

OBITUARY



1949 - 2022

Prof. Chris King, Emeritus Professor of Earth Science Education, Keele University, passed away on February 17, 2022. I was totally devastated on hearing of this news. May his soul rest in peace. My deep sympathies to Phoebe and family. Chris has left behind not only his beloved wife, Phoebe, and his loving children - Will, Tom, Dave and Pete, but several colleagues and friends around the globe. He was an educationist par excellence, a committed trainer, a visionary, a great institution-builder, and an initiator of novel programs in earth science education (ESE).

Chris received his Geology degree from Bristol University. He completed M. Sc. with distinction in Sedimentology at Reading University and received teacher training in science and geology education at Keele University. He was a diamond prospector, geology teacher, and Head of Lower School Science and School Development Officer, and a professor of earth science education at Keele University. He was Director, Earth Science Education Unit in Keele.

My maiden encounter with Chris was during the international conference on Geoscience Education (GeoSciEd) in Hilo, Hawai'i in 1996 where his wonderful presentation made an impact on me. There, he held discussions with colleagues (me included) at a café that paved the way for starting the International Geoscience Education Organisation (IGEO; www.igeoscienced.org) in 2000 of which he was Founder Chair. He served as its Adviser too later. He was a signatory to the document registering IGEO in India in 2015.

Chris was instrumental in starting the International Union of Geological Sciences' Commission on Geoscience Education (IUGS-COGE; www.iugscoge.org). Chris was Commissioner for many years and its most recent Chair. He was Chair, Committee on Education, European Geosciences Union (www.egu.eu/education/committee) at the time of his demise. He initiated the earthlearningidea program (ELI; www.earthlearningidea.com), along with his colleagues – Peter Kennett and Elizabeth Devon – in 2007 when the International Year of Planet Earth was launched.

Chris had a well thought out plan and strategy to enhance the quality of ESE in schools. He was involved in global and regional surveys to gain insights into the state of earth science education. From this, he recognised the problems afflicting ESE and devised and implemented programs to solve them:

1) School teachers' lack formal education/training in imparting ESE: He offered several teacher training workshops - short ones at ESE conferences and full-fledged, 1- to 4-day ones (for e.g., GIFT workshops) where teacher participants carried out experiments, made observations and understood earth processes/ phenomena. The teachers, in turn, could effectively teach their students. Impressed by his workshops, I invited him and Prof Nir Orion (Israel) to conduct similar workshops at Mangalore, Bangalore and Goa (India). Realising the difficulty of training thousands of teachers across the world, he proposed the concept of Field Officers wherein earth scientists would be trained, and be ambassadors of ESE, to train school teachers in their respective countries.

He created a synergy amongst IGEO, IUGS, COGE and EGU to fund and implement this ongoing program. Chris firmly believed that well trained teachers are the backbone of ESE.

2) Lack of proper syllabus in school curriculum and teaching-learning resources: He organised group discussions at IGC's and GeoSciEd conferences and collaborated with ES educationists to draw up a syllabus and prepare a textbook. The syllabus included aspects of earth science that every child must learn to grow up to be responsible citizens of the world (www.igeoscienced.org/activities/international-geoscience-syllabus). He prepared a text-book (titled EXPLORING GEOSCIENCE ACROSS THE WORLD) and revised it based on comments from colleagues that serves as a useful teaching resource (www.igeoscienced.org/teaching-resources/geoscience-text-books). One can use it as a template and replace examples and photographs with local ones to produce a country- or region-specific textbook to provide a local flavour.

3) Lack of simple, doable experiments, hands-on training and field learning: Chris and his colleagues started the earthlearningidea program (ELI; www.earthlearningidea.com) that publishes on the web simple experiments using inexpensive, locally available materials to demonstrate earth processes and phenomena for the benefit of school students and teachers. ELI activities have been translated to 11 languages and the total downloads as of February 2022 was > 5.7 million. He demonstrated how earth science could be effectively taught in the field setting.

To pass on the good work done by ES educationists to, and enthuse, the next generation, he initiated the “My Earth Science Educator Story” series (www.igeoscienced.org/activities/my-earth-science-educator-story), where ES educators could share their ES educational experiences during their careers. So far, 71 have shared their experiences.

Chris collected information and photos from colleagues to compile the EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GEOSCIENCE EDUCATION ORGANISATION – AND RELATED ORGANISATIONS (including GeoSciEd conferences, IGEO, IESO, and IUGS-COGE) and shared it with colleagues (www.igeoscienced.org/activities/my-earth-science-educator-story).

Chris' contributions were recognised by many organisations. For e.g., the “Distinguished Service Award” of the Geological Society of London, the “Halstead Medal” of the Geologists' Association and the “Geoethics Medal” of the International Association for Promoting Geoethics.

Above all, Chris was a fine human being. He was warm and gentle, committed and industrious, humorous and jovial, understanding and accommodative. He never hurt anyone with his words or actions. He practised what Basavanna, a 13th century social reformer from southern India, said: Work itself is heaven! That goes beyond the WORK IS WORSHIP tenet.

Very few people reveal their terminally ill diagnosis. Chris' conviction and openness enabled him to share this as well with colleagues and friends whom he considered as family. Even fewer people have the level of satisfaction that Chris had while looking back in the dusk of their lives. He has helped so many people in the world, and wonderfully, marvellously, and superbly at that. I fondly recall my association with him, which was most memorable.

To me, Chris, who worked at the University of Keele, was the keel of the “Earth Science Education” ship! Chris was not a star, but an ever shining superstar in the galaxy of earth science educationists. He will always remain a fountain of inspiration and a treasure house of admiration for me and all ES educators across the world.

On January 28, 2022, days before he passed away, he called and spoke to me for 21 minutes. Though his voice was hoarse because of hospitalisation, his mind was calm and thoughts crystal clear. He wished me “Aum” and said, Goodbye, Shankar. When it was my turn to reciprocate, it was emotional for me, and barely managed to say, “Good bye, My dear Friend!”

March 02, 2022
Bangalore, India

R. SHANKAR
Past Chair, IGEO