

## **Informing Patterns of Student Case Writing**

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### **Abstract**

During 2002-03, fifty-three undergraduate students from the University of Zagreb participated in the development of case studies on strategic decisions facing Croatian enterprises at a critical juncture in the country's history. This paper describes the informing patterns among students, faculty, and business executives that were formed during the case writing process and examines the impact of these informing patterns upon the educational experience of the participants and their subsequent careers.

The paper begins by describing the context in which a small group of Croatian students took the initiative to learn about the case method in the absence of formal university support. It then documents the process by which a workshop on the case method led to the search for companies willing to receive groups of undergraduate students conducting case research in the field, to the development of a case collection, the discussion of selected cases among leading Croatian executives, and to their use in international settings. The paper presents information on the influence and benefits of the experience as perceived by the participants ten years later and draws conclusions regarding the influence of student case research on management practice.

**Keywords:** Case Writing, Management Education, Croatia, Competitiveness, Pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

During the years 2002 and 2003, sixteen teams of undergraduate students in economics and management from a public university in Croatia participated in the development of teaching cases on decisions facing the managers of Croatian enterprises. This paper assesses that experience from the perspective of the informing patterns that were created among students, faculty, practitioners, and the international academic community in the ten years during and subsequent to the development of those cases. It also examines the impact of this case writing activity upon the educational experience of these students and their subsequent careers and draws conclusions regarding the influence of student case research on management education and practice.

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During the years 2002 and 2003, sixteen teams of undergraduate students in economics and management from a public university in Croatia participated in the development of teaching cases on decisions facing the managers of Croatian enterprises. This paper assesses that experience from the perspective of the informing patterns that were created among students, faculty, practitioners, and the international academic community in the ten years during and subsequent to the development of those cases. It also examines the impact of this case writing activity upon the educational experience of these students and their subsequent careers and draws conclusions regarding the influence of student case research on management education and practice.

The case writing project was a student-led initiative, occurring at a time when Croatia was still recovering from a brutal war of independence, changing to a market economy after decades of communist rule, and facing the prospect of

accession to the European Union. In this context, students of economics and management would have a crucial role to play in the future of Croatian society. Many former Yugoslav public enterprises were then under the administration of custodians with no formal management education and little experience competing in market economies. Recognizing this, CEO's of the twenty leading companies in Croatia formed a competitiveness committee and set as a top priority the improvement of management education in the universities. This initiative was supported by the Croatian Government, which expanded and transformed this private sector committee into a National Competitiveness Council (NCC) with participation by the government, the labor sector, and education & technology.

With the support of the NCC, the authors conducted case writing workshops and supervised field research from early 2002 through late 2003. This paper describes these activities, the case studies that were developed, and their subsequent use in Croatia and beyond. Though not by plan, most of the cases involve decisions to export Croatian products and services to Western Europe or to the East. The paper discusses the informing patterns that emerged from this research and their implications for student learning, for future research, and for the role of student case research in emerging societies.

For the preparation of this paper, we sent a brief survey to 34 of the 53 workshop participants whose addresses were previously obtained. Out of 34 surveys sent, 23 responses were received: 7 men and 16 women, mostly born and raised in or near the capital city of Zagreb. In this paper we report their perceptions of the value of the experience, the types of learning and professional benefits obtained, and the informing pathways created as a result. We recognize that the responses are not necessarily representative and that there may be some non-response bias, presenting threats to validity that might be overcome in future research.

A major conclusion is that student-led development of cases differs in a substantial way from the conventional role performed by students in case discussions. As case writers they play an active role, as teams, in seeking evidence to support their definition of the problem and their analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of alternative solutions. As participants in the classroom, they are confined to examining a situation in which all the information is provided.

This student case writing experience raises important questions for informing systems. First, what is the influence of student involvement in case research on student learning outcomes and career paths? If there is evidence that the influence is positive, how might student case writing initiatives be encouraged within the university setting?

Second, how does the discussion of these cases in diverse settings influence the continued informing relationships among students, faculty (in their roles as researchers, case supervisors, and instructors), case protagonists, and other practitioners? It is our hypothesis that learning may be enhanced for all participants, but that certain conditions must prevail for this learning to occur. In the final section of the paper we draw upon the evidence presented by the authors themselves, some ten years later, to answer these questions.

