



ODP Applications Report (2019-2024)

Introduction

Applications to Operating Department Practice (ODP) programmes in the UK have undergone significant shifts over the past six years. The attached dataset shows that direct-entry ODP applications have fallen consistently since 2019, while apprenticeship applications rose sharply until 2022/23 before beginning to decline. This mirrors wider national trends in Allied Health Professions (AHPs), where several universities have reported reduced interest in perioperative programmes post-pandemic. The purpose of this report is to summarise these trends, explore potential drivers, and outline implications for workforce planning and the future stability of the ODP profession.

This Report is part of the Ongoing SURGE project for NHS England and College of Operating Department Practitioners (CODP)

Methodology

This Analysis draws upon validated data combined with narrative from the ongoing thematic analysis as part of several collaborative workstreams.

- UCAS direct-entry application and acceptance data (2019–2024), broken down by region.
- NHS England apprenticeship start data (2018/19–2024/25), also by region.
- Qualitative interpretation of national trends, likely drivers, and contextual factors affecting ODP recruitment

This Approach Involved:

- Extracting Numerical trends of applications and accepts for direct entry ODP degree programmes, and accepts only from apprenticeship, due to their “in house” nature.
- Identifying Regional variation
- Synthesising narrative explanations from focus groups and surveys.

Findings

National Trends

- Direct-entry ODP applications have steadily declined since 2019, falling from 3055 to 2260 by 2024 .
- Apprenticeship applications increased sharply between 2018/19 and 2022/23 (23 → 398) before declining to 323 in 2024/25.

Fig 1 Direct entry applications

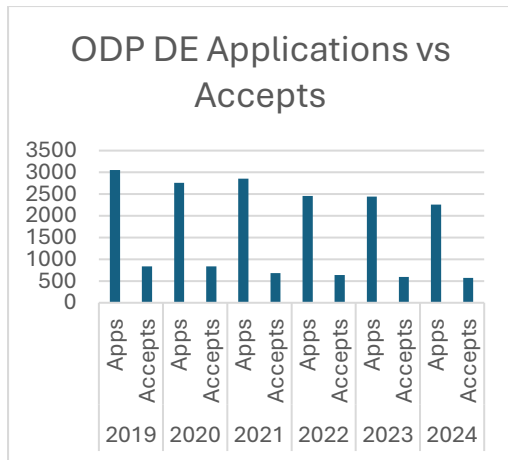
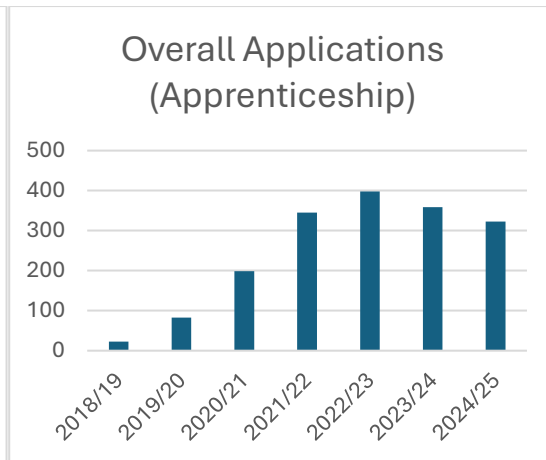


Fig 2 Apprenticeship Applications



Regional Patterns

Direct Entry

The steepest declines between 2019 and 2024 were observed in:

North East: 215 → 65 (−70%)

South West: 215 → 70 (−67%)

South East: 315 → 185 (−41%)

East of England: 345 → 210 (−39%)

Apprenticeships

Comparing 2022/23 to 2024/25:

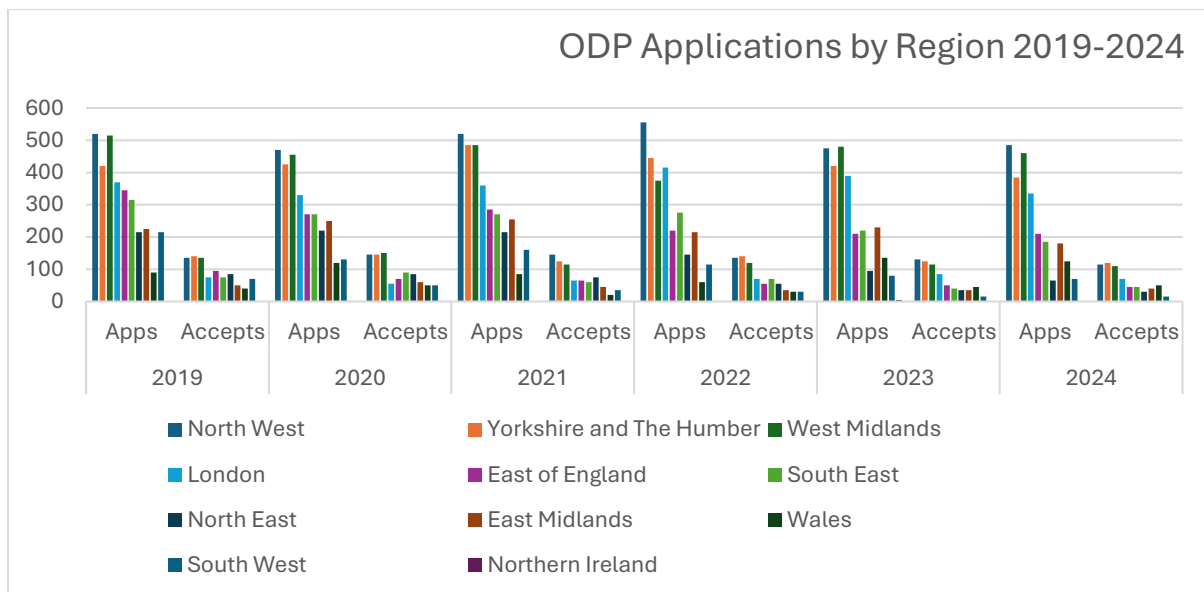
Midlands: 134 → 75 (−44%)

North West: 47 → 27 (−43%)

South West: 45 → 56 (slight increase)

London: stable at 20

East of England: 37 → 41 (slight increase)



Discussion/ Likely Drivers

The decline in ODP applications appears to stem from a combination of structural, financial, and perceptual factors that have intensified since the pandemic. The role continues to suffer from lower public visibility compared with more widely recognised professions such as nursing and paramedicine, limiting its appeal to prospective applicants. At the same time, post-pandemic fatigue has reduced interest in acute-care careers more broadly, while cost-of-living pressures have made full-time study less viable for many, increasing reliance on paid routes such as apprenticeships. Even these pathways face constraints, with bottlenecks in backfill and funding limiting the number of apprenticeship places trusts can support. The situation is compounded by local closures or pauses in university ODP programmes, reducing training capacity, and by NHS job freezes and wider financial pressures, which may discourage applicants who perceive fewer employment opportunities. Finally, ODP programmes face competition from other AHP and nursing courses that offer broader or more flexible career mobility, further diluting the potential applicant pool. Together, these factors create a challenging environment for ODP recruitment and contribute to the sustained downward trend in applications.

Conclusion

The data shows a clear and sustained decline in both direct-entry and apprenticeship routes into ODP training. While the drivers are multifactorial, the combined effect poses a significant risk to the future stability of the perioperative workforce. Given that ODPs are the only profession trained to work across all three perioperative areas at graduation, continued decline will have direct consequences for surgical capacity and NHS recovery efforts.

Appendices

Appendix 1 (ODP Direct Entry Applications vs Accepts by region, UCAS data)

	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
Row Labels	Apps	Accepts	Apps	Accepts	Apps	Accepts	Apps	Accepts	Apps	Accepts	Apps	Accepts
North West	520	135	470	145	520	145	555	135	475	130	485	115
Yorkshire and The Humber	420	140	425	145	485	125	445	140	420	125	385	120
West Midlands	515	135	455	150	485	115	375	120	480	115	460	110
London	370	75	330	55	360	65	415	70	390	85	335	70
East of England	345	95	270	70	285	65	220	55	210	50	210	45
South East	315	75	270	90	270	60	275	70	220	40	185	45
North East	215	85	220	85	215	75	145	55	95	35	65	30
East Midlands	225	50	250	60	255	45	215	35	230	35	180	40
Wales	90	40	120	50	85	20	60	30	135	45	125	50
South West	215	70	130	50	160	35	115	30	80	15	70	15
Northern Ireland									5	0		
Grand Total	3230	900	2940	900	3120	750	2820	740	2740	675	2500	640

Appendix 2 (ODP Apprenticeship data by region, NHS England)

Operating Department Practitioner Apprenticeship - starts per region								
Academic year	East of England	London	South West	South East	North West	North East and Yorkshire	Midlands	Overall
2018/19	0	0	0	0	11	12	0	23
2019/20	7	6	2	12	11	20	25	83
2020/21	21	8	32	56	9	44	29	199
2021/22	21	21	62	44	60	51	86	345
2022/23	37	20	45	51	47	64	134	398
2023/24	41	24	60	42	26	61	105	359
2024/25	41	20	56	49	27	55	75	323