

Distinctive case development at University of Hong Kong

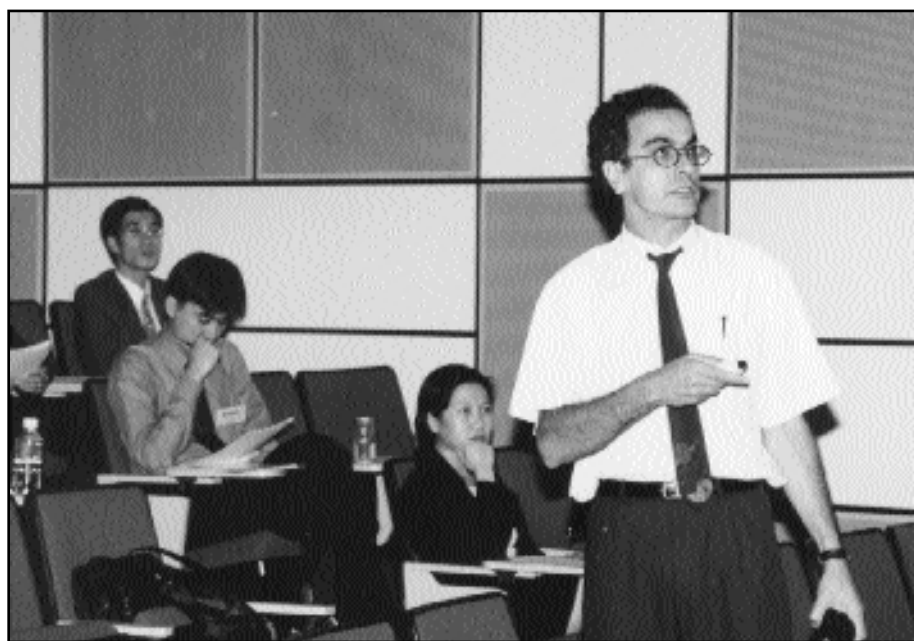
The Centre for Asian Business Cases at the University of Hong Kong School of Business began a major case development initiative in August, 1997. Since then more than 30 major, strategically orientated cases have been produced. ECCH holds all of the cases in its collection. In this article Dr. Ali Farhoomand, the Centre's Director, explains the rationale for the initiative and how they have implemented it.

When Dr. Ali Farhoomand of the University of Hong Kong School of Business's recently formed Centre for Asian Business Cases surveyed the available cases throughout the world dealing with situations in the Asia-Pacific region, he found himself profoundly disappointed. First, there were very few cases focusing on the region. Harvard Business School Publishing listed 100. ECCH had an additional 101, of which only 62 were written after 1995.

Second, the existing cases concentrated on the concerns and problems of western firms and managers trying to do business in the region, not on the concerns of Asian managers working on their own home ground. Third, the majority of existing cases were lightweight and descriptive case histories, not strategic case studies as understood in the leading western schools.

The mission of the Centre for Asian Business Cases

He determined that the Centre should spearhead a radical turnaround in this situation, and in a powerful show of academic entrepreneurship, he and his colleagues led the creation of a team of case writers that in just over two years has added over 30 serious strategic cases with teaching notes to the canon of classroom resources set in an East Asian context. The Centre is fully supported by the government, and is funded by teaching development grants from the Hong Kong University Grants Committee.



A corner of an MBA class at The University of Hong Kong School of Business being led in a case discussion by Professor Dr. Ali Farhoomand

All of the released cases are now listed by ECCH, and the Centre has received accreditation for its output from Harvard Business School Publishing.

The Centre's website expresses its mission very succinctly. It is 'devoted to the advancement of learning and teaching in business education through the development of context-rich Asian cases'.

The Centre sees itself as filling the void left by the failure of western case schools to address Asian questions in an Asian context. They see themselves as well positioned to develop the local contacts and

insights needed to generate a substantial body of material relevant to the Asian context and the Asian manager. The cases themselves are prepared and written by professional case writers, hired specifically for this purpose, under the supervision of teaching staff from the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and the HK Institute of Education. All the inter-university activities are co-ordinated by the Centre.

The project got under way in August

Features

1997, and in the ensuing period it has grown from two people to a team of ten professional case writers and multimedia experts who conduct research, write case studies and teaching notes, and develop multimedia teaching tools for the project. On certain projects the Centre works in conjunction with the University's Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching.

Generally speaking, case writers have one and a half months to research and draft a case, normally of about 20 pages, with its complementary teaching note. The Centre firmly believes that a case without a teaching note is of limited use for teaching.

Contacts with the companies are initially made by the academic supervisor who identifies appropriate business scenarios and obtains consent for the cases to be written. Only when consent has been obtained is a writer allocated to the case. The writers are supervised throughout to ensure that the cases meet their objectives.

The teaching note is written concurrently with the case, and all cases are classroom taught before being released for

wider distribution. Formal evaluations are taken from students and teachers during the initial teaching, and these provide a searching quality benchmark before release.

What makes the Centre a distinctive case producer

All the cases focus on topical issues, of which the following selection gives a flavour:

- the 1997 Stock Exchange crash and the actions of the Hong Kong Government;
- the recent Asian bird flu, as an illustration of public communication crisis;
- the Indonesian currency crisis;
- the Hong Kong Property market in 1997;
- initial public offerings of a number of mainland Chinese companies;
- the development of Hong Kong's National Information Infrastructure;
- marketing issues encountered by Hong Kong Telecom in the launch of their video-on-demand product in 1998;
- the impact of the Internet on the

- structure of the travel industry;
- Singapore's investment promotion strategy;
- the development of Hong Kong's electronic commerce infrastructure;
- China's electronic commerce initiative.

The Centre describes its cases as 'context-rich'. By this it is meant that they are information and issue packed, setting real challenges for teachers and students in classroom discussion.

They recognise the diversity of cultures and the differences in levels of economic development among the countries of Asia. Some differences are much broader than may be found in Europe.

In addition, they consider the role of national policy in business strategy development and, based on indigenous companies, a number of cases are about the impact of those policies on business decisions.

Reinforcing Hong Kong's educational position

They aim to reinforce Hong Kong's position as a focal point for quality business education, particularly as Hong Kong has always been a place where East meets West.

The cases are set in the environments of a number of countries or regions – China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, Singapore and Taiwan, so far!

The cases pull together disparate disciplines in business, which provide scenarios that are as close to real-life business situations as possible. For example, a case about new technology might involve issues of product innovation, marketing, management strategy and organisation behaviour.

Many cases are about change – for instance in travel, oil, retail, pharmaceuticals and the facsimile and pc industries.

They are all produced in the 'Harvard style', and are analytical.

Cases from the Centre for Asian Business Cases, and their teaching notes, are available from ECCH. They can be found on COLIS or CODIS by searching under *centre for asian business*



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