## **The Context**

Although the case method has been used for many decades at the Harvard Business School (Klobas, 2005, p. 329) and other centres of higher education in Europe, North America, and increasingly in emerging economies, this method was virtually unknown in Croatia in early 2002, when the case writing project had its beginnings. Croatia was still recovering from a hard-fought war of independence, with the scars of battle still unhealed. The newly independent country was also emerging from fifty-five years of communism, albeit of a soft variety where travel to the West was permitted. In this environment, many former Yugoslav institutions were slow to change, and the state university system was the least inclined to do so.

In this context, there were several forces driving change in the educational system. One major force was the desire of many Croatians to join the European Union, which would require greater business competitiveness and a modernization of national universities. The word *konkurentnost* (competitiveness) appeared ever more often in the local press. There was a growing discontent among Croatian business leaders with the way management was taught in the university system. Members of the newly-formed Business Competitiveness Committee, which included the country's top twenty CEO's, placed "improving management education" as a top priority for making the country more able to compete in international markets, especially in Western Europe. The legacy of communism had left Croatian universities with rigorous programs in mathematics and the natural sciences, but in the view of the Croatian CEO's, students graduated with little knowledge of managerial decision-making processes and without practical skills in the execution of business plans.

The second driving force was student discontent with the traditional lecture method used in the national universities. In the spring of 2002 one of the authors was approached by a pair of top university students, who had been selected to participate with him in "Croatian Futures," a scenario planning exercise, and was asked to speak to their class about the case method used at the Harvard Business School. "No one can lecture on the case method," was his response, "you have to experience it." The students persisted, so the co-author agreed to conduct a case workshop on the condition that the students find a member of the faculty who would be willing to organize and champion the activity. They thought for a moment and suggested the person who would become the second co-author of this paper.

## **The Case Workshops**

The first workshop was conducted by the authors at the Faculty of Economics, University of Zagreb, on the afternoon of June 27, 2002, with the objective of introducing students to the dynamics of case discussion. We began with a discussion of the classic "Dashman Company", case about a hapless purchasing vice-president unable to obtain cooperation from plant managers on new purchasing procedures in a decentralized company. "We have never seen anything like this," one of the students commented after class. "How can we learn to write cases?" asked another. The workshop ended with a commitment to hold a second workshop, this time on case writing.

Thus began the Croatian Case Writing Project, to develop cases on real business situations unfolding in the country. Previous experience documented by Leenders and Erskine (1989) had shown that participants in such workshops, in our case students, could expect two major benefits: the slope of the learning curve would be steeper, and his or her starting point would be further along on the curve. As an additional incentive, the best cases would be used in a "Competitive Business Forum," organized by the Croatian Competitiveness Council, which would bring together the country's top business leaders in the city of Opatija in June 2003. The longer-term objective was to develop a Croatian Case Collection and, eventually, to institutionalize the case method of learning in the University of Zagreb and elsewhere in Croatia.

The case writing workshop, held without University authorization on September 26-28, 2002, was attended by around sixty top undergraduate students, most of whom were in their third year of studies. Many of the participants also attended the seminar in June. The workshop was over-booked, although students were aware that the case writing would demand a substantial time commitment and that they would receive no academic credit for their efforts.

The three day workshop began with the discussion of a case on a Croatian manufacturer in the automotive electronic components industry, with three main objectives: first, to develop a common understanding of the case method, particularly for the first-time participants; second, to examine the teaching case as a learning vehicle; and third, to collectively generate a list of elements

that a good case should contain. The final list contained five key elements: (1) a decision to be made or problem to be solved, requiring management action; (2) a description of the case protagonists and key actors, to understand the objectives and motivation of the people involved in the situation; (3) information about the environment surrounding the company; (4) at least two viable alternative courses of action, though these may be left for the students to discover rather than being explicitly stated; and (5) enough information about each alternative to evaluate the consequences of pursuing it as opposed to pursuing other alternatives.

