

# IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH CASE STUDY COMPETITIONS: CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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# IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH CASE STUDY COMPETITIONS: CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

## ABSTRACT

The main aim of this research paper is to identify the different perspectives of students and teachers from two SEE countries on the case learning method in local case study competitions. This research investigates the benefits and challenges of participating in case study competitions for students and mentors. Previous research is extended to include the teachers' perspectives. Qualitative research has been conducted in Serbia and Croatia to obtain a better insight into the perspectives of all parties involved. Students are found to have difficulties with time management and identifying financial and sales implications of marketing strategies. Mentors, on the other hand, emphasize that students have difficulties with negotiation skills and identifying financial and sales implications of the marketing strategy recommended.

Recommendations on how to improve learning through case study competitions are made. They should serve as guidelines for both teachers and students to help them to improve the learning process using marketing case studies.

**Keywords:** Case-based learning, local case study competition, marketing case study, Croatia, Serbia

## 1. Introduction

According to a South Eastern European (hereinafter, SEE) research study, the main mission of a higher education institution (hereinafter, HEI) is to help students develop their capability to think, create new ideas, and develop analytical and problem-solving skills (Jelenc, 2011). Teacher educators have

discovered that the case study method provides a valuable link to the "real world" (Sudzina, Kilbane, 1994), making it necessary to improve the teaching style by relating theory to practice and to provide support to students in the case-based learning process. Harvard Business School case study strategy aims to condition students to become future man-

agers through the acquisition of functional, conceptual, interpersonal, and leadership skills (Burke et al., 2013). To develop top talent students, every HEI needs to find answers to the crucial questions of how excellent teachers are developed (Pinsky, Irby, 1998) and what type of interactive teaching method teachers should follow to improve instruction and student learning.

Erskine et al. (1998) define case studies as “a description of a real event, which includes a decision, challenge, opportunity, problem or attitude with which a person or people in an organization are faced”. The results in Yadav et al. (2007) study provide evidence that, overall, faculty perceive case studies as having a positive impact on enhancing student learning, developing critical thinking, and boosting participation. Moreover, faculty report that one of the main issues in case study teaching is the shortage of preparation time for case studies, the need to develop adequate assessment tools for case-based learning, and deficiency of relevant case studies. Similar research (Damnjanović, 2011) found that benefits included the connection of theory to practice, encouraging creativity of students and teachers, and the development of presentation and communication skills. The major challenges were identified as: work in large groups is more difficult; students and teachers do not have enough knowledge to discuss the problem; students do not have enough arguments to explain a solution; and evaluation and grading of students as individuals is difficult. We took into consideration these findings when we conducted qualitative research.

There are two main areas for using the case study method in higher education: in the classroom and through case competitions. The classroom needs to include active and interactive learning as the basis for developing an understanding of core disciplinary concepts, and these underpin academic success with strong implications for student retention (Crosling et al., 2009). Active learning is often associated with experiential, problem-based and project-based learning, and other forms of collaborative learning, and relies less on ex-cathedra lectures and large classes. Furthermore, active learning promotes collaboration among students in solving realistic problems or situations for the purpose of learning and helps them develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between theory and practice.

Considering Jelenc's (2011) comparison study of using case methodology in the classroom in the West (USA) and East (Croatia), it is crucial to point out that the role of the student in the West is to become a partner with the professor, while in the East the student has a subordinate role. Another important difference is that students in Western countries are more stimulated to prepare themselves for class and are motivated to actively participate. Furthermore, in the East, students are usually not familiar with the materials used in the classroom and are less interested in learning. The main constraining factors affecting students in Serbia, as an eastern representative, with regard to the case method used in the classroom are as follows: (Damnjanović, 2011) focusing only on the body of knowledge covered by the exam, lack of time to learn more, and demotivation for active learning.

Students develop different skills essential for their future career (Burke et al., 2013) when they are involved in the case study learning process. These skills are related to active learning method, upon which case study is built. So, analytical, decision-making, time-management, oral and written communication, creative, interpersonal and social skills are developed during case study training period (Apaydin, 2006). Skills developed through the case study process are necessary for business success. Furthermore, authors point out that negotiation skills (Black, 2009, cited in Chebet et al., 2015), time-management skills (Sevari, Kandy, 2015) and interpersonal skills (Lovett, Jones, 2008) are the ones that help managers prosper in business. Therefore, developing these skills through case study adds value to students' future business careers.

Application of active case-based learning in case competitions is perceived as an opportunity for undergraduate students to apply concepts to “real-world” business problems (Bale et al., 2013). Furthermore, this paper presents an example of how case-based learning was used to identify benefits and challenges facing students and teachers participating in local case competitions. According to Damnjanović and Dlačić (2015), it is evident that skills that students developed the most through case study competitions are teamwork skills, problem-solving, analytical and argumentation skills, as well as market research skills. This approach could help business schools in strengthening their position and increasing their recognition among target

audiences on the local, regional, and global level. For universities, this implies closer cooperation of teaching staff with companies as sources of case studies for competitions, as well as greater opportunities for students in terms of their future careers. As in the literature there is not enough information for teachers on selecting and preparing students for case study competitions, the main objective of the paper is to provide them with guidelines.

The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, a theoretical framework is provided focusing on case-based learning with case competitions. This is followed by the methodology section providing background information on qualitative research, and the findings and discussion sections which focus on two perspectives, the students' and the teachers'. At the end of the paper, practical implications for teachers aiming to apply case study as a learning method are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Case study competitions involve student teams engaging with real-life scenarios and presenting their proposed solutions to a panel of judges who are considered experts in the area represented in the case study (Burke et al., 2013). Case study competitions enable students to deal with the challenge of delivering results under pressure, given a real-world business problem. "Case competitions are considered important in developing a real-life format to solve organizational or managerial problems in an intense competitive environment" (Sachau, Nass, 2010). The case study competition encourages students' innovative recommendations that are feasible and sustainable, and the application of wide-ranging skill sets. Case study competitions are intense, problem-based educational experiences that encourage students to adopt macro-level perspectives instead of focusing on individual components. Reflections of past participants suggest that a case study competition is a more memorable university experience than are obligatory prerequisites for career qualