

## **Guests Commentary: On Building Cooperation for Business Education Amongst Asian Countries**

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The goals of business education are manifold but can be summarized as addressing the following objectives : a) to deliver a valuable learning experience for the students so that they can become effective leaders and participants in the business community; b) to contribute to the conceptual and methodological body of knowledge in international business education; c) to assist business enterprises with operational know-how to compete in a national, regional and global economy.

As we focus on strengthening business education in the Asian region, it is evident that the region is poised and ready to undertake these objectives and make unique contributions to the area of business education. It is in this region in the last decade that the world has witnessed unprecedented economic growth rates, a growing skilled and literate labor force, swelling ranks of business students in universities, the spread of new research and learning centers, the influx of new businesses, and the rapid liberalization of previously closed economies.

Business educators in the region have a real challenge - and simultaneously a real opportunity - to keep pace with, indeed a few steps ahead of, these rapid developments in the Asian region. It is encouraging to note that business education in the region has world class universities, research institutes and internationally recognized scholars. We are now at a point where we are poised to reach the next level of excellence with our unique experiences. With many of the institutions and expertise in place in many of the Asian countries, we are now at a crossroads where we can go beyond our past reliance on a knowledge base derived primarily from a Western experience. We need to explore effective ways of strengthening the learning experience of our students to enhance their abilities to lead and manage local, regional and multinational firms which are growing rapidly in the region.

Our intent here is to present a working framework (Figure1) which is by no means comprehensive, but addresses certain issues and can serve to encourage increased dialogue and cooperation towards building business education. The focus of this framework is on business teaching in the area; thus key components of this working framework emphasize the cooperative development of the business curriculum, cases and other teaching materials, and initiatives that would facilitate the process. Each of the components will be elaborated briefly.