We then discussed how the learning objectives of a case are developed, using the local case on the manufacturer of automotive components as an example. Facing steep competition from Asian manufacturers, the manager was trying to decide whether to reorganize the work force in self-directed teams to increase productivity. The learning objective was that students develop the capability to identify and analyze the alternatives using both quantitative and qualitative data, but the workshop participants recognized that the case did not contain all the operational information needed to decide on a change in workforce organization. This exercise helped the students understand the importance of formulating the learning objectives from the outset and to developing the teaching note as the case is being written so that information essential for analyzing the alternatives is not omitted.

On the second day of the workshop we began with the discussion of case leads. Back issues of *MediaScan*, the English-language news summary service, were distributed and students were asked to identify case leads from the Business and Economy section. A list of some twenty leads was generated based on articles from *MediaScan* and the personal experience of the participants. Applying the five essential elements of an effective teaching case, the list was reduced to six leads: a shipbuilder seeking to justify government subsidies to the industry; a new technology park near the Hungarian border seeking investment by European firms; a wood furniture producer in a war-torn area faced with a decision on a new line of products; a multinational food company trying to decide whether to produce a private-label brand for a major Slovenian retail chain; an association of hotels attempting to implement a “certificate of authentic tourism” based on the Costa Rican certificate of sustainability; and a supplier of nuclear reactor technology seeking new markets in Western Europe. Though highly diverse, all case leads involved Croatian companies or industry associations facing strategic decisions that could have an impact on the country’s future.

During the final day of the workshop, students organized into teams of three to five volunteers to write the six cases. Each of the teams spent the rest of the day developing a “case preview” that included a first draft of the opening paragraph, a detailed outline, and the formats for tables and graphs (known as exhibits) that should accompany the case (Leenders & Erskine, 1989). The six student teams then left for the field, and four of the teams produced first drafts by the end of December 2002. The technology park project was not advanced to the point at which a case could be written and the supplier of nuclear reactor technology was unwilling to supply the needed information—two common reasons why most cases are abandoned in the early stages of research. Based on our feedback, final versions of the remaining four cases were completed in early April 2003 and discussed over a videoconference between Croatia and Costa Rica (where one of the co-authors was based) later that month. But even before this first round of cases was completed, students unable to participate in the first iteration were clamoring for a second round, which by 2004 included another ten case leads, nine of which were completed, for a total of thirteen, all of which were authorized by the companies and thus prepared for use in the classroom. These cases are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. List of Croatian Cases and Issues Addressed**

Company	Sector	Issue or Decision
Uljanik Shipyards	Shipbuilding	Whether to diversify into ship maintenance services
Spin Valis	Wood furniture	Whether to introduce a new line of mass-produced furniture
Podravka	Processed foods	Whether to manufacture private label products for Mercator
Certificate of Sustainable Tourism	Hotels	How to promote this certificate as the standard for the hotel industry
Cedevita	Beverages	Whether to export to Western Europe or to markets in the East
Lura	Dairy products	Whether to purchase a bakery
VipParking	Telecommunications	Whether to market this product in Austria or Hungary
SMS: the China Decision	Specialty foods	Whether and how to enter the Chinese market
Duga	Organic strawberries	Whether to expand into other organic vegetables
HTMobile	Telecommunications	Whether to invest in a license for 3G technology
Jamnica Spring Water	Diversified agribus.	Which underground source to use for a new line of spring water
Briefing d.o.o.	Press digest services	Which options to pursue for growth of a small family business
Pliva	Pharmaceuticals	What course to pursue in the face of an expiring patent

The second-round cases, like the first, were focused on Croatian companies facing strategic decisions regarding growth. These companies were mostly in the food sector, from large agribusiness companies to boutique producers of organic strawberries or specialty products from the Adriatic coast. Two of the cases were in the telecom sector, which at the time experienced a period of exponential growth in the Croatian mobile phone market. “Excuse me, I need to put more money in the parking meter,” begins one of the cases. But rather than leaving the building, the person simply punched some digits on her cell phone and the meeting resumed. In 2002, when this incident took place, such technology was uncommon even in the developed markets of North America and Western Europe.

