We need a Paradigm Shift: Prof. Shekhar Chaudhuri, Ex Dir. IIMC; Director SME SNU

Prof. Shekhar Chaudhuri is a well known name in the Indian management world. He served as the director of Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIMC) for two consecutive terms (2002-2008 and 2008-2013), where he was responsible for the globalization of the institute, taking many initiatives like launching major new academic programmes bringing about significant organizational changes, pursuing accreditation by AACSB and AMBA, and participating in the highly competitive Financial Times Rankings etc.

After his term as IIMC director ended in early 2013, in a move that surprised many, he decided to join the fledgling Shiv Nadar University (SNU) as the director of School of Management and Entrepreneurship (SME). SNU, a university established by The Shiv Nadar Foundation, was set up in 2011. Tech visionary Shiv Nadar, the founder of HCL has been the pioneer and the frontrunner of the IT sector in India. The university is offering an MBA programme, the first batch of which will commence in July 2014. Apart from that SNU has already established schools of Engineering, Natural Sciences and Humanities and Social Sciences. Schools of Education, Communication and Law are to be established in the next few years.

In a candid interview with MBAUniverse.com, Prof. Chaudhuri shares what led him to take this challenge, his vision for the B-school, and how he plans to make his B-school into a well renowned institution in 5-7 years.

Edited excerpts:

Q. Let’s start with your long stint with IIM C as its director. How was it to lead an old & gigantic institution like IIM C?

IIM C has a great history as the pioneer of management education in India. As you know, IIM C celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2011. There is a lot that the institution has done to further management thinking and practice in India. However, a lot remains to be done.

Along with my colleagues, what we did at IIM C in the last 10 years was to make it a more global institution. We took several important initiatives and the results are now becoming visible. IIMC was ranked No 19 in the global FT Rankings this year.

Q. So what led you to join Shiv Nadar University?
As I finished my term earlier this year, I had several options. I could have continued at IIM C, I also had offers to lead other B-schools. In early 2012, the Shiv Nadar Foundation’s top management contacted me to find out if I would be willing to lead the School of Management here. Initially I was not sure…but as I started to interact with them, I began to see that they were serious about building a great university that would have a long term impact. I realized that the foundation was not doing this for revenues or profits. Most of the private players in education put profit ahead of other things like research and long term impact.

Even before I joined, I made several suggestions about the management school’s design and focus, which were immediately accepted. I thought we should put a focus on “entrepreneurship”, and hence we should call the School as “School of Management and Entrepreneurship.” This idea was welcomed and accepted. I joined in May 2013. We have a clear idea of where we are headed…

Q. Have you interacted with Mr Shiv Nadar, and what are his views?

I have had the opportunity of meeting Mr Shiv Nadar a couple of times and he extended me full support for pursuing the vision and mission of the School. He has given us a green signal to set up a Financial Research and Trading Lab just like the one in IIM Calcutta, which is the only one in the country today and also agreed to support the School’s thrust on research and the creation of a business incubator to support entrepreneurship.

Q. Do you think that the current timing is good for launch of a new MBA program? So many B-schools are reporting trouble in enrolling students.

Yes, we understand that the current environment is tough. But there is always room for quality players. We don’t have a narrow perspective of 3-5 years. We are clearly looking at long term sustainability and impact. At the moment, we are making our best of efforts and by doing this programme well over a period of time we will be able to make an impact.

Q. What are your visions for SNU-SME?

We want the SNU-SME to be a globally recognized institute aiming to create outstanding leaders and entrepreneurs. We want to be counted amongst the well respected MBA programs in India in next 5-7 years.
Apart from the MBA program, we will also be launching a programme in 2015 in collaboration with Babson College, Massachusetts, USA which is the leading college for Entrepreneurship in the world. We also intend to start a Ph.D programme. In future we might offer a BBA programme.

**Q. How will your MBA program be different from others? What are your USPs?**

I think we will be different based on our curriculum and pedagogy. While I was at IIMC, in 2011, we did a survey of recruiters, deans and directors of business schools jointly with IIMA in collaboration with Prof. Srikant Datar a professor at the Harvard Business School and a co-author of “Rethinking the MBA” to understand the issues in the Indian context. One of the things that came out clearly was that there was a gap between “theory” and “practice”, as seen by recruiters. Corporates expect industry-ready skills when they recruit MBAs.

So, in our MBA program, we are focusing a lot on skills and practice, in a very structured manner. At least 15% of the term time would be focused on “experiential learning”. There will be intensive company visits for the students, accompanied by faculty members on which the students will be graded. Skill development workshops will also be organized extensively.

Over the years due to the explosion of knowledge, MBA programmes had become very much focused on imparting knowledge. What our survey showed was the need to bring about a better balance among the three important legs of management education, i.e. knowledge, skills values and attitudes. At SNU-SME our aim is to rebalance the MBA.

**Q. Where do you see SNU-SME within 5-7 years? Ranked in Top 25?**

A. Well, I can’t say Top 20 or Top 30 but I can confidently say that within 10 years SNU-SME will be recognized as a very well reputed institute in the country, and within the Asian region. Rankings are for others to judge…

**Q. So University based private B-schools like yours have some advantages over IIMs, and other standalone B-schools?**

A. I think so. An university has a lot more resources and breadth, which isn’t the case in a typical PGDM B-school. For instance we can draw upon faculty from our other departments or schools like Humanities and Engineering for the benefit of our students. But the university system has some disadvantages also. If adequate autonomy is not given to the schools they may have to abide by the rules which may be more suitable for the larger schools like Engineering, then the management school may suffer.
Q. What do you make of the drop in CAT numbers?

A. I believe there are two broad reasons for this: economic slowdown impacting jobs at management school campuses, and disenchantment amongst recruiters for hiring MBAs.

In the last several years there has been an economic slowdown. Salaries offered by recruiters have gone down across campuses. What used to be a placement week has got stretched into months!

Recruiters are generally concerned about the ROI of their MBA hirings, and have started recruiting graduates for jobs that were otherwise for MBAs. Overall the sentiments are down.

Q. So what kind of students are you looking for?

We at SNU-SME will accept CAT and GMAT scores. We are not going to design our own test as of now. Past academic record and extracurricular activities of the students will also be of importance during the time of admissions. We will stress upon taking students who have an innovation and entrepreneurial orientation and ethical nature.