

## **Directors' Meeting: A Brief Report**

**Organizer:** The Wellcome Trust / DBT India Alliance

**Venue:** Taj Deccan, Hyderabad

**Date:** Friday, 29 October 2010

### **Scope:**

The Wellcome Trust / DBT India Alliance (IA) organized a Directors' Meeting on 29 October in Hyderabad, with the objective to explore ways-and-means to secure greater institutional buy-in for the India Alliance Fellowships. Facilitated by the IA CEO Professor Anuradha Lohia and presided by the Secretary of Department of Biotechnology (DBT) Dr MK Bhan, the meeting was well attended by heads of several (~30) academic and research institutions in India, including IIT Kanpur, IISER Pune, NCBS, NII, ICGEB, NIN, CCMB, CDFD and IISc among others. Some members of the IA Selection Committees and the Grants Team also attended.

The meeting opened with Professor Lohia stating the purpose of the meeting- to provide a forum for the heads of various organizations to meet in person and discuss at length issues and concerns in building research capacity in India and the role IA can play towards augmenting this effort. She introduced the various IA Fellowship schemes, their provisions and the application process.

### **Margdarshi Fellowships:**

Professor Lohia took this opportunity to have Dr Bhan announce the launch of the Margdarshi Fellowships. This is a newly created funding scheme for scientists wishing to relocate from their current organization to any other non-profit institute in India, to nucleate a cutting edge research centre. The Fellowships are for five years, with possibility for renewal, for researchers with at least twelve years of experience heading a laboratory group and having made major scientific contributions. The Fellowship is hoped to incentivize leading scientists to take their knowledge and experience to a new institute, which will in turn help attract expertise, develop infrastructure, and train students and inspire them to take up science careers in India. This will also aid in de-clustering of applications to and awards from funding agencies. The participants were requested to provide feedback on how IA and DBT could optimize each of their contributions for these Fellowships.

### **Postdoctoral Culture for India:**

The discussions began with seeking participants' views and suggestions on how to improve the quality of Early Career Fellowship applications being received by the India Alliance. One of the reasons cited for the poor quality was that most institutional leadership was spending more time on administrative responsibilities rather than focusing on training and career trajectories of its student populace. Similarly, faculty initially hired for research are now having to take out significant amount of their time for teaching duties leading to their inability to provide adequate mentorship. On the other hand, PhD students encouraged by some faculty have the (mis)perception that unless they carry out a postdoctoral stint abroad, it will be difficult for them to return and find an academic position in India. Even if they return, they typically join the same institution, and even the same research group, from where they received their PhD. Finally, many of the top-notch institutions have abundance of funding, expertise and resources, which seemingly removes their need to reach out to students and postdoctoral scholars. This however has begun posing a problem in attracting quality students, therefore warranting committed efforts from the leadership.

A participant stressed that life sciences will continue to become the dominant sciences over the coming years. Therefore, it is vital for the leadership to have a vision and good governance followed by adequate infrastructure, positions for faculty and funding for research. Others emphasized that teaching is as important as research in identifying talent and building capacity. A foreign Committee member pointed out discussions over teaching vs. research, space, funding are common and ongoing in their country as well. A key difference,

however, is that India is placed in a strong position, owing to its robust economic growth, which bodes well for Indian science. Therefore, it is timely and prudent to focus on postdoctoral models that may fare better in India.

Another participant suggested that more efforts should be directed to allaying the concerns among postdoctoral scholars about the lack of a link between Fellowships and long-term job placements. One option could be to assure them of a tenure position at an institution of their choice upon excellent performance. This should be accompanied by measures to help with transition to or retention in India and settling of their families. These include information on resources available, road-map of career paths and rewarding success.

#### Connecting Biology, Medicine & Public Health:

It was noted that one of the first structured postdoctoral programs in India was started nine years ago and it may take another decade to yield noticeable results. One of the factors for this delay might be lack of biomedical research programs in medical schools. Participants noted a similar disconnect between basic scientists and the public/population health community. An option that has generated considerable interest is creation of combined MD-PhD programs, whereas others believe that PhD could be pursued after MBBS since the costs of recruiting, mentoring and training of clinicians are high. A participant with medical training, who has made the transition to research, stated that a PhD degree is not as important as exposure to biomedical research during their under- or post-graduate training. It is vital to identify clinicians interested in research and stimulate them through role models, shield them from ridicule of a career in science, and sustain their interest in research by providing technical staff and other needed resources.

Collaborations between clinicians and basic scientists can be achieved through joint grants as well as at the institution level by partnering universities with medical schools, even establishing them in close proximity. It is important for clinician-scientists to maintain their interests in seeing patients even as they conduct research. A series of deliberations and enhanced outreach to the medical and public health communities was proposed as a first step in bridging the gap among these disparate groups.

On the role of the Wellcome Trust, it was reminded that the former International Senior Research Fellowships were now rolled into the IA Fellowships. Investigator awards are replacing the project-based collaborative grants for a longer duration to achieve a greater depth of research. However, this still leaves room for new funding avenues, should there be a need or an appropriate case made. The India Alliance, for its part, will continue to embark on domestic and international efforts to attract and retain the best scientific talent.

#### Conclusions:

The half-day meeting covered a range of themes recapitulated here:

1. Prevailing institutional inertia needs to be overcome via proactive and visionary leadership in reaching out to the next generation of students and postdoctoral scholars to help them see science as an exciting and viable career path.
2. Synergistic efforts need to be put forth by institutions and funding agencies to enhance communication and collaboration among the scientific, clinical and public health communities.
3. Funding mechanisms, such as the Margdarshi Fellowships and DBT Glue Grants, may pave the way to a wider dissemination of the human capital critical for strengthening and sustaining innovative research capacity in India.

The Directors' Meeting was insightful and engaging, and the India Alliance hopes this meeting will lead to further stimulating conversations and concrete follow-up actions. The India Alliance would like to thank Dr MK Bhan and all the participants for their valuable time, cooperation and participation.