## The Competitive Business Forum

Since the original motivation of the student case writers was the introduction of the case method in the University, it was important for the product of their efforts to be classroom-tested, and what better forum for this testing than discussion among top Croatian executives, followed with comments by the case protagonists. While not a typical class, the participants were more knowledgeable and demanding than the typical university student. The Croatian Business Forum (CBF), briefly referred to above, was an initiative of twenty top Croatian CEO’s who had formed the original competitiveness committee, later transformed into a National Council. The CBF was founded on the premise that the discussion of cases on relevant issues, even if from other parts of

the world, could lead to consensus on national priorities among leaders from various segments of society. Such an approach to addressing national priorities and achieving societal change had been used previously in South Africa and Guatemala with varying degrees of success (Kahane, 2010). The first CBF, attended by CEO's of the top fifty Croatian enterprises, was held in the Adriatic village of Umag in June 2002. In a typical case discussion, EMBRAER, the Brazilian leader of regional jets, had to decide whether to launch a new generation of mid-size aircraft. Issues of international competitiveness and government protection soon drifted from the airline to the shipbuilding industry and to the current situation in Croatia.

The organizers of the second CBF decided to extend invitations to the government and labor sectors. They also agreed that two of the cases to be discussed would be selected from among those developed by the student teams, giving priority to situations involving the penetration of EU markets and the reactivation of basic manufacturing industries in war-affected areas. The wood furniture company, Spin Valis, met both criteria (a brief case summary appears in Box 1).

### **Box 1. The Spin Valis Case**

Since its founding in the eastern Croatian village of Požega in 1948, Spin Valis had specialized in heavy sitting furniture crafted from the precious Slavonian oak trees native to the region. In 1991, shortly following Croatian independence from Yugoslavia and in the midst of war, it went into bankruptcy and a new company was formed with capital from Exportdrvo, a major Croatian exporter of wood furniture and Požeška Banka, a local bank. The new CEO, Zeljko Čerti, re-hired 70 of the best workers from the old firm, tightened work norms, and cut wages, increasing productivity rapidly in all departments. However, European tastes in furniture were changing, and consumers in the company's major markets were no longer attracted by the heavy, massive designs that characterized the company's products. Moreover, availability of Slavonian oak would become more difficult with the stringent enforcement of EU environmental standards, as Croatia prepared for accession to the European Union. At a trade fair, Mr. Čerti became acquainted with computer-controlled machinery for the mass production of simple wood tables and chairs, for which there was a growing demand among young professional couples in Western Europe. He also knew that other varieties of wood, such as beech and pine, were in much greater supply than Slavonian oak. Should Spin Valis broaden its product line to include mass-produced beech chairs and tables, or seek new markets for its traditional products?

A seasoned manager accustomed to dealing with bare-fisted union leaders, the Spin Valis CEO, Zeljko Čerti, was initially skeptical of the four young women students who came to write a case study on the company's decision, and they were terrified during their first interview with him. But their persistence and diligent preparation gradually prevailed, and it was evident that they had won him over when we visited Mr. Čerti on Friday, June 6, 2003, in preparation for the Competitive Business Forum. He greeted the students warmly, even respectfully, and it was immediately evident to us as observers that all had learned from the experience. No longer timid and uncertain, the students presented their analysis of the case with firmness and conviction.

The other case selected for use in the CBF was Podravka, a well-known multinational Croatian food company which faced growing competition in Central Europe and increasingly difficult negotiations with large retail chains (see "The Podravka Case," Box 2).

**Box 2. The Podravka Case**

Podravka was founded in 1934 by two brothers, and it started business as a small distributor of processed vegetables in the city of Koprivnica, Croatia. After World War II, the company became property of the State of Yugoslavia. The company gradually broadened its product line to include soups, sweet jams, sauces, baby foods, and Vegeta, a universal seasoning that was an instant success throughout Central Europe. In 1993, two years after Croatia's declaration of independence, Podravka went public, and in the following years, the company invested in the construction of several new production facilities, including a plant in Poland for the elaboration of powdered products, soups, and Vegeta.

