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The Asia Business Case Centre

The Asia Business Case Centre (ABCC) serves many purposes for the business school at Nanyang Technological University. The ABCC is designed to be a one-stop electronic resource for writers and users of case studies focused on Asian business contexts. It aims to build a community of business researchers interested in these contexts, both those affiliated with Nanyang Business School (NBS) and with other schools around the world, and to provide an outlet for their scholarly productivity. The Centre supports students of the Nanyang Business School as well, providing case studies for their research and projects and supporting case competitions organized by student clubs. The ABCC also works to build understanding of national, economic, and cultural factors in Asia and how they affect the Asian and global business environments.

Auspicious Beginnings

According to Dr. Wee Beng Geok, Director of the ABCC and Associate Professor at the Division of Strategy, Management and Organisation, Nanyang Business School, strong administrative support for the ABCC’s mission has been an important factor in its success. When she first joined the school in 1999, (then) Dean Neo Boon Siong had proposed an initiative to promote case writing by the Nanyang Business School faculty. Dr. Wee felt that such an effort would work best if focused on Asian companies and environments, the aim being to expand what she saw as an extremely limited resource pool of teaching case studies focused on Asian business and management practices.

The ABCC was founded in 2000 with support from The Lee Foundation, a major Singaporean philanthropic organization,¹ which Dr. Wee describes as both generous and fortunate for the Centre and its mission, as generating funding is always one of the biggest challenges for research centers such as the ABCC. To encourage the use of case studies, she set up an e-catalog containing abstracts of Asian cases by major case publishers including Harvard Business School, the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario, Thunderbird School of Global Management, and Switzerland’s IMD (with due permissions), to promote access to cases among professors so that they could easily find what was available and incorporate them into their curricula. At the same time, the ABCC’s electronic portal www.asiacase.com was launched to stimulate interest in case writing among faculty and to house and promote the case studies published by the Centre. Dr. Wee says that having the ABCC do its own desktop publishing has been good for the Centre, particularly in terms of mitigating the costs associated with publishing activity.

In the same year, the ABCC also began a strategic collaboration with the Richard Ivey School, which was already known as a leading producer of case studies focused on the Asia-Pacific region, to “jointly write
case studies and encourage the use of case studies in Singapore and Asia. Over the next five years, faculty and research associates from NBS and the Ivey School worked together to produce numerous cases focused on Asia. According to Dr. Wee, Ivey School faculty also gave courses and workshops on writing and teaching with case studies to the NBS faculty involved with the ABCC, both as a way to develop capacity and to encourage such involvement. Additionally, as part of the collaborative agreement under the Lee Foundation sponsorship, the faculty of NBS, as well as those of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School and the Singapore Management University, were granted unlimited access for eight years to the Ivey School’s existing case resources, with ABCC managing the infrastructure to support their use.

Expanding the Field

Dr. Wee says that building faculty excitement about writing and teaching with cases takes time (in ABCC’s case about three years), but demonstrably pays enormous dividends. The ABCC now has a large number of faculty that regularly contribute, including approximately 40 from NBS itself, 11 from other academic units at Nanyang Technological University (e.g., engineering, communication, etc.), and some 18 others from universities around the world. Submitted cases, however, must naturally withstand the editorial process. After all, as Dr. Wee notes, maintaining high quality is vitally important for demonstrating the value proposition of the ABCC.

Under its web portal, ABCC also set up the “Asian Case Collection,” an e-journal, where case studies written by academic faculty regardless of their affiliation are published. Inspection copies of these cases are free for download. The ABCC’s e-catalog of cases and case abstracts focused on Asia has grown substantially over the years. In 2011, with increased faculty familiarity in regard to direct access to the major case publishers, the decision was taken to phase out the e-catalog and provide direct links to the major case websites.

In addition to contributors from the faculty, the ABCC employs five full-time staff members, including research associates, case writers, and a database/website manager. There are also a number of project-based employees, such as independent translators and editors, working on another important initiative of the ABCC designed to increase access to case study material in the Asian context, namely the work of translating the ABCC case collections into Chinese. According to Dr. Wee, the translation initiative is driven by NBS program directors. NBS has a significant number of Chinese-focused programs, including an EMBA program based in Shanghai and Beijing focused on developing Chinese managers, and having case materials available in Chinese is highly valuable for this program. Dr. Wee notes that though English remains the most common language in which scholarly material is published, the challenge of translation is not just a question of being bilingual. There are concepts and terms in English that must be understood,
and are not easily translated, into various Asian contexts, particularly the Chinese. The work of the translation initiative progresses slowly but steadily, she says, as more than 20 individual cases and at least two books of case studies have been successfully translated thus far.5

The Centre’s work also involves collaborations with various government and industry partners on case-study projects, for example the Design Singapore Council, the Maritime Port Authority (MPA) of Singapore, and the Singaporean Ministry of Manpower. Each such collaboration is designed to reach out to students and the wider community in an effort to contribute to the understanding of issues that pertain to these sectors and businesses. For example, Dr. Wee notes, Singapore has one of the busiest and most important seaports in the world, and yet the case literature on maritime and transshipment issues in the Singaporean context had been extremely spare. The MPA and ABCC collaboration created a series of cases that “expand understanding and scholarship of this important sector of Singapore’s economy.”6 ABCC’s work with the Ministry of Manpower resulted in a substantial report on strategic issues surrounding an aging workforce.7 Most recently, the ABCC published a book of best practice cases in the Asian hospitality industry in collaboration with the Cornell-Nanyang Institute of Hospitality Management.8

The ABCC undertakes a number of student support-oriented activities as well. For the past five years, the ABCC has been writing cases to be used in the finals of the annual International Asian Business Case Competition, organized by undergraduate students at NBS.9 She says that the competition has been very useful to help the students focus on practical applications of business research, particularly in light of the fact that the case-focused student club, Business Solutions, organizes and runs the competition itself. Additionally, the ABCC web portal hosts a Student Resources page, which includes cases written by student contributors and links to case study material for use in projects and research.

Looking Ahead

According to Dr. Wee, the ABCC’s biggest current project is developing a number of cases focused on the management of non-profit, philanthropic, charitable, and other social welfare organizations. As with cases previously developed for other sectors of the economy, it is expected that this new series will see strong use in NBS’ executive education programs, as well as seminars and workshops focused on management of the social welfare sector.

Dr. Wee says that the best thing that a research center such as the ABCC can do for itself and its stakeholders is to consistently look for such areas of perceived need, where case research can usefully contribute to greater understanding. There is still great need, she notes, for more cases set within the different contexts of Asia, as there is a great deal of variation both between and within national and cultural boundaries. It is therefore important to stay in touch with the needs of local communities, and
learn how best to add value to the knowledge pool, be it for businesses, academics, government regulators, or other institutions.

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End Notes