

From the Editor's Desk

December 2013

Postgraduate studies such as for masters or doctoral degrees in optometry differ widely in various parts of the world. For example, in graduate schools in departments or schools for optometry in the USA students who do doctoral degrees will, on average, spend about five years full-time. Although the duration of a PhD in optometry in the USA is meant to range from four to six years dependent upon the university concerned, not all students successfully complete parts of their studies the first time around; thus some students can even spend up to eight or nine years full-time completing a doctoral degree. By comparison, in South Africa in optometry, students are expected to complete their doctoral degrees, usually part-time, over a four year period, with a possible six to twelve month extension under exceptional circumstances. In graduate schools in the USA optometry students also spend the first few years of their doctoral studies doing post-graduate courses, presenting papers at university seminars and elsewhere, doing written and oral examinations and preparing for their research which follows in the second half of their overall period of study. South African doctoral students in optometry have almost none of this experience and often little in the way of financial or other support from universities. American doctoral candidates are almost always paid during their studies and, in return, are expected to do a small amount of lecturing to undergraduates or supervision of practicals or perhaps clinics or they may assist more established researchers in various ways such as, for example, in the collection of data for research papers where the student may thus collaborate and learn from the more established researcher. Some postgraduates may even do a small amount of administrative activity in return for the financial assistance the specific university provides. In South Africa in optometry almost none of this happens with either masters or doctoral students. In the USA optometry graduate schools appear to perform mostly internal evaluations of their post-graduate students without the messy complications of external examiners. American academics in optometry know that the papers that their students

produce during their studies will be peer-reviewed by journals to whom the papers are submitted and that there is little need to follow the route that universities use in other parts of the world such as South Africa where far too much relevance is given to external examiners in a largely futile attempt which ultimately discourages academic and national development and is sometimes unfair to postgraduate students. In some parts of the world such as Australia external examiners are used but there is sufficient local or national talent to largely avoid using examiners from other parts of the world and so far fewer problems occur as such examiners are clearly aware of national issues that potentially may critically impact on their students and their performance and, for that matter, the academics supporting students. In South Africa we are far too concerned with what the rest of the world thinks and local academics are hindered at every turn. We have some important problems in South Africa that do not really apply in general to more developed parts of the world and yet little understanding of this seems apparent in the general approach to many issues in universities in South Africa. Creativity, research and academic development cannot prosper in universities, for example in South Africa, where local issues are largely ignored such as the relatively weak pre-university educational system that result in many university students having exceptionally poor analytical, mathematical and language skills that, unfortunately, can impact quite significantly on the quality of work that such students might produce at a post-graduate level.

Alan Rubin

Editor

Department of Optometry

University of Johannesburg