In 2002 Darko Marinac, Podravka's president, had to decide whether to accept the offer from Mercator, the dominant Slovenian retail chain, to produce its popular Lino brand of baby food under the Mercator private label. This was contrary to company policy, designed to foster the company's own brands, but Podravka was suffering from overcapacity and the opportunity to increase its small share of market in Slovenia, even with the slim margins given to private label producers, was tempting.

The second CBF was inaugurated by the President of Croatia's National Competitiveness Council on the evening of June 6<sup>th</sup> in the Istrian city of Opatija. All but four of the fifty top Croatian CEOs who had registered for the event were present, along with the authors of the cases. The following morning, the discussion of the Podravka case was launched by Werner Ketelhöhn, an experienced case instructor with joint appointments at IMD (Switzerland) and INCAE (Costa Rica). "Why should Mr. Marinac even consider Mercator's offer?" he asked provocatively. Most of the executives participating had initially opposed private label manufacture, but as the list on the blackboard of competitive forces favouring negotiation with Mercator grew longer, some changed their minds. After a heated debate in which there was no clear consensus, the instructor shifted the focus of the discussion to Podravka's product line, which ranged from high-margin specialty products to low-margin, high volume items such as pickled vegetables. Perhaps Marinac could offer some of these products to Mercator, possibly in exchange for allowing Podravka to place Lino baby food on its shelves. Though not every executive present agreed with this solution, all participants had gained insights into the causes of the changing competitive forces in the Central European food industry.

That same afternoon, after meetings of small discussion groups, INCAE professor Roberto Artavia led the Croatian executives in a discussion of the Spin Valis case. At the outset, there was broad agreement that Mr. Čerti should invest in the equipment needed to mass-produce tables and chairs, given changes in Western European demographics and design preferences. Then the discussion began: what is the company good at? Artisanry. What is its competitive advantage? Privileged access to Slavonian oak. What are the human skills and organizational capabilities required to produce quality sitting furniture? How transferable are these skills and capabilities to mass production? This line of questioning led to the conclusion that it would be unrealistic for a company like Spin Valis to compete with the low-cost producers to the East. "So, we can produce great furniture with no market?" Perhaps not in Western Europe, but purchasing power among higher income segments of the Hungarian and Russian markets was fast rising and the new rich in those countries were thought to favor opulence rather than functionality.

As in the Podravka discussion, there was no consensus around a single solution to the situation facing Spin Valis. But what was very clear were the underlying concepts of strategy, structure, process, and people. To implement the mass production strategy in Spin Valis would require not simply the introduction of technology but a fundamental change in company culture, from one that placed value on skilled craftsmanship to one that rewarded precision and productivity.

## Informing Patterns

Though none of the students who participated in the case writing initiative ever received academic credit for their efforts, the Spin Valis case was nominated and chosen to receive the Rector's Award for student research, the highest honor given to undergraduate students at the University of Zagreb.

Several other cases were used among students and professionals in Croatia. Vip-Parking, on the decision to export digital technology for remote replenishment of parking meters, was used among the professors of Zagreb School of Economics and Management, one of a growing number of private business schools, to increase discussion leadership skills among faculty. A second generation case, SMS ("Sun, Sea and Salt" in Croatian) was used among executive MBA students at the recently-opened private Cotrugli Business School that was about to enter the Serbian market. The case described the successful efforts of a Croatian entrepreneur to produce and export Adriatic specialty foods to a dozen countries and his ambitions to enter the Chinese market. Most of the EMBA students were convinced by the class discussion that it would be a mistake to introduce these products in China and argued in favor of other export opportunities.

Some of the cases were presented and used outside Croatia. The SMS case was used as the final exam in the Entrepreneurship course for full-time MBA's at the INCAE Business School. The Uljanik Shipyards case was used in an in-company EMBA for the Panama Canal Authority (ACP) at a time that it was considering a \$6 billion expansion. The discussion of the case among ACP executives was important to their understanding of the opportunities and threats in the global shipping industry, and how these might affect the mega-investment decision.