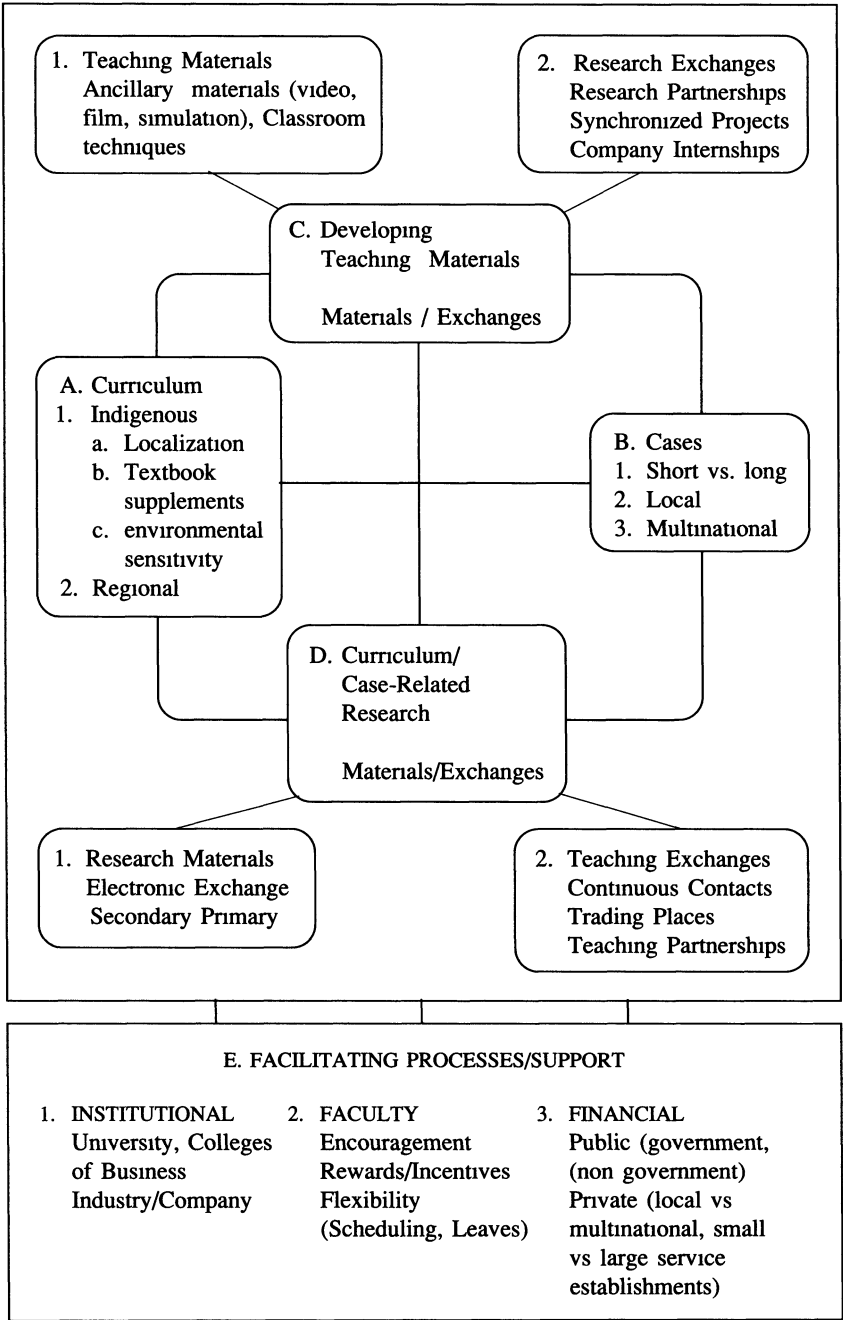


FIGURE 1

## CURRICULUM

This is really the focal point of our efforts. How can curriculum be made relevant for regional and national needs as we train our students to become more effective in the national, regional and global environment? With this in mind, what are the particular types of cases, teaching materials, and research materials that can help to strengthen our curriculum to prepare our students effectively and efficiently? With regard to the curriculum, here are a few points for consideration:

**Indigenous** For the various Asian countries, the unique business parameters within which our students have to prepare themselves are not often reflected in the types of materials that are currently available in the region. For example, there is a need to clarify the relevance of certain business principles, in each of the functional areas, when applied in the Malaysian context (or for that matter in the Thai, Indonesian, Indian, etc. context). How this can be accomplished requires discussion. Some preliminary ideas follow:

1. *Localization* There is a need to develop “local” content that elucidates how business principles may be applied in our circumstances and in our economies. For example, consider a required course in all our curricula in Marketing where most of the materials that are used are either U.S.-based or U.K.-based. It is not just the translation of such textbooks (for example, in Malay) that is needed, even in situations where the language of instruction is other than English; what is more imperative is that the examples that are used to illustrate marketing concepts are Malaysian in nature. Given constraints of time and resources the development of short “case-ettes” (or, brief cases) could accomplish that objective most expeditiously. Most examples in textbooks are American or British. For example, in illustrating the concept of the “product portfolio,” U.S. textbooks may use Proctor and Gamble to discuss the width of the portfolio (different lines, for example, soap, toothpaste, detergents) and the depth of the lines (different items, e.g. Tide, Bold, Dash, Cheer). Local and regional examples can be developed quickly through class assignments, and these short case-ettes can be then shared with other universities in the region.

2. *Textbook Supplements* This raises the next critical issue of textbook supplements which will be dealt with again in the context of teaching materials. Textbook supplements that have the goal of generating local applications are vitally needed. We could develop, for example, common student workbooks with assignments that require students to observe and actually apply the concepts. For example, students could be asked to describe and examine branding strategies for a local company, and to identify and analyze whether it is a family branding strategy, individual name

strategy, etc., and assess whether the strategy is appropriate in our markets. The collaborative development of such workbooks is a pragmatic and useful project for faculty to cooperate on. Related to this is the next point: environmental sensitivity.

3. *Environmental Sensitivity* It is necessary to identify differences in such aspects, among others, as the political, legal, economic, and cultural environment as it influences the appropriate conduct of business in our countries. For example, the unique elements of the cultural environment (i.e., religion, cultural diversity) that may have a substantive impact on customer expectations in certain market segments could considerably influence the preparation of business strategies. Again, assignments are needed that clearly identify, and articulate in detail, such comparative aspects including the dynamics of diverse linguistic, religious, racial, and ethnic groups for our students to consider in the formulation of business strategies. The preparation of such short assignments could be beneficial as a joint project, and their use in classes could also promote understanding of intra-regional differences.

