

From the Editor's Desk

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One of the initiatives from the Professional Board of Optometry and Dispensing Opticians that has been bubbling and boiling for a while is that of setting up National Board examinations for graduating students. As appears to be typical of many of their plans, little consultation with the profession thus far has actually occurred. (One of the truly amazing aspects of professional practice in South Africa is how little real debate takes place before often seriously profound actions are undertaken by various professional bodies.) But, such Bored (*sic*) examinations are, of course, common to other parts of the world and the question is whether the institution of such an examination process will achieve very much in relation to the significant costs involved in establishing and maintaining the process (no doubt the profession will be expected to find the funds and support the process financially despite the already somewhat exorbitant fees that we are paying to belong to various professional bodies). Many proponents of the idea believe that the mechanism serves to achieve some form of standardization of education and skills across the different educational programmes on offer, or at the very least the impression is created that such standardization is in place. Since much of political activity in optometry and elsewhere is mainly concerned with show or *smoke and mirrors* rather than substance this sort of activity is well supported by the relevant individuals and other authorities. This apparent standardization is also naively considered as something positive or something worth striving for at all odds. The fact that such *so-called standardization* is often used, consciously or unconsciously, as a highly effective method to lower standards and quality of education is ignored. And unfortunately, one of the dangers or risks in South Africa is that there seem to be subtle, and not so subtle, racial undertones behind the initiative and such issues really should have no place in taking decisions involving issues of this sort. A further and major limitation of the idea is that a truly independent

body is extremely unlikely to be set up to design and organize the examination procedures and related aspects such as the appeal process if graduates are unhappy with their results obtained. In an attempt to insure the integrity of the process, the body that manages these examinations and their content should be completely independent of the various universities that provide optometric education but almost certainly this will not be the case. Generally, to insure that students in sufficient numbers will pass these examinations at first exposure (and mainly to reduce the workload on the assessors involved), we can expect that these examinations will be of a generally low standard, as is typical of much of the compulsory practitioner development or CPD that currently is on offer, and that probably the more intelligent or knowledgeable student will actually be penalized by the approaches, such as mainly multiple choice questionnaires, typically used in such examinations to facilitate marking and reduce time demands on assessors. Such board examinations also have lots of potential to be abused to unfairly limit entry into professional practice and this process already is a feature of similar mechanisms in other parts of the world. Yet another and potentially more serious negative feature is that universities will be encouraged, or even forced, to adapt their educational offerings to ensuring that graduates pass these particular examinations in sufficient numbers so that things look respectable rather than concentrating on devoting their energies towards developing more sophisticated and creative educational offerings that actually grow the profession as quickly and effectively as possible. But, no doubt such concerns will be mostly ignored and, in due course, National Board examinations in optometry will be instituted for better or worse and almost certainly without sufficient debate and discussion within the profession.