

# Developing the doctorate

**Professor Rishi Agarwal** recalls a long journey that finally led to the setting up of a doctorate in optometry at a UK university

**A** profession-specific doctorate in medicine was already awarded in the late 12th and early 13th centuries at Bologna, Paris and Oxford. Formal instructions were also provided at these universities for the award of Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree. The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree was established in the early 19th century at Berlin for on-campus independent research by supervised students in a specified discipline and a significant and original contribution to knowledge was expected by the universities. It was a new concept for the development of knowledge at the time. Because research was considered important for the advancement of knowledge and social progress, universities in the UK, US and other countries also established research-based doctoral degrees. Eventually the PhD degree became an internationally known academic award covering a wide range of disciplines, symbolising academic excellence and attaining a gold standard status.

## Early ambitions

My interest in a profession-specific doctorate in optometry began in 1961 when I attended the International Ophthalmic Optical Congress in London, opened by the then minister of health Rt Hon Enoch Powell MP. It was inspiring to meet several Americans qualified with a professional doctorate in optometry. I wondered whether a profession-specific doctorate in optometry would ever be offered in the UK. Despite the fact it was not a realistic aspiration I decided to ask George Giles OBE, optometrist, barrister and BOA secretary who was at the helm of British optometry at the time, whether it would ever be an option. With his usual sense of humour he said 'maybe you will start the course one day'. I soon realised that I was being over ambitious considering the professional culture in healthcare then prevalent in the UK. Professional



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degree courses in optometry were not even established as yet and Dr Max Sorsby, a member of the General Optical Council, also attending the congress, said he was not in favour of adopting the title optometrist.

Ten years later I floated the idea of a Doctor of Optometry programme in the UK (*Optician*, Oct 16 1971, page 926). I felt encouraged by the response I received from the British Chapter of the American Academy of Optometry, established in 1951 by two British optometrists the Rt Hon John Roby Benson and Eric Bateman.

In 1972 in the US I met Dr V Eugene McCrary, a past president of the American Optometric Association who was very supportive of my aspirations. At his suggestion I attended an optometric event sponsored by the Virginia Optometric Association (*Optician*, 24 June 1972, page 620). There he introduced me to several like-minded US optometrists.

From 1972 I began to explore the possibility of finding a British university which could set up a course leading to a postgraduate professional doctorate in optometry. Several health ministers later and after a long and tortuous journey without achieving my goal, it was in 2004 that I was asked by the Institute of Optometry to find a suitable university for the purpose. I continued with my search.

By the end of 2005 I approached London South Bank University. I had several meetings with Professor David Sines at LSBU who was then executive dean to the Faculty of

Health and Social Care. LSBU with its progressive policy in health and social care education proved the ideal venue for the project and optometry was included with other health-related professions. In 2008 a Doctor of Optometry course was established at the Institute of Optometry in partnership with LSBU. In the same year another professional doctorate course leading to Doctor of Optometry (and also Ophthalmic Doctorate) was established at Aston University. These were landmark events for British optometry.

In 2005 the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) defined a professional doctorate as 'an award at doctoral level where the field of study is a professional discipline and which is distinguished from the PhD by a title that refers to that profession'. According to a UKCGE report published in 2010, the number of professional doctorates on offer in the UK has almost tripled between 1998 and 2009 from 109 to 308 in 71 British institutions.

## Complementary studies

In addition to PhD programmes, profession-specific doctorates should also be offered at all those British universities presently offering entry-level degree courses in optometry. Both types of doctorates are necessary for the development of optometry. Professional doctorates will not replace well established PhD programmes. These doctoral studies should be regarded as complementary.

The development of healthcare professions is an ongoing process necessary for the advancement of professional work and in the context of optometry as a primary healthcare profession it is crucial for the delivery of excellent eye care. In the UK optometry is practised in accordance with statutory regulations. Continuing education in all forms and at different levels is essential for professional excellence; professional doctorates will provide continuous professional development to the highest level. ●

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