**Regional** Here teaching materials are needed that are related to preparing functional capabilities of area industries and companies to become competitive in regional and global markets. Modules on regional cooperative groupings and their implications for business, such as the possibilities of market expansion, rationalization of production, and the like, can be prepared. These could focus for example, on ASEAN, AFTA and EAEC; and relations with other groupings such as NAFTA and the EC could be included.

## CASES

The next component of the framework is case development. Pragmatically, the development of our students to become effective managers is dependent upon cultivating their abilities to respond to business demands that they face indigenously. Thus the preparation of cases for class discussion through which students can develop their creative, analytical, and presentation skills are an important component of business education and merits particular attention. Hence, there is considerable emphasis in this discussion on case development that helps to strengthen the curriculum.

**Long vs. Short Cases** For medium- and long-term objectives there is a need to develop more comprehensive cases that address various functional areas but also those that are cross-functional in nature. More on this aspect later.

Let us first specifically suggest the development of “short” cases or “case-ettes.” These are “do-able” and can be prepared in shorter periods of time reflecting what was referred to earlier as support for indigenous and regional needs. These would be, for example, three to four pages in length dealing with specific business concepts as mentioned earlier. A collection of these cases can then be compiled as textbook supplements. These kinds of cases and case-ettes can be developed at the local and multi national level.

**Local** These cases focus on national companies and their business strategies. Three types need to be developed:

1. *National policy cases* These could include evaluating and assessing the development of sectors identified as ones in which the country is attempting to be of world class quality.

2. *Industry cases* Examples of these could be of companies that have been privatized, having reverted from State ownership to private ownership, with these experiences recorded and shared for analysis.

3. *Specific company cases* Countries in the area are keen on promoting the development of small companies and entrepreneurship. This is an area of case development that remains largely neglected with major attention given to larger companies. Cases that help to understand issues such as motivational processes of successful small business entrepreneurs and highlight facilitative processes, government and non-governmental, could be beneficial. Specifically, these could be where faculty from schools in the Asian region jointly review and also provide recommendations for cases that can help to improve small businesses.

**Multinational** There are two initiatives that can be undertaken here. First, to coordinate certain local cases that result collectively in multinational cases (or case-ettes). An example might be a case of Unilever’s marketing strategies in Malaysia (or, in the case of a case-ette, application of a marketing concept such as the product life cycle; with similar cases of the same company in Indonesia, India, etc.) As these are prepared, they will cumulatively result in developing a case to discuss the differences in the use of strategies and their assessment.

Another type of multinational case would be that related to business issues of regional companies that have joint ventures in the region, such as an Indian company in Malaysia .

Units such as CIBERS (Centers for International Business Education and Research) in the United State for example, and also the regional PACIBERS (Pacific Asia Consortium for International Business Education and Research) could help in the development of cases. These CIBERS are interested in developing international cases to internationalize their own curriculum, and could be approached to cooperate in preparing cases.

## DEVELOPING TEACHING MATERIALS

The third component of the framework, the development of teaching materials, encompasses the regionally focused cases as discussed above. In addition to these, however, other initiatives could include the following:

### Teaching Materials

1. *Ancillary materials* Additional teaching materials that could be prepared cooperatively include video-cases (and case-studies). Filming a video of a McDonald's in operation in Malaysia, and conducting a video interview of McDonald's managers, employees, and customers, could be replicated in other Asian countries. The development of the interview guide/questions could be prepared jointly by the region's faculty.

Business simulation programs currently in use are primarily oriented to the training of Western business students and thus reflect issues mainly significant in those environments. In the long term such tools need to be prepared reflecting educational requirements of area students. Joint development and usage can help to make these economically feasible.

