

There is more to a conference than its registration fee

In countries where most cutting-edge research is performed in isolation, conferences provide a unique opportunity for face-to-face interaction with accomplished professional colleagues. As pointed out by Vidyasagar (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 1151–1152), there is nothing wrong in subsidized access to local participants. The low cost of local publishing and accommodation makes our country an attractive conference destination, even if registration fees are differential. However, one cannot overlook more important issues that make a successful conference.

Conference organizers often indulge in details that have very little to do with its technical content. Thus, an entire laboratory is effectively paralyzed for several months leading to what often ends up as a 'mela'. One cannot ignore the similarity between conferences and other social events such as weddings. Instead of dis-

tributing coconuts, we distribute bags with conference proceedings along with that coveted collection of invitations. Almost half a day is often lost to hearing politicians and civil servants, who can neither comprehend nor appreciate the essence of the meeting.

The honest (and usually unrewarding) effort put in by scores of footworkers in making a conference happen, is truly commendable. However, at the end of the day, the impact of a conference is measured in terms of its scientific content and the equally important quality of its delivery. We need good work to be presented eloquently to make a lasting impact on an audience that has set aside valuable time and money (often, tax funds) to participate. This requires deft marketing of the conference programme and intelligent channelling of resources to deserving local participation. Unfortunately, neither is self-evident at many meetings.

Perhaps, the problem is one of scale and of focus. 'Small is beautiful' may indeed apply to conferences as well. This would permit quieter venues – smaller towns or university campuses. Many emerging disciplines demand international participation and these too can be organized with a healthy mix of deserving local participation under subsidy based on merit. Our own scientists should leave the conference with a feeling of exposure and bench-marking that are an essential motivation for future work. Overseas participants may then return home with memories of creative interaction and an urge to promote more such meetings in India. Neither is achieved by misplaced or misdirected generosity.

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Appointment of Heads of Institutions

I do not agree with R. C. Mehrotra's view about the criteria for the appointment of Directors and Vice-Chancellors (*Curr. Sci.*, 2001, **81**, 1277). The primary function of a Director (or a VC) is to 'direct' the institution towards existing and, more importantly, new goals. Goals are varied: effective instruction, R&D, adding to or establishing a system conducive to the total personality development of students, faculty, and supporting staff, and initiating R&D in newer fields. He or she must be aware of the forefronts of the entire academic field, from anthropology through botany, etc. to zoology. He or she must have or develop influence in national funding bodies and industry. It is naive to think that one can do worthwhile and irreplaceable research, while paying intense attention and energy to this primary function, or the other way around. Indeed that has been the bane of many an institution and university in this country.

Without doubt the Head must have credentials before appointment. 'Credentials' for what? Certainly academic credentials, but not for the prospect of

continuing the same research that one could do as a professor, which is what all people do. The potential for executing the primary function is what the selection committees must assess.

Building a rapport with students and faculty does not depend on one's ability as a researcher. It depends on visible interest in them and communication skills. The scientific and academic communities in India have not developed a healthy respect for the job of a Director/VC. Equating ability to do good research with the functions of a Director/VC is naive.

In the late nineteen sixties, MIT needed a new President. They looked for one beyond the Atlantic Ocean, a physicist in the semiconductor industry who was well-known for his researches and directing abilities. After two years he thought the better of it and resigned because he wanted to get back to research. How many scientists in India have done that or would do so? The problem in India is that such positions are associated with prestige and power.

Charles Frank (now deceased), my Ph D supervisor in Bristol in the late nineteen fifties, was Raman Professor in Bangalore in 1980. In India he met many Directors and some VCs. He told me that it was funny that they, when asked of their perception of the institution they were heading, went into long discourses on the research they were doing, without being aware that he might not know much about their field of work. He never got an answer to the question he had asked.

I have a suggestion to make. No one, howsoever good thus far, beyond the age of 40–45 years be appointed Director or VC. Let the exhausted older people do the research they want to do. Among the younger people there must be, and are, many who are good and know that their talent lies more in that 'primary function'. They are the ones to take Indian academia higher and higher.

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