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CASE WRITING IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: AN INDONESIAN EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an English-language case-writing project in Indonesia that produced twelve business cases in twelve months. The account provides guidelines that may be useful for those wishing to write English-language cases in other developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate business education is big business. Around the world, MBA programs have blossomed [The Official Guide..., 1992]. Most of the top-quality programs use English as the language of instruction. The emerging economies of Southeast Asia have been especially fertile ground for management education. Hong Kong, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand all have MBA programs taught in English. Indonesia, the largest country in the region and the fourth largest in the world, is moving rapidly to develop graduate management programs.

THE MAGISTER MANAJEMEN PROGRAM

In 1989, the Ministry of Education authorized Magister Manajemen (Master of Management or MM) programs at Indonesia's two largest public universities--the University of Indonesia (UI) in Jakarta and at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta. These are really MBA programs by another name [Benang Kusut Sekolah MBA, 1993]. The UGM program is administered by the Dean of Graduate Studies, while the UI program is part of the Economics Faculty. Both use English as the language of instruction. New MM programs were subsequently authorized at major public universities in Bandung, Surabaya, and Bogor.

English In the MM Classroom

The case method of teaching is of great importance when teaching students using English as a second language. Not only do they derive experiential benefits, the case method is an important way for them to improve their language skills. They read cases in English, discuss them with their teammates in English, prepare case presentations in English, present the cases in English, then participate in a class discussion using English.

At first, the strategic management course at Gadjah Mada used cases from a five-year-old American text book. All of the cases dealt with American firms. From the first class session with the author, it was apparent that students lacked the requisite general knowledge and historical context to make the cases meaningful. Few had even heard of Sears Roebuck, K-Mart, or Firestone Rubber. The only American companies they recognized were multinationals like Caterpillar, Goodyear, or automobile companies that had a presence in Indonesia. In short, the students, even those with good English skills did not have the knowledge and experience assumed by American case writers.

Much of the case discussion was spent explaining social and political issues that would have been apparent to American students. Students got little benefit from what was supposed to be an experiential exercise designed for them to make strategic management recommendations based upon the case materials.

Lack of Case Materials

Because Indonesia's economy has only recently become market-based, there is no large body of case material written in Bahasa Indonesia, let alone English. Some of the private MBA institutes in Indonesia rely heavily upon English-language cases written by American writers to polish material gathered by local staff. But these cases are for internal use and not publicly available. Unfortunately, Indonesian graduate management programs tend to guard their case materials, using them as competitive tools to attract students.

CASE WRITING MEHODOLOGY

The Director of the Magister Manajemen Program at Gadjah Mada decided that the only way to obtain English-language cases dealing with Indonesian firms was to write them on-site. Accordingly, he established a case-writing project with the goal of producing 12 English-language cases in 12 months.

Selection of Subject Firms

The MM staff selected 20 firms as possible case projects. Of these, 14 were publicly traded companies to be approached as "cold calls." The remaining

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five were organizations with which the team had personal contact through MM faculty members or students.

Information Acquisition

The first effort to obtain information failed. Letters sent to the 20 public firms requesting copies of prospectuses and annual reports yielded not one response. As it happened, the Principal Director of the Jakarta Stock Exchange, Hasan Zein Mahmud, was coming to Yogyakarta to speak to the MM students. One-MM faculty member, a personal friend of Hasan, suggested that he might have copies of the annual reports on file at the Jakarta Stock Exchange. Hasan not only had copies, but brought a trunk-full of annual reports from Jakarta in his car.

Annual reports provided the basic information to get started on the cases. To flesh out the histories of the selected firms, two undergraduate assistants combed through periodical literature and newspapers. Their work was made much easier by the relative newness of the business press in Indonesia. They only had to go through three years of material and were able to assemble a substantial number of relevant articles.

The next source of information was the university library system. Gadjah Mada is the largest university in Indonesia and has extensive library facilities. One of the major assets of the library is its collection of student papers. It stores not only graduate theses and dissertations, but also undergraduate senior papers (called *skripsi!*). The research assistants were able to unearth some valuable industry information from these documents. The search was not without difficulties. Each college of the university maintains its own library. The researchers needed an authorization letter for each one before they were allowed entrance.

Approaching the Subject Firms

At this stage the public companies had no idea that they were the subject of the case writing effort. To finish the cases and obtain authorization for use, the case writer needed personal contact with top level executives from the subject firms.

After translation into English, information from the annual reports, periodical literature, and the library search provided enough information to complete a first draft case for 16 of the public firms. These drafts contained financial data, charts

and tables. Each case was sent to the appropriate CEO along with a letter explaining that the MM Program planned to use the case. The letter requested assistance in correcting errors and an interview with the CEO or his representative.

Sending the first draft to the CEO of each firm demonstrated determination to use the case and showed that considerable work had already been done. It turned out that in several instances information taken from journals and newspapers was incorrect--in some cases dead wrong. The CEOs were anxious to correct these errors.

Responses to the letters far exceeded our expectations. Only one firm refused to cooperate. Each CEO or his representative arranged at least two on-site interviews each of the public firms. Of the five firms with which MM had a personal link, CEOs agreed to interviews before writing the first draft thus avoiding many initial errors and false trails.

Finishing the Cases

The CEOs reviewed the final case drafts and signed authorizations. MM students tested six of the cases in the classroom before receiving final authorization. Of the 20 public firms selected, only seven cases were completed. One firm refused to cooperate, two were dropped because other institutions were writing cases on them, and time constraints eliminated the other four.

RESULTS

Although the selection process did not specify what types of problems should be addressed in the cases, the final twelve cases included a good mix of subjects. The completed cases included: two on international competition, one turn-around, one privatization, one entrepreneurship situation, one manufacturing problem, one centered on cultural differences between CEOs, one corporate governance problem, and two rapid growth situations. Two industry notes dealt with important Indonesian industries.

Use of these twelve cases in the MM classroom produced a marked improvement in student understanding. Case writing by UGM faculty members is now a continuous activity. The casebook itself is being used in many Indonesian graduate business programs.

A copy of the complete paper is available from the author upon request.