## A Decade On: Reflections

In October 2012, ten years after the case writing initiative had begun, the authors contacted 34 of the 53 members of the case writing teams from whom they had current addresses. We wanted them to reflect upon the experience and its significance in their education as managers. We wanted to know which among various capabilities and skills the experience most contributed to; and finally, in what ways if any had it influence their careers (the survey instrument is shown in the Appendix).

Twenty-three of the 34 responded, including at least one member of ten of the thirteen case writing teams. Of the 23, 15 felt that the experience was of "very significant value" as a part of their educational experience at the University of Zagreb; 7 responded that it had been of "significant value." Anisija Grubic, a case writer on the VIP-parking team, commented that "...it gave me a whole new perspective about the way of observing situations one can encounter in a business environment and the ways of solving them. During the process I built certain skills that even today are shown to be very useful. All in all, the case writing project was a priceless experience." Similarly, Admir Đozović reported that "I remember the Pliva case writing project and case workshop as though it were yesterday. This was my contact with the business world... Instead of just learning about theoretical frameworks and management principles, this workshop as well as the case study process offered me a great experience and chance to see how big companies are approaching their daily and strategic problems. Writing a business case study offered me chance to meet the executives responsible for different areas of the business while receiving direct feedback on our work." Ana Romac, member of the award-winning Spin Valis team, summed it up as follows: "There is a great difference between listening and reading international cases during our classes, and participating in creating a one."

The greatest benefit perceived by the case writers a decade later, as may be seen from Table 2, was the opportunity to work as a team, which nearly 80% rated as either first or second. Ivan Kepcija, a member of the team that wrote the Uljanik Shipyards case, commented that "...I run a



youth soccer club in California. You can't learn about teamwork, group processes, personality management, and network development from books, it has to be accompanied by hands-on experience." Furthermore, one of the members of the Duga case writing team reported that "Participation in a case writing project is a very valuable experience because of the opportunity to work in a team and to develop team interaction skills. Working in a team enables communication with team members, negotiation, decision making, problem solving, which is very good preparation for working effectively in the workplace."

**Table 2. Benefits of the Case Writing Experience**

	#1	#2	#1+2	#1	#2	#1+2
Working as a team	11	7	18	47,8%	30,4%	78,3%
Building analytic skills	6	5	11	26,1%	21,7%	47,8%
Interacting with company executives	4	3	7	17,4%	13,0%	30,4%
Learning about the industry	1	7	8	4,3%	30,4%	34,8%
Other (*) networking	1	1	2	4,3%	4,3%	8,7%

Building analytic skills, including environmental scanning, was considered to be the first or second most important benefit for nearly half the case writers. Zoran Wittine, another member of the Uljanik case writing team, commented that "...the case writing project on Uljanik has helped me to better understand the strong interdependence between the economic and political environment, since politics has always played a significant role in the Croatian shipbuilding industry." These skills were often related to their later careers. According to Tea Duplančić of the VIP-parking team, "the experience was beneficial in terms of working on a real case where we could bring together theory about business models in practice, to deepen the understanding of how things are working in real life. I liked the fact that working on a case was like working on a project, so at the same time, learning about the case study methodology I got understanding about project management, that helped me at my current job." Lahorka Habunek, who was a member of the HTmobile case team, commented that "...learning how to analyze a certain market situation and present it in a paper without disclosing what actually happened was quite a challenge. It requires looking at things from other perspectives, and I find this a valuable experience which is very useful in my work today."

Interactions with company executives were seen as the first or second most important benefit by seven of the 23 responding case writers. As Goran Vorkapić of the SMS team remarked, "for many of us that was first contact with real projects and firms." Zoran Wittine commented that "it changed my attitude regarding top executives in a positive way – they proved to be willing to help and postpone meetings because of students they have never met before, without asking anything in return."

The case writing experience influenced the careers of many of who participated. Dijana Maglov, a member of the Cedevita case writing team, is now working in beverage marketing for Nestlé. "It is the same Fast Moving Consumer Goods business so it is normal to communicate with Atlantic (the holding company for Cedevita) and of course the beverage part of it," she commented. "It was a very much appreciated experience for me. I always mention it in discussions on what are the most valued parts of my education when talking to other former EFZG students. This was my first team case in FMCG and in some way it made my future career path."

