

Faculty positions in scientific/academic institutions and citizenship issues

Gowrishankar's letter¹ is precise and I suppose it is technically correct. However, the real issue, in my view, is not how to ensure that foreigners (NRIs and otherwise) are kept out of our academic system, but rather how we persuade our Government to scrap this anachronistic rule.

There is a real hunger for quality education in India, and there is a chronic shortage of good teachers.

Switzerland and the US are two examples of very different countries that opened

the doors of their academic establishments to foreigners. Both countries benefited vastly because of this. Taiwan did this too, but in a more limited way.

We can do this opening up gradually, if what is desired is incremental change. Initially, we could open up to NRIs and those from SE Asia and the SAARC region.

The sort of xenophobia that seems to underlie this rule is ill-befitting a country that is trying to go global in so many other ways. We need many students,

postdocs and faculty from foreign countries within our academic system.

1. Gowrishankar, J., *Curr. Sci.*, 2007, **93**, 1647.

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The rot in Indian universities

Balaram's editorial¹ about the decline of our academic institutions makes sad reading. The academic decline is not specific only to the universities, but all around. Who is responsible for this decline? Will putting in more money rectify the situation? Will the Knowledge Commission report be implemented? These are some of the questions that we need to examine.

The situation is complex. The solution, as pointed correctly, must come from the universities themselves. But do our universities have the ability to do this? With small-time politicians being the Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors, interference in the working of any university by local politicians becomes unavoidable. Most universities do not critically assess their performance once a year. The reports of

the Vice-Chancellors read out at the convocations bring out the rot rather than the achievements.

Nearly five decades ago, as a graduate student at an university in the US, I had seen how the President of the University (Vice-Chancellor) exercised his power to ensure the academic standing of the university. At the beginning of the computer age, the President placed an advance order for a large computer, without obtaining permission from the State. The State legislators criticized the President for this action. Without fear, the President threatened that he would withdraw his order and let the university slip from its high standing. The result was that the legislators backed out and the order was processed. Until we reach such a stage,

higher education and research will continue to be controlled by the political class. With rampant corruption in every sphere and interference by the politicians, no report (no matter how good it is) can make any difference. One can only hope that the Russian 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' will some day occur here, leading to the emergence of a new order.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **94**, 153–154.

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Questioning the geoscience community – Are we on the right track?

As the world is in the midst of rapid change, sustainable development principles are now well acknowledged as a part of the planning process. Addressing such change depends on existing information and in majority of the cases, this information pertains to questions that are vitally geographic in orientation, such as the spatial patterns of biomes, ecosystems, habitats and communities. Towards this pursuit for economic development in

countries like India, the earth observation resource systems and spatial data technologies have with time facilitated and eased such initiatives at multiple scale. Conventionally, India has enjoyed a reputation for its capacity building in space technology science; centres of excellence for GIS have also gained roots. However, we have not productively bridged the gap between technology and development; by this, I mean changing the primal 'output'

of a spatial information system from maps, to 'digital inputs' that can be manipulated, analysed, modelled and imbibed for development frameworks. Hence, there is a fundamental need for re-visioning spatial data and knowledge in the decision-making process in order to address real-world problems with efficacy.

Largely, sustainable development decisions are inherently multidisciplinary. Also, the importance of integrated appro-