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Visa Labyrinth

THE DATE OF AN EXCITING OVERSEAS ACADEMIC CONFERENCE IS APPROACHING, AND YOU DISCOVER that you need a visa. You have to fill out an endless form (do you really have to list every country you've visited over the past 5, or even worse 10, years?). You may need to travel to a distant town for an interview. The visa may cost as much as your airline ticket. You begin to question whether you really need to go to this conference at all. And you wonder what things are like for someone trying to get a visa to attend a conference in your own country or work in your institution.

This is a global problem. Throughout most of the developed world, governments are responding to domestic concerns over immigration by tightening entry requirements and introducing ever more complex application procedures for visas. This situation is harming science. Governments are failing to appreciate, perhaps unknowingly, that scientists and engineers across the world need to meet to carry on their business. The history of major scientific breakthroughs is littered with accounts of seminal Solvay Conferences, Faraday Discussions, Gordon Research Conferences, and so on, where key ideas were articulated for the first time. Young researchers need to travel to widen their horizons and build up their skills by experiencing the scientific cultures and approaches in different countries. Most countries, including the United Kingdom, recognize this and do welcome young scientists when they arrive. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic visa labyrinth still sends a subliminal if not explicit message of "Stay at home."

As Foreign Secretary of the Royal Society, I hear of failed visa applications and other immigration problems in the United Kingdom and across the world. Although the problems can sometimes be the fault of scientists who are not organized enough to apply for a visa in time, there is clearly a more fundamental problem with some visa systems. What can be done to fix this?

We cannot assume that all governments understand that a problem exists. Senior scientists and engineers need to explain to their governments that the movement of talented researchers is an essential prerequisite to addressing the grand challenges facing society around the globe, such as climate change, sustainability, and antibiotic resistance. Scientists also need to make it clear that overseas researchers are not economic migrants who are hell-bent on stealing jobs from locals, but an essential component of a country's scientific workforce. And scientists must emphasize to governments that international exchange is the best way of training future scientific leaders for the developing world. But more radical action is needed. The scientific community needs international recognition to legitimize the exchange of researchers and scientific dialogue across the world.

Last year, the Royal Society hosted the first of what it hopes will become regular meetings of the G8 science ministers and the presidents of their academies of science. There was constructive discussion and consensus on important issues, but visas for scientists were not discussed. Therefore, I suggest that a communique from the next meeting, provisionally scheduled for this summer, should recognize the need for free and widespread international exchange of researchers in science and engineering, especially for the younger generation. Admittedly, this would be a small step, but perhaps it might start the chain reaction that is needed to reach the ultimate goal of a single worldwide scientific community.

Local action can help too. The Royal Society and other UK academies have been steadily building a working relationship with the UK Border Agency, and we are hopeful that constructive engagement with those in the front line can help smooth the process. The simultaneous but potentially conflicting political goals of wanting to promote international scientific collaboration and being tough on immigration can lead to unintended consequences. However, when discussed constructively, such conflicts and misunderstandings can almost certainly be resolved to the benefit of global science.

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