The informing pathways with company executives sometimes opened opportunities for career development. Marina Cvirn, a member of the Lura case writing team and now a human resources management professional, reported that

I communicated a couple of years afterwards with the former CEO regarding my career path and his interest in mentoring me in the direction I wanted in terms of my personal and professional development. He also endorsed me with the recommendation letter which for sure supported my career at that time, all based on our cooperation in this project. I managed to get a good network which supported my advancement in the HR field and which I still have today. His advice at the beginning of my professional life have made me more determined in which direction I would like to go and gave me an additional boost in sticking to my dreams and fighting for them.

...the project made me realize my potential and competencies I had at the time, and pointed out areas I should develop in order to gain knowledge and skills I was missing for a career in HR which was really appealing to me at that time. It also taught me that each opportunity you get in life should be used for personal learning and advancement which any project during [university] studies rarely gives.

Not all the subsequent interactions between case writers and company executives led to such positive results, however. After having received the Rector's Award and having been invited to observe the discussion of their case in the Competitive Business Forum, the case writers lost contact with Spin Valis. While case writer Maja Sakac described it as an "amazing and inspiring lifelong experience," Ana Romac, another member of the team, said that "the only thing I regret, that after participating in the Business Forum, and being convinced (what for us then sounded like a miracle) that companies would continue to work with us, or invite us to do our practice there and even apply for a job, this never happened." Ivona Grgan of the HTmobile team also commented that "it is a pity we didn't have more contact with the company later on."

Some case writers were able to find opportunities in other companies in the same industry or in related fields. Lahorka Habunek, the HTmobile team member who benefited from analyzing a market situation, reported that since 2008 she was working for VIPnet, the second largest mobile operator in Croatia and as an expert in the marketing department she often attended conferences in the Telco sector, "where is inevitable to interact with employees from other Telco companies." Igor Zgrabljic, a member of the team that wrote the case on the "Certificate of Authentic Tourism" commented that "...I am not directly working in the tourism industry but many of the key players in the sector are my clients. I am currently running two companies, one which is focused on certification (ISO, FSC, and CE marking)..."

## Discussion: The Informing Flows

The pattern of informing flows among faculty, students, and practice may be seen in Table 3. The student case writing experience revealed a progression of these informing flows, however, that are not fully captured in this table. The workshops began with a one-way flow from faculty to students that quickly evolved into a reciprocal flow between the two, then expanded to include student-to-student flows as the discussions broadened. Practitioners were not involved in this stage.

**Table 3. Examples of Information Flows in Student Case writing**

	<b>To: Faculty</b>	<b>To Students</b>	<b>To: Practice</b>
<b>From: Faculty</b>	Sharing knowledge through joint teaching in workshops Cooperation in the supervision of cases Joint publication of casebooks	Facilitated discussions in case workshops Assistance in the selection of case projects Feedback on drafts of cases	Cases used for executive MBA programs in Croatia and abroad Case development process Discussion of the cases by business experts
<b>From: Students</b>	Facilitated discussions Case evaluations Learning outcomes instruments	Teamwork Sharing of knowledge Peer feedback	Questioning, probing Insights on company problems as seen by impartial observers
<b>From: Practice</b>	Interaction during the case development process Contributions by business experts in case discussions	Revealing of information for the development of cases Career development opportunities Networking	Exchange of information and perspectives in group meetings Contributions to debate and learning in case discussions

Once the case research began, student teams typically engaged in mutual informing among members, with sporadic exchanges with faculty supervisors. In this second stage, a key event was the initial interview with the company representative, typically the CEO in a smaller company like Spin Valis or SMS, or with a department head in a larger company, such as a telecom. In both situations these informing flows were from practice to student. As the research progressed and students gained knowledge of the industry and the company, there was greater reciprocity. Student team members began to probe, asking multiple “why’s”. This could be seen particularly in the Spin Valis decision to mass produce wood chairs and tables, and in the SMS decision to export to China.

