

## *Making the Most of Your Situation*

### *Views of Prof James Wolffsohn*

It does not seem that many years ago since I was in a similar position to you, fresh out of School and, in my case, with little long term aspirations. I had always known I was going to go to university. My parents had not been afforded this privilege, and education is a privilege, but my elder brother and sisters had gone and now it was my turn. My mother and elder sister were teachers. Teaching is a tough profession and my teachers at the time advised me against this. My elder brother was an engineer, but engineering was going through a hard time in the early 1990s, with few jobs available, so this did not seem like a good option for a career. I had specialised in the sciences and wanted to maintain a broad use of all of them. So when my mother suggested optometry, as I was apparently fascinated by a visit to the optician when I was younger (not that I remember this), it seemed like as good a choice as any.

I visited a friend's dad's practice - largely making tea and opening the post – but I experienced the complexity of the consulting room, the challenge of communicating with patients, the optimum selection of the best refractive correction, detection of eye disease and even RGP adjustment in his small upstairs workshop, and so I thought this might make an interesting degree. I was aware that at the time ~60% of students followed a career unrelated to their degree and I decided that optometry would be an adequate degree to keep my options open.

#### MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

University is not JUST about learning a profession. It is also about aspects such as living independently and learning leadership skills, networking and management.

In my case, it included being on the executive of the hall of residence I lived in, being chair of the charity committee, being on the estate committee and even taking on the position as the yearly play set designer. I was also an active member of the Christian union and local church. These positions expanded my network beyond fellow optometry students and taught me invaluable people management skills, financial accounting and marketing, to name just a few transferable skills.

Just doing enough to pass, while the attitude of unfortunately many young people, will severely damage your career opportunities in years to come.

#### AMBITION

Ambition is a balance between getting ahead in the world while not disadvantaging other people. Optometry is a small profession and “what you give is what you get” is a good phrase to remember. I applied to what was considered to be the top clinical position for my professional year which was an internship at Moorfields Eye Hospital in London. My ambition payed off and I learned a lot, made some lifelong friends in a year that shaped my future career greatly.

I was considering doing a PhD or a fast track into medicine by this stage. Janet Silver, who started hospital optometry in the UK advised me “do you want to be a top optometrist or a mediocre medic”. This might seem harsh, but what she meant was we can always be disappointed in our position in life and think there is something better. Optometrists often look at ophthalmologists as

having all the power. But the reality is most of them work for the health service with managers who dictate to them, who in turn have the hospital bosses to appease. But hospital bosses are civil servants who answer to the government who, at the end of the day, answer to us as voters in a democracy. Therefore I have found it is better to be a big fish in a small pond than to be a small fish in a big pond.

## OPPORTUNITIES

The profession you have chosen will give you lots of opportunities – it is up to you if you choose to take them. These for me included a PhD at Cardiff University on head up displays and virtual reality. My position in Melbourne, Australia involved research, teaching and working in low vision clinic's as a flying optometrist. I have been at Aston University since the year 2000. I have had many travelling opportunities, such as Australia, Peru, the United States of America, Hong Kong and much of Europe including Russia - and that is just this year. I have been promoted from lecturer to senior lecturer, to a reader, to a professor, to deputy dean of the faculty and now an associate pro vice chancellor of the university.

I feel the opportunities open to students are even more nowadays and I would really encourage you to volunteer to help the department and university, engage with research studies, attend professorial lectures outside your discipline etc.

## RESEARCH

Now you might be thinking I do know what I want to do and I want to work in practice. What is the relevance of someone who has pursued a research career, even if a clinical one? However I would argue that we are all researchers - optometry students are training to be clinician's not technicians. Hence we need to rely on evidence to best manage a patient and we learn from each patient to form new knowledge to best manage future patients. If optometry was just about practising how other people practice, it would be an apprenticeship rather than a University degree!

In your career you will have opportunities to specialise, to work alongside industry to test new products, to educate colleagues, to shape clinical guidelines, to get involved with professional bodies – the possibilities are unlimited to go out and make a difference in the world.

## CHALLENGE

Be prepared to be challenged, to be pushed beyond your comfort zone. Be prepared to debate, and challenge your fellow students (and even your lecturers), to contribute to group work, to the whole life of the University, not just your academic studies. University teaching challenges you to grow and discover.

## TRANSFORMATION

University leads to transformation. All your university's resources are targeted towards helping you to thrive, but you have to reach out and use them; you have to take responsibility for your learning journey and growth. If you do this, you will find yourself with opportunities you never dreamed of.

## CONCLUSION

Through your motivation and engagement, ambition, taking every opportunity, practising based on evidence to provide the best outcomes for your patients and challenging yourself beyond your comfort zone you will optimise your time at university.

I wish you every best wish for your career ahead and look forward to hearing how each of you progress.