

## Integrating theory with practice

Professional doctorates offer optometrists continuous professional development to the highest level. **Dr Rishi Agarwal** explains the establishment of a new programme in London

**T**he Institute of Optometry has recently launched a Doctor of Optometry programme in partnership with London South Bank University. This is the first professional doctorate in optometry by that description in the UK, distinct from a traditional PhD. This development is likely to have an impact on the future of British optometry as a profession.

In medieval Europe an early phase of professionalisation started with the formation of craft guilds. Apprentices began learning, usually in their teens, and progressed to become journeymen after the necessary training that lasted several years. They could aspire to become masters, which was the highest achievement in their chosen craft. The title 'master' was also adopted by the universities, hence the award of degrees like the 'Master of Arts'. Some masters used the title doctor.

The root of the word doctor is the Indo-European *dek* (Sanskrit *daksha* – expert, skilled, competent; Latin *docere* – to show, teach). Cognate words include *docent*, meaning teacher; the Middle English *doctour* and the Old French *docteur*, also meaning teacher.

In the late 12th century, professional doctorates were awarded in theology, law and medicine at Bologna, Paris and Oxford. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Salerno, Pavia and Bologna were the earliest universities in Europe to provide formal instructions in medicine. Historically, professional doctorates are older than PhDs.

In the early 19th century the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree was established at Berlin for on-campus independent research by supervised students in a specified discipline. It was expected by the university that the submitted thesis would demonstrate a significant and original contribution to knowledge. Because research was highly emphasised during the period, universities in the UK, US and other countries established research-based doctoral programmes.

### Professional discipline

According to the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) report in 2005, a professional doctorate is 'an



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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'.

In 2002, UKCGE described the professional doctorate as 'a programme of advanced study and research which, while satisfying the university criteria for the award of a doctorate, is designed to meet the specific needs of a professional group external to the university, and which develops the capability of individuals to work within a professional context'.

Professional doctoral programmes are now offered to graduates in several healthcare professions in the UK. This development also coincides with the fact that the expectations of people from healthcare professions have changed considerably and continue to change due to massive advances in health-related technology.

Professional doctoral studies offer flexibility in the application of knowledge, development in the specialised areas of practice-based learning and evidence-based clinical practice for healthcare professionals.

In recent years, British universities have offered professionals, often with innovative ideas, an opportunity for postgraduate studies and work-based research, leading to a professional doctorate.

US professional doctorates are different from those awarded in the UK. In the US, university education for several healthcare professions leads to the award of a first professional degree, an entry level professional doctorate,

which is a requirement for professional licensing and entry into a particular profession like medicine, dentistry or optometry.

There are several optometry schools in the US and two in Canada that offer professional education followed by the Doctor of Optometry award. Those optometrists interested in pursuing an academic and research career often study further for an additional qualification like a traditional PhD.

### Complementary studies

Professional doctorates should not be viewed as replacements for established PhD programmes. Both types of doctorates are necessary for the development of healthcare professions. These are complementary doctoral studies with the aim of integrating theory with practice and enhancement of clinical practice with modified and new skills.

In the UK, health-related professional doctorates are postgraduate qualifications offering practitioners continuous professional development to the highest level by providing university-based education, while maintaining strong connections with their profession and continuing in practice.

Although professional doctorates are mostly postgraduate qualifications in the UK, there are exceptions. For example, a doctorate in clinical psychology is now accepted as the entry level qualification for clinical practice. It is possible that eventually Doctor of Optometry may become an entry level qualification in the UK for the practice of ocular therapeutics and advanced clinical practice, following successful completion of approved taught modules which may be included in future doctoral programmes in optometry.

● For further information on the Institute of Optometry doctorate programme contact Joan Wade on 020 7234 9659.

● **Dr Rishi Agarwal** is director of postgraduate education at the Institute of Optometry. He was an ardent advocate for a Doctor of Optometry degree for the past four decades and initiated negotiations with LSBU which led to the launch of the first programme in the UK