As the cases neared completion, the informing flows between faculty and students once again intensified. Once the cases were presented in the Competitive Business Forum, the informing flows shifted to faculty and practice, with students as listeners. The case protagonists maintained a passive role throughout the case discussion, with faculty leading exchanges among the executives participating. Toward the end of each session, the protagonist was asked to comment upon the discussion, respond to questions from participants, and provide an update of the situation. In this stage, the informing flows centered among protagonists and other practitioners. This effect may diminish when the protagonists no longer participate, but their continued involvement as invited guests is a lasting benefit of student-led case writing.

The long-term impact of these informing flows, however, seems to have been greatest upon the former students in their role as practitioners. The student-to-student teamwork experience was seen, after ten years’ reflection, as vital in developing the communications skills needed to interact with the case protagonists and, after graduation, to succeed in the business world.

## Conclusions

The student case writing project has produced a significant change in the informing patterns among the faculty, students, and practitioners who participated. This change originated with forces favouring the case method, including pressure from the most demanding university students for a shift from ex-cathedra lectures towards the case method, and demands by business leaders in the National Competitiveness Council for university graduates able to deal with real-world problems. In contrast to ex cathedra lectures, which are limited to one-way informing flows from faculty to students, the case method is characterized by multiple informing patterns between faculty and students and among the students themselves. As cases are typically used, however, neither the case protagonists nor practitioners in general participate in the informing system.

Student-led case writing further broadens the informing flows to include case protagonists and practitioners in a way that empowers, building self-confidence and team skills. Though they may attend the first meetings as humble and passive observers, the need to obtain information to complete the case study motivates them to assume an increasingly proactive role. At the same time, the managers begin to appreciate the value of dialogue with a team of bright students who are able to view their company with objectivity.

There is yet another informing pathway that we did not appreciate until resuming contact with the case writers ten years later. As their careers have progressed, they have maintained channels of informing among former team members and, in a few cases, with the executives of companies that were the object of their research.

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## Additional Resources

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## Appendix: Survey Instrument

Dear xxx,

Ten years ago you participated in a case writing Project with Prof. Omazić and me and, as a result, you and other classmates developed a case on Uljanik Shipyards. We are now writing an article on the results of that experience, and we would appreciate it very much if you could take a few minutes to respond to a couple of questions:

1. How would you evaluate the case writing project as a part of your educational experience at the EFZG? (Please place an “x” after the most accurate response)
  - a. Of very significant value
  - b. Of significant value
  - c. Of some value
  - d. Of little value
  - e. Of no value
  
2. How would you rank the following benefits of the experience, from 1 (most benefits) to 5 (least benefits)? (Place a number from 1 to 5 after each. Please do not repeat the number.)
  - a. Working as a team
  - b. Building analytic skills
  - c. Interacting with company executives
  - d. Learning about the industry
  - e. Other (please specify)
  
3. Have you had any contact with the company or its executives after the case writing project? If yes, please describe briefly the circumstances.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
4. Please provide any further comments regarding the experience.

All individual responses will be kept confidential unless you authorize us to quote you by name in the article.

## Biographies



**John C. Ickis, D.B.A.**, is Dean of the Faculty at INCAE Business School with campuses in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. He earned his masters and doctoral degrees from the Harvard Business School, where he was subsequently a Visiting International Scholar, a member of the research faculty, and instructor in the first Colloquium for Participant-Centered Learning (CPCL I). He has conducted workshops on the case method throughout Latin America and in the U.S., Central Europe, and Asia.

His area of teaching and research is in the implementation of strategy in private, public, and non-profit organizations.



**Mislav Ante Omazić, PhD** (born in 1971 in Zagreb) is Associate Professor of Management and Organization at the Faculty of Economics, University of Zagreb, in Zagreb, Croatia. In 1998 he started to work at the Faculty of Economics and Business Zagreb as Teaching Assistant in the department of Organization and Management, and today is an Associate Professor, teaches variety of classes like Corporate Social Responsibility, Business Ethics, Management, Project Management and Change Management. He worked on various projects with United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, IFC, COOP, Toyota, Novartis, IBM and many others. Currently he's working on Corporate Social Responsibility Index in Croatia and fostering creativity under Creative Dimensions inspired by Toyota project.