Catching them young: The need for education-research connect in astronomically developing countries

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It is a well established historical fact that for a discovery to take place or make an impact on subsequent developments, it must be located in a culture of enhanced activity. For creative peaks to arise, extant knowledge and especially the recent developments must be well absorbed.

Astronomy like all basic science today is a child of high technology. And yet unlike other disciplines where a new sophisticated facility tends to render the older ones redundant, there is place for all, big and small, under the astronomical sky.

In India and other similarly placed countries there is a sharp disconnect between education and research which is detrimental to both. The excitement of astronomy as an intellectual discipline and the value of the universe as a scientific test house must be conveyed to people when they are young so that in their youthful innocence and enthusiasm they may choose astronomy as a career or otherwise become supportive of it. It is thus important for senior researchers to be educators as well. As things stand by the time we try to reach out to future researchers they are already fatigued.

The current financial and economic crises may turn out to be a blessing for basic sciences. Universities and research institutes, at least in third world countries, seem to be partly recovering the ground they had earlier lost to the corporate world and the services sector. This may well be the time to press the advantage.

Within basic sciences there is far greater excitement in life sciences than in the physical. In astronomy itself, dice is heavily loaded in favour of theoretical studies than the observational. What should be our strategy for the astronomically developing countries? These and related questions will be discussed in some depth.