We need to focus on building research capability of universities

Prof. Nikhil Sinha, Vice Chancellor, Shiv Nadar University, in an interview with Shilpi Sachdeva, speaks about a plethora of problems that Indian universities face...

Q. Should India expand in terms of number of universities or consolidate?
A. We need more seats in higher education. More seats can come in two ways; one is expansion of the existing institution and the other is by creating new institutions. The relative cost of creating a new institution is much higher than expanding the capacity of an existing institution. We must find a way to expand our existing institutions. There is an opportunity in affiliated college system as most of undergraduate education in India takes place through affiliated colleges.

Q. Should we go for specialized universities or multidisciplinary ones?
A. There is definitely a need for specialized universities to come up. Those should be graduate-level universities or postgraduate-level universities. Universities specialising in subject of a particular area should come up at Master’s or PhD level.

Q. Should universities do only socially relevant research?
A. Most of the scientific breakthroughs are coming from basic research carried out in educational institutes and that needs to be the focus. In some places we have got social problems and economic problems that need to be dealt with. We need to develop research projects focused on that area. If we stop doing basic research then we will begin to fall behind in terms of developing new knowledge.

Q. What are the pros and cons of the patenting culture emerging in our universities?
A. Patenting culture is rather irrelevant at this point of time. More important thing is, are we doing any research that is cited by any other people in the world or bringing new knowledge? We have no patents in India as compared to rest of the world. The issue is, we are not generating new knowledge in our universities because we don’t hold our faculty responsible as it is not the part of the job requirement and also does not hamper their appraisal. We don’t have a research culture. By and large we need a culture of research to be generated.

Q. Why only a minority of faculty publishes in refereed journals?
A. For any kind of habit development it is very important to have combination of both incentives as well as disincentives. Incentives to do research and be rewarded; and disincentive of not doing research, who lag behind. People must know this is the part of their job requirement.

Q. Should universities hanker after star faculties?
A. There is a reason why they are stars -- they have built public career of excellence in what they do, they are influential in their field, are very helpful for students in getting excited about the subject. There is no reason why universities should not go after star faculties.

Q. What are the top skills that your university graduate must possess?
A. The top skills that a graduate must possess are: Problem solving; the ability to reason and apply scientific method; collaboration and teamwork; innovative thinking ability to develop new ideas; social consciousness; and understanding of the political, social, historical and international context in which the world is today.