

Luring and fooling foreign-trained young Indian researchers

I believe that a further debate is needed on the editorial by Balaram¹ and the reaction of Lohia² to it. Unlike Lohia, I am not dismayed or scorned by the use of the word 'luring'. After their day-long interviews in institutes across India, a large number of candidates are of the opinion that they have been fooled by the recent flood of advertisements put up by new institutes or grant agencies. The usual responses they get are: 'lack of enough experience to start a group', 'areas of interest do not match the research interests of other faculty of the institute' and 'lack of papers in high impact factor (HIF) journals'.

The curriculum vitae of the applicant and his/her research proposal provide clear information on the research area, experience and impact factor or *h*-index of his/her publications. If the profile is not suitable, why is the interview call letter sent? Is it due to carelessness and a casual attitude, or a bureaucratic requirement to call a large number of people for an interview? Do institutions lack direction in their programmes?

Ironically, various factors have to be taken into account in publishing a manuscript in an HIF journal. Of late, many leading researchers are inclined towards publishing in open access journals (that do not currently have an HIF), due to greater availability of the article, the scope for higher citation numbers and faster pre- and post-submission procedures. I strongly argue that the ideas coupled with the technical capabilities, as demonstrated in the publications, should be examined rather than the impact factor in multiple-authored articles. The applicant hardly gets a chance to explain these points during an interview. It would be wise if the selection criteria are disclosed in the advertisement rather than at the end of an interview, as writing a research proposal and preparing for an interview are time-consuming processes.

Like Balaram¹, I too feel uneasy and confused as to why attempts are made to entice Indian students and academics who are currently overseas, primarily in

the United States, to return and build teaching and research careers in India. Does this mean that research in other developed countries, such as Canada, Sweden, Germany and the UK is sub-standard? The stereotypical image 'US research is good' should be removed from the minds of all researchers. As long as this picture stays, every supervisor would advise his/her student to go abroad for further training. The prime duty of a mentor is not only to guide the student to a degree, but also ensure that his/her future is secured and that he/she does not lag behind just because he/she is not trained abroad or does not have HIF articles.

It is not uncommon that in several selection processes in India, the affiliation of students plays a critical role. Can we deny the fact that the label of a premier institution helps in rapid treatment rather than the idea or work presented? Unless this mindset is changed, it would be difficult to attract researchers who are interested in coming back to India. These unwritten, open facts form the prime reason for the observation by Lohia² that most mentors strongly advise their graduate students to pursue further training in overseas universities.

An interesting point by Lohia is that there is a notable gap in the offered and awarded early career fellowships (ECFs), due to poor response. This raises fundamental questions about the applicants as well as the policy of the grant agency. There is no doubt that the ECF application-screening procedure is fair, unbiased and in accordance with international standards. But how many students are trained in writing major grant applications during their Ph D studies? This is an art that is learnt during postdoctoral training, even at the international level. A simple mistake or lack of secondary information in an ECF grant application will tear down the entire proposal and there is no second chance.

In addition to lack of training in writing grant proposals the applicant, due to various commitments in his/her present position, finds it tough to acquire in-depth

knowledge about the proposed area prior to starting work on the same. In my opinion, lack of thorough knowledge of the proposed area will not be detrimental for starting the future project with the grant money. If the grant agency requires the ECF application to be nearly perfect without any flaws, then the applicant has to be given an opportunity to address the comments of the reviewers, before the final decision is made; much like the publication of an article.

As pointed out by Balaram¹, many new institutes are started without much background work just to meet the demands for rapid expansion. Research institutes are not like factories wherein only the initial investment and routine maintenance costs are to be met. A research centre needs constant flow of money, strategic planning and prudence to tackle future demands and developments. Without this, just 'luring' scientists in the hope of creating a science environment will have disastrous consequences. It would be good if every institution declares its strategic plans and makes preparations to train youth, rather than looking for researchers with high-impact publications and treating science as a rehabilitation ground. We need to focus on creating a congenial and trustworthy environment with less of bureaucratic hurdles, not just singing an emotional 'nativity' slogan.

Finally, science is beyond the borders of nations. It is the responsibility of the high-end decision-making bureaucrats and administrators of the country to gear its institutions to create and promote science.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **100**, 957–958.

2. Lohia, A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **100**, 1763.

MUKESH PASUPULETI

*Centre for Microbial Diseases and Immunity Research,
The University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4
e-mail: mukesh@cmdr.ubc.ca*