

Now Davos draws the scholars, too

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Article

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MENTION Davos and one is likely to associate it with the prestigious World Economic Forum (WEF), the annual meeting of global political and business elite. The recent WEF was held last month and it drew some 2,000 participants, our prime minister among them.

It is said that two-thirds of the world's wealth is controlled or held by the people who turn up for the Davos meeting.

Situated in the eastern Swiss Alps, Davos in the early 1970s (before the WEF came to the fore) was known only to skiers and well-heeled holiday makers.

Snuggled high in the Alps, Davos is almost inaccessible except via a two-hour train ride from Zurich with one change mid-way at Landquart.

The train ride is an experience of a lifetime, with breath-taking views of snow-capped mountains along the way.

Unknown to many, long before what it is today, Davos had already carved a name for itself, as a health retreat.

In the earlier days, Davos was a "cure station" for patients with tuberculosis, mostly limited to Europeans who felt the air in the Alps was clean and the weather therapeutic.

In fact, it was alluded that Davos village folk benefited so much from this healthy environment that they appeared to be "immune" to the deadly "consumption", as TB was then known.

This was in stark contrast to the polluted and dirty industrial European cities, notably London, where diseases spread easily.

Some dared even claim that the crisp, dry and clean air of Davos could "cure" maladies.

One medical practitioner was quite categorical when he noted: "A winter spent in the high Alps is often productive of great benefits in cases of chest disease."

Others also asserted that the relatively dry and warm summer was also of great benefit. There is currently an exhibition on TB during the winter season in Davos.

All this no doubt led Davos to develop in the early days into a health resort for people. Sporting and tourist amenities sprouted alongside. The abundant natural springs, prized in the Alps for their therapeutic wonders, added to the attraction.

Davos today stands proud in attracting the rich and famous, as well as the brilliant, to sample its hospitality, especially along the Promenade, the main street. Not to be missed are its museums and research centres, such as the one famous for asthma and allergies.

Last week, Davos saw yet another addition to its world-class activities when it hosted the Inaugural World Universities Forum (WUF).

Like the first WEF, this initiative is aimed at articulating some of the deeper concerns about higher education worldwide. It has all the ingredients of another WEF, this time for the academic and scholarly world.

If WEF brings together the world's rich and powerful to the tiny corner of the Alps, WUF has the potential to draw the world's brains. After all, it is similarly designed to promote robust and vigorous interactions across the globe at the same venue.

Foremost is about the changing definitions of the purpose of universities, the changing character of its governance, and even the changing nature of its relations with governments, corporations and the community.

Most impressively, WUF is about new ideals, ideas and substance, and not just more of the same discussions about processes, procedures and management of the "old and tired" notion of universities.

To quote the organiser: "This is an ambitious goal, one that is neither idle nor frivolous."

And this is what the future of universities is all about.

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