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## Do We Need Visas for Science-Related Travel?

Satoshi Kawata and Prabhat Verma

Scientists who must acquire visas to travel to technical conferences are often forced to cancel their plans due to procedural hassles and delays. As we look to promote international collaboration among researchers, the time may be right to consider other alternatives for science-related travel.

**M**any of us have experienced it: We're at an international conference held in the United States, and some of the talks are cancelled suddenly with no further information available. For those of us who planned our schedules around listening to those talks, this is of course inconvenient and frustrating.

The same situation often arises at conferences held in Japan and European countries, causing genuine concern among our scientific community. Looking at statistics, we see that most of the cancelled talks are from scientists in China and a few other select countries. Why?

The most common answer is that the speakers could not obtain their travel visa in time for the meeting. While such a visa is not required for most people in Europe, North America, Australia or Japan, it is necessary for citizens in most Asian, African and South American nations (and a few others) when they are attending conferences held in the United States, Japan and Europe. For certain countries, the visa process is much stricter than for others, resulting in either prolonged processing time or frequent denials. As a consequence, scientists are forced to witness the cancellation of some important talks.

In fact, in a recent incident, we witnessed that an Indian scientist working in Japan could not make it to a European symposium that he himself was organizing in collaboration with French partners. According to him, he made a visa application in the consulate a month prior to the symposium. However, he could not obtain his travel visa until the actual date of the symposium. As this unfortunate example demonstrates, the visa process often hinders the free and natural proliferation of science.

Over the past few decades, it has become possible for the citizens of select countries to travel without a visa,

as long as the length of stay is less than 90 days. On the one hand, this exemption program made it possible for more scientists to travel easily. On the other, it has created greater difficulty for those foreigners who do need a travel visa, because many consulate generals have reduced their visa services in those countries.

Even when a person obtains a visa to travel for a particular scientific activity, in most cases, it is valid only for the duration of that particular activity. Thus, if the scientist needs to travel again within a month or so, he or she must go through the hassle of collecting and submitting papers for the application all over again—and then wait a long time for the results. The visa consulates are usually located only in specific cities, making domestic travel and work leave necessary with every visa application, not to mention the expenses that are involved with getting the visa. All these difficulties often demoralize international scientists and discourage them from applying for visas.

U.S. immigration law requires that all transit passengers pass through immigration. For example, if someone is traveling from Asia to South America with a flight that requires a changeover in the United States, the traveler must have a valid U.S. visa too, even if he does not intend to enter the United States. Naturally, the more visas that one needs to travel somewhere, the greater the likelihood will be that they will not be able to make it to a planned conference or other scientific activity.

Still, the rate of visa denial remains high in the United States. Although visas are a diplomatic matter between countries, they significantly affect the scientific process and elevate concern in our community. Should there be a quicker and easier procedure—or even a visa exemption—for travel related to scientific activities?

VIEWPOINT

According to recent news reports, the Japanese government is currently examining a new visa system in which Asian researchers would be exempted from needing a visa if their stay in Japan does not exceed 90 days. If approved, this system would be applicable to those who want to travel to attend conferences or meetings, to those who want to have academic exchanges, and to those who want to participate in international joint research projects.

In fact, the Japanese government is also considering financially supporting travel related to research in some high-technology fields, such as environmental and medical research, where the total funding is anticipated to go up to one million U.S. dollars. If this plan is approved and implemented, it would be a big step toward promoting international science by removing an unnecessary diplomatic barrier.

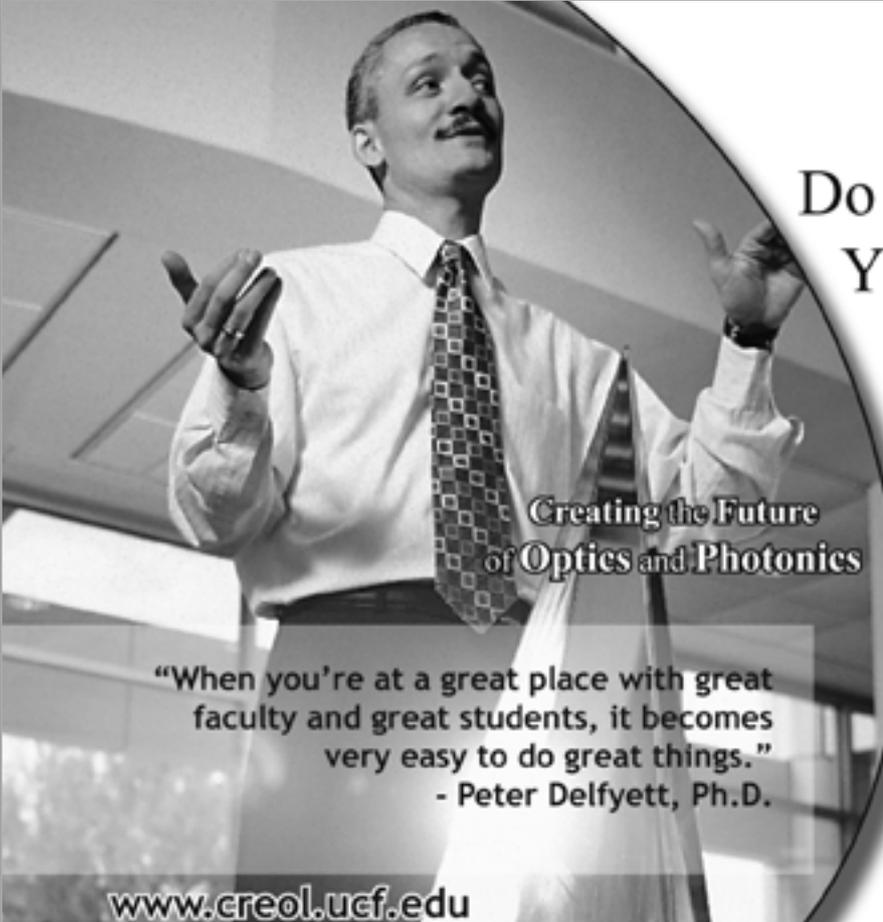
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Scientific activities have gained their due respect in society, and we believe it would be very much justified for travel related to scientific activities to be considered from a different platform than other travels. Perhaps there should be worldwide agreement that we need to either relax or exempt the visa requirements for science-related travel.

This would be a very meaningful way of encouraging real international involvement and collaboration in science. It is perhaps high time for the scientific community to consider this matter and propose suitable recommendations to government authorities. Hopefully, such proposals will be seriously considered as a way to help promote science beyond geographical borders. ▲

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