2. *Classroom techniques* Similarly, effective classroom techniques developed by faculty on topics such as how to stimulate class discussions, could be shared. It is not uncommon that comments are made about the lack of participation in class discussions as a regional "cultural" attribute. Indeed we need to discover and share ways of encouraging students to be more participative and to express and rationalize their views. Faculty in each functional area could also exchange syllabi that include 'tried and tested cases' with their comments on classroom use. This could be most effectively done through electronic exchange on Internet.

### Teaching Related Exchanges

1. *Continuous Contacts* When electronic exchanges are in place in different schools in the region, continuous contact between faculty will be easier and could be promoted by University administration for regular usage. In the interim, faculty/staff at each school could be designated as 'Materials Coordinators' who could expedite the flow of materials and requests from each school to others.

2. *Trading Places* In order to make this possible for faculty, it would be helpful if courses are identified with equivalence between schools in the region where such 'trades' of faculty are possible for a semester. When there is partial equivalence in courses, faculty members could trade places for part of the semester.

3. *Teaching Partnerships* Another process that could merit consideration is where a faculty member goes over to another cooperating/participating school as a teaching partner and vice versa. While the host university's faculty partner may maintain overall control over course content, incorporating appropriate teaching modules by the visiting partner in consonance with the course syllabus may be possible. The visiting professor, during the time spent at the host university, could also be simultaneously working on assimilating teaching-related materials such as those mentioned earlier, and on developing fresh perspectives and ideas on teaching that course at his/her own university, and could also be conducting appropriate research.

## CURRICULUM/CASE RELATED RESEARCH

### Research Materials

1. *Electronic Exchange* The potential of utilizing Internet and other electronic networking capabilities for regional cooperation is not fully realized. Accessing the global network to link up with professionals all over the world is an invaluable tool for professional development. It could also be the quickest and cheapest way to maintain continuous linkages by business academics in the region.

Sharing teaching tips, syllabi, workable student assignments, textbook assessments, curriculum developments, are just some of the ways in which this media could be mutually beneficial for the region's business schools. Electronic bulletin boards for discussions in each of the functional areas of business could allow faculty to remain in touch not only for enhancing teaching but to discuss potential research relevant to regional needs. Such bulletin boards could also be very useful in sharing information on developments that are taking place continuously in this media which allow for easier access to information related to teaching and research.

2. *Secondary information* There is a need to develop easier access to secondary information. Researchers in the region often have a common complaint of not having access to journal articles in their libraries, and of the time and cost of getting these through processes such as inter-library loan. Regional cooperation by universities could help to request better rates based on scale usage for full-text on-line proprietary computerized data bases. In addition, traditional channels of sharing library resources through regional loans should be made more accessible to area faculty.

3. *Primary Materials* Similarly, in the preparation of cases or 'case-ettes,' some standardized formats and primary questionnaires can be mutually prepared and shared by faculty in each of the functional areas as well as

cross-functionally. By making these easily available, it would encourage faculty to adapt and use these, particularly in preparing the ‘case-ettes.’

### **Research-Related Exchanges**

1. *Research Partnerships* Faculty could engage in research partnerships for development of case materials. Here it may be a team of research partners from Asian schools who, after jointly preparing background secondary and primary materials for case development, come together to collect the materials and write up the cases.
2. *Synchronized Projects* For multi-national cases (e.g., on the same company in different Asian countries) the research effort can be coordinated and facilitated through a regional ‘clearinghouse’ that could also assist in dealing with specific field research problems.
3. *Company Internships* These could be helpful, both for professional development of the faculty as well as for the development of ‘case-ettes.’ Faculty in a functional area could intern with an executive counterpart in a company to their mutual benefit. Such internships could be for short periods (a few weeks at a time) or distributed over a longer period of time. The short internships would also allow participating companies and their executives to be comfortable with the relationship, and longer partnerships can then be developed.

## **FACILITATING PROCESSES/SUPPORT**

What are some other substantive issues that we will have to address in exploring some of these, as well as other, initiatives? Mainly, these revolve around the facilitative processes that are developed. At least three types of facilitative supports are necessary: 1. Institutional; 2. Faculty; and 3. Financial.

### **Institutional**

1. *University* First, the university has to be committed at the higher levels to be supportive of the efforts of the Schools of Business. Here, collective efforts to draft joint declarations of effort by cooperating universities in the region, along with articulated directions, can be useful in underscoring the commitment of Schools of Business to central administration. Nevertheless, the University ought to be supportive of the flexibility that might be needed for engendering curriculum development and flexibility in faculty scheduling, leaves, etc. Schools of Businesses will have to be prepared for some disruption from the norm as curriculum and case experimentation is undertaken,



both in preparation and in use in the classroom. In addition, to make it successful, most of all we will have to commit ourselves to supporting faculty flexibility while still carrying out our business. More on flexibility later as we discuss it in a separate section. Perhaps the most important facilitative tool is the development of computer based electronic exchanges, and requires the commitment of the School of Business and of the university to introduce and promote greater use of these.

2. *Industry/Company Support* For the preparation of case materials, active company cooperation is necessary. We could work at different levels to seek such cooperation: at industry associations including Chambers of Commerce, trade groups; at the company level by approaching senior level functional executives, and by using individual faculty contacts. These efforts can be given additional legitimacy by a joint declaration of cooperating universities underscoring the significance of curriculum/case research being conducted by the member schools. For example, it can help to provide the additional 'stimulant' to say that similar case information collection procedures are being conducted at participating universities in other countries in the region.

### **Faculty Support**

1. *Encouragement* While the intrinsic value of curriculum-related research and preparation of teaching materials could be high, faculty should be motivated to experiment with the visible support and encouragement of the administration.

2. *Rewards/Incentives* Faculty members will have to be comfortable that initiatives they undertake that are curriculum/teaching related are valued in the same way as traditional contributions, such as journal/conference articles, presentations, etc. The effort cannot succeed without some clear declaration of support in this regard reflected in the compensation/reward system. In addition, non-monetary awards can be just as important: for example, consortium and individual recognition through plaques/awards to faculty who have engaged in such productive and enterprising efforts.

3. *Faculty Flexibility* A major issue is that of providing enough flexibility to accommodate faculty teaching-related and curriculum-related research exchanges. These can be facilitated by such things as reduced loads, part-time teaching, course scheduling and research leaves. Again, participating universities should be willing to accommodate such interchanges, sometimes with minimal lead times. An articulation of this 'upfront' by cooperating institutions will allow for the expeditious conduct of the activities discussed earlier. Participating institutions could collectively develop standardized application criteria for consortium faculty who intend to be involved in these activities.

**Financial Support** Last but not least is the issue of generating financial support for these activities. Thus, sources of financial support - public and private - need to be tapped.

1. *Public* Both governmental and non-governmental organizations need to be first identified and then approached. The collective inputs as to which groups may be potential sponsors could be used to develop appropriate lists. Each cooperating institution may be able to identify national governmental sources who might be willing to lend support, and then cooperating institutions could develop similar lists of international and regional agencies. Where appropriate, joint applications may be prepared for consideration by potential sponsors.

2. *Private* Traditionally, larger companies and multinational companies have been approached to provide some financial support for activities. Less explored avenues could also include looking for in-kind support from a variety of private organizations. Specifically, for instance, rather than asking for direct financial donations, companies could be approached for the contribution of services. We could approach airlines to provide travel for faculty on assignments during times when airlines have extra capacity, hotels when occupancy rates are lower, companies for the use of guest houses, etc. Again, the strength of such requests can be reinforced when it is by a number of different universities so that it can be pointed out to a potential sponsor how others in their business are lending assistance in other countries in the region.

These are just some preliminary thoughts that hopefully will lead to pragmatic and operational suggestions for implementation. The discussion in this framework is limited to a few specific issues in the development of curriculum, cases and some teaching and research material exchanges. Nor are these ideas necessarily new. In fact some of these suggestions are probably being implemented by many of our universities in the region. But where these are being undertaken, we are calling for greater dissemination of the results of such efforts and a greater level of cooperation in strengthening these efforts so that we can collectively provide a richer learning experience in business education that incorporates the uniqueness and the diversity of the Asian region.