

Plight of doctoral students during the pandemic

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This crisis will most severely affect those who have just finished or are finishing, their PhD degrees



In the establishment of advanced research, the ones most affected due to the COVID-19 crisis are fresh PhD scholars and those who are on the verge of completing their doctoral research. This cream of our scientific establishment, after years of dedicated and consistent hard work, finds that their opportunities have disappeared suddenly.

In the unfolding saga of human crisis threatening the existence of millions, it is important to bring up the issue of these young scholars, lest their plight never get heard.

Research fellowships

It takes five years to finish a PhD degree in one of the top Indian institutions, and student fellowships are available generally during this period. Students enter the program after clearing competitive examinations such as GATE or CSIR/UGC NET or with INSPIRE and PMRF fellowships, the latter being awarded generally to top rankers. Doctoral fellows in national institutions get a fellowship of Rs.31,000 per month for the first two years and Rs.35,000 per month for the remaining three years or till they submit their theses, whichever is earlier. There are other schemes with different fellowship amounts, too.

Research fellows after completing the PhD programme often go for post-doctor fellowships (PDF) for higher studies and independent research, which make them eligible for faculty/staff scientist positions in academia or industry. Typically, three years of PDF experience is expected for a faculty job. It is common to go abroad for such assignments although domestic opportunities are increasing.

No support from parent labs

During the COVID-19 crisis, those who have completed their degrees, even if they have postdoctoral offers, are stuck. Universities abroad have been closed as well. They have no support from parent laboratories, as advisors have no additional money, and institutional resources are limited. There are other battles to fight for the institutions within their meager resources. These unique challenges faced by the young PhDs have left them in the lurch.

Those who are finishing their degrees might still be receiving their fellowships, although they may not be in the institutions due to the ongoing lockdown. However, their work suffers and it will certainly take more time to finish the degrees and that without any fellowship.

Even more worrisome is the situation of existing postdocs and those who are caught in between postdoctoral assignments. Many have come back from China and other such places

and are unable to go back. They do not have new assignments, and even if they do, there is no way to proceed with them. They too remain unpaid.

There are four students after PhD in my lab, with valid postdoctoral offers but unable to take them up. There are four more finishing their PhD theses and who have exceeded the fellowship period. They are exploring postdoctoral opportunities, but COVID-19 has crushed research funding in many places. With funds drying up, they are likely to stay back for several more months. Fortunately, these students are being supported, but many advisors do not have that option to support their students.

The COVID-19 crisis will take away at least six months from the productive life of PhD students irrespective of the stage they are in their degree. The most severely affected will be those who have just finished or are finishing their degrees and those currently in their postdoctoral period with uncertain funding.

About 20% of all PhD students belong to this category. This number is estimated to be about 3,000 in the premier institutions. The total must be at least twice that if you consider the students in the top State universities and other laboratories put together.

Measures needed

What then can be done to support them? The government must come to their rescue in this period of crisis. The government may do well by extending the fellowship for six more months for all eligible scholars and those who have just completed their tenures. Those who have completed their PhD within the past year, and without jobs or adequate support may be provided with urgent funding for the same period. Postdoctoral fellows who graduated from institutions of national importance and are currently jobless may be provided with quick assistance for six months if they can work with eligible institutions. It is estimated that a package of Rs.200 crores (0.001% of GDP) be allocated to help the young scientific talent pool of the country. Immediate financial support at such a crucial time would provide them immense relief.

Surely, we will live with COVID-19 for some more time. What can our young scientists do to ensure that they can self-support afterward? This crisis must be used to skill themselves beyond their areas of research — scientific editing, online tutoring, business incubation, development of computational skillsets, taking up online courses and conferences for

revisiting fundamentals as well as to gain advanced knowledge. Our industry leaders should also provide new opportunities for this talent pool.

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<https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/science/plight-of-doctoral-students-during-the-pandemic/article31711284.ece>
