good. Learners receive very effective support from a wide range of colleagues including practice managers, optometrists, dispensing opticians, workplace buddies and peers. Managers frequently check that learners are not experiencing problems and provide a thorough and flexible approach to supporting learners. Trainers and assessors provide additional support through training sessions, additional assessment visits to the workplace when requested, and through email and telephone contact.
21. Progress reviews are very comprehensive. The reviewers are very skilful in enabling learners to identify their own skills and progress. Learners participate fully in setting challenging targets between reviews. However, progress review information is not used effectively to systematically track the progress of all learners towards completion within the planned end date.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 2**

22. Senior managers provide good leadership in all aspects of Boots Opticians' work. They communicate the purposes of the provision, and the high levels of ambition expected for learners, to staff extremely effectively. Managers provide strong direction, clearly linked to business development objectives. Directors and senior managers have managed significant changes to the structure of the company very well. This includes the successful merger of two companies and the development and introduction of a new qualification framework since the previous inspection. Maintaining good outcomes for learners and good quality apprenticeship training has been achieved during a period of substantial change and reorganisation for the business.
23. Boots Opticians has a very strong commitment to investing in the training and development of apprenticeships. The current managing director of Boots

Opticians signed the Government's Skills Pledge to upskill the workforce to at least level 2 and to recruit and train more apprentices within the business. The company is making excellent progress with the pledge, having set up five regional training centres, each with a full-time manager.

24. Operational management of training programmes is good. Managers and staff use information satisfactorily to monitor learners' and staff performance and to plan provision. Managers and staff regularly review the performance of learners and the effectiveness of the support that they receive. Managers and assessors take prompt effective action when they have concerns about individual learners' progress.
25. Partnerships with work place supervisors are very strong and benefit learners well. Communication is very effective. Frequent meetings between supervisors and learners maintain a close focus on learning and ensure that learners receive the support that they require. Training centre managers work particularly well with staff in the retail practices to ensure that training meets their needs and those of their customers.
26. Boots Opticians has improved safeguarding arrangements for learners since the previous inspection and they meet current government requirements. A strong emphasis is placed on the health and well-being of learners and their safety in the workplace and while staying in hotels when attending off-the-job training. The company undertakes Criminal Records Bureau checks on all new staff. Relevant policies and arrangements are in place for safeguarding. Learners have an appropriate understanding of issues, such as bullying and discrimination, and all have received sufficient training in using the internet safely. In particular, learners demonstrate good awareness of the need to protect children in their work settings. However, the company does not sufficiently identify vulnerable learners and monitor their well-being.
27. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. All staff receive adequate training and development on the relevant company policies and procedures. The range of policies and procedures is satisfactory and these are monitored routinely. Learners also develop an appropriate understanding of equality and diversity issues relevant to their work roles, especially in regard to the support requirements of customers with disabilities. The company has recognised the need to increase the analysis of outcomes and progress made by different groups of learners. For example, no analysis has been made of the comparative success rates of part-time workers, in order to develop additional support strategies. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of planned actions to address this.
28. Boots Opticians has appropriate arrangements to collect the views of learners, supervisors, and other staff to support improvements to the provision. Managers use surveys to evaluate the provision. Managers and staff have a clear understanding of learners' views and respond quickly to any comments or

suggestions. However, the feedback is not sufficiently analysed or summarised to accurately identify trends over time.

29. The 2012 self-assessment report was inclusive and accurate. It successfully identified very similar strengths, areas for improvements and grades as those awarded by inspectors. The resulting action plan is clear and sets realistic improvement targets. However, the management information system was not able to provide meaningful data to fully evaluate performance and progress.
30. Boots Opticians manages its resources well and provides good value for money. Managers use appropriate strategies for performance management and quality improvement. Good use of available accommodation, very effective collaborative working and good staff development promote value for money well. Staff and learners use a wide range of learning resources very well to support learning. The company manages risk well. It carefully monitors the effectiveness of its provision and reacts effectively to changes in the optical industry and at local retail practices. Outcomes for learners and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are good.

## Information about the inspection

31. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and three additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's training and assessment manager, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the funding body, the previous inspection report and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
32. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers.

**Record of Main Findings (RMF)**  
**Boots Optician Professional Services Ltd**  
**Learning types: 14 – 16:** Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades <b>using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Employer responsive</b>
<b>Approximate number of enrolled learners</b>		
Full-time learners	236	236
Part-time learners	0	0
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	2	
<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2	
How well do learners attain their learning goals? How well do learners progress?	2	
	2	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2	
How safe do learners feel?	1	
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	n/a	
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	n/a	
<b>Quality of provision</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>2</b>	
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	n/a	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	3	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

\*where applicable to the type of provision

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