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EDITORIAL

Ageing scientists

The 'graying' of our scientific institutions has been the subject of some discussion following publication of a survey, which revealed that the average age of scientists in national laboratories was dangerously close to fifty. Youth is invariably associated with vigour (and enthusiasm) and therefore it is not surprising that thoughtful science administrators view an ageing staff profile with concern. Advancing age is rarely a desirable qualification, except in politics. Recruitment to our institutions occurs only as a small trickle nowadays; burdened as most organizations are with an already bloated staff structure. Retirements have also been stalled, thanks to the increase in the age of retirement of scientists and academics from 60 to 62 years. This, of course, is hardly a measure that is calculated to reduce the average age of staff in our scientific laboratories.

How would one go about reducing the 'average age' of scientists, if, that were indeed a desirable goal. One obvious strategy would be to recruit large numbers of young (truly 'young') researchers to the workforce. Unfortunately, in most places recruitments are frozen, thanks to the financial burden of an already alarming salary budget and the enormous constraints placed by restrictions on hiring. Alternatively, the average age could be lowered by providing incentives (truly 'golden handshakes') that would induce many senior scientists, who do little else but contribute to the 'average age', to make way for younger recruits. Unfortunately such schemes in the public sector (where the motivation was to downsize the staff) have only facilitated the departure of competent and skilled personnel, who find better employment elsewhere, thereby further weakening already moribund organizations.

If 'graying' is indeed a matter of concern, then special attention must be paid to the operation of various schemes by which scientists are retained after retirement. While every effort must be made to ensure that active and productive scientists continue to have full

access to laboratories and funds, irrespective of age, the criteria for exercising judgement in emeritus scientist schemes must be strict; high standards must be ensured. Our inability to exercise collective judgement in a fair and credible manner, has inexorably extended to all levels of selection and decision making. The 'lowest common denominator' principle now operates; mistakes of the past are being cited as examples justifying the errors of judgement of the future. It is indeed surprising that the across-the-board increase in retirement age was accepted with such alacrity by the government, when job opportunities for new entrants are so scarce. The inescapable conclusion is that the lobbying power of senior administrators is so great, that there is little time to reflect on the consequences of a decision before it is made. Unfortunately, a substantial number of senior academics who approach retirement contribute little to teaching or research activities. Seniority brings with it many perks; avoidance of routine duties being one of them. Even more disturbingly, administrative positions in most scientific institutions are frequently filled using seniority as a criterion.

The issue at hand is critically important. How can there be a resurgence of our scientific research institutions by infusing a substantial number of new investigators into the system? Should we not be considering innovative schemes which will provide new positions in our laboratories? China, for example, has embarked on an ambitious plan to increase the number of research positions. The irony of course, in Universities, is the large number of unfilled positions which have become a casualty of the 'reservation system'. Should we also not be considering schemes which will ensure that new entrants to the scientific enterprise are challenged vigorously to prove themselves, rather than to settle into a gentle and somnolent existence like their forbears, where premature 'ageing' is inevitable. Ageing, most often is a state of mind. It is quite common to find 'young'

researchers, who have mentally retired while in service. It is less common, of course, to find the vigorous 'retired scientist' who still contributes vibrantly to the scientific process. Many new initiatives are necessary to foster science in India at a time when most of our institutions are struggling to be competitive. At least one of

these should be directed towards increasing the prospects for employment of the many trained researchers whom we are producing.

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