

International Students Meet.  
March 6, 2015

An International Students Meet consisting of about 100 foreign students from the universities in Kerala was held for a day on March 6, 2015.

The Chief Minister, the Education Minister, the Programme Officer, ICCR and the undersigned addressed the meeting. Secretary, Higher Education was present during the forenoon session. Lectures on Kerala culture and life were delivered by Princess Lakshmi Bayi and Dr. A.K.B.Pillai (New York) in the afternoon session.

In their addresses, the CM and EM welcomed the foreign students and said that Kerala would like to become a destination for international students. The Government would be happy to do everything possible to make it comfortable for foreign students live and study in Kerala. They promised to look into their grievances.

Although we had requested the Vice-chancellors or their representatives to be present, only MGU, CUSAT and Agriculture University were represented. This was a handicap because many grievances of the students could not be addressed on the spot. The Chief Minister said that all the problems mentioned should be recorded and addressed as a matter of priority.

Generally, the ICCR scholars were satisfied with their studies and life in Kerala, but the self-financing students, particularly the students from Iran had the following complaints:

- 1.Irrational increase in fees frequently. This has affected the students badly, particularly the Iranian students because of the exchange rate between Iranian and Indian currencies. Fees should not be increased for existing students. There should be a ceiling on increase in fees for students who are already here.
- 2.Extension of visa and stay permits are very cumbersome. FERRO creates many difficulties for the students.
- 3.There are no special facilities for students in any of the universities.
- 4.Procedures for admissions are long and arduous.
- 5.There is a long period between the submission of theses and open defense. The research scholars have to either stay for several months or come back for defense. Can't the defense of theses be organized by video conference?
- 6.Obtaining any service from the universities is difficult as the foreign students coordinators are not able to help in any way. The officials are "disrespectful, discourteous and insulting". The students have no access to the VCs.
- 7.The campuses are not clean. There is no waste management.
- 8.No working permits are given even for short periods to foreign students.

The following suggestions were made by some of them:

1. Orientation courses including Malayalam classes may be organized.
2. Research quality and facilities may be improved.
3. Some funding may be provided for research projects. (ICCR already provides a modest grant for study travel)

## Recommendations

The loud and clear message that came from the meeting was that no special attention was being given to foreign students. They are left to their own devices and they go through the same difficulties that Indian students face. The red tape is very much present in our universities and the mindset may even be prejudicial to the foreign students. Efforts at exploitation may also be a factor.

CM/EM heard some of the grievances and desired that urgent action should be taken by the universities to resolve the problems. My own recommendations are the following:

1. A single window facility should be established in all the universities to deal with the foreign students. The facility should have the power and the clout to get things done by the concerned authorities. The foreign students should be able to resolve all their problems by approaching the Foreign Students Unit. Such Units exist, but they are either powerless or unwilling to provide any service.
2. Increase in fees should be rationalized. As far as possible, fees should not be increased for current students. An overall ceiling on increase should be imposed and intimated.
3. Procedures for admission, valuation of theses, handling of synopsis etc should be streamlined immediately.
4. Original degree certificates should be given to the foreign students as soon as possible after the results are announced.
5. Possibility of holding defense of theses through video conferencing should be examined.
6. FERRO and the university authorities should coordinate visa and stay permit matters.
7. Orientation courses and Malayalam classes should be organized for new students.
8. ICCR regional office and KSHEC should provide all possible assistance to foreign students.
9. Deserving research projects of foreign students should be considered for assistance by KSHEC.

On the whole, the meeting was without rancor, even though the students were frank in airing their grievances. Many of them complimented the ICCR and the universities for taking care of the foreign students. The Agriculture University was particularly helpful to foreign students, it was stated. Many students were very appreciative of the general helpfulness of the people and said they were generally happy.

The most heartening thing about the meeting was that a student said at the end of the meeting that even if all the problems of the foreign students were not solved, they were very grateful to know that “there are ears to hear our grievances”. KSHEC agreed to hold meetings with them every six months or so.