

From the President

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted our existence and the long term impact of this disease on our personal lives and work is not known. However, the rapidity and efficiency with which the life science research community responded to the crisis, and contributed to the isolation and identification of the virus leading to designing of diagnostic kits and vaccines is commendable. The contributions of other fields of science to the fight against the virus is equally to be appreciated.

In general, there has been a severe interruption in almost all fields of science. Stark impact has been felt by the life science researchers as multiple problems cropped up starting from interruption and termination of experiments to losing jobs. This pandemic has shown how important life science research is, to answer basic scientific questions on an emerging disease and therefore, we need to ensure that the field does not suffer due to lack of support. It is crucial to reinforce life-science research and arrange to help the scientists to regain the lost ground to prepare for the future - a time with a much improved way of communication, collaboration and new ways of doing science. It is important that we engage with the scientists and other stakeholders within the ecosystem of the life science research, including the life sciences industry as the the upcoming horizon has to be mapped out.

First, it is essential that the status of the doctoral and post-doctoral students who are the main workforce for research is analysed. They can be classified as two groups - the first are those whose laboratories did not have the facilities for research on infectious diseases and hence they could not join the research efforts to help their laboratories, the second group was able to volunteer to work for testing, designing kits, sequencing the virus etc. While the first group struggled for the reason of not having access to work, the second group also diverted from their own area of interest so as to be able to serve the country. Both groups of students require help in terms of financial support and resources to continue their interrupted work as the institutions reopen. The doctoral students (5th year) who are yet to submit their theses require an extension of tenure with fellowship support for about an year to be able to complete their work, publish their data and submit theses. Under these trying conditions, they will also require more time as they need first-authored papers to submit theses. There are beautiful data on SARS Cov-2 that have emerged from laboratories across the world and this became possible because students and scientists in the laboratories indulging in research pertaining to SARS-Cov-2, put in their heart to deliver. So, we need to nurture and support the young minds for their curiosity and committed endeavors.

There are two other groups – the students who have submitted their theses and are stranded here in spite of having offers for post-doctoral fellowships, and the scientists who have returned from abroad without jobs. So, there is this population of skilled manpower which can be utilized to add zest to the efforts of combating COVID-19. They could be put in various institutes as contractual employees with monetary support.

The return to work has been difficult as well, because infection rates are high in some set-ups. The travel to workplace also is difficult as the public transport is not without risks. The work environment may remain uncertain for some more time to come. All these are sources of stress and counselling for students to combat the uncertainty is desirable. While we speak about the professional aspect of life, personal lives have been disrupted of many due to closure of schools, change in the mode of education of children, loss of job of spouse and other difficulties.

In view of above projections, it is essential that the Government takes appropriate measures to reduce hardships for the scientists and students in different stages of their careers.

Chandrima Shaha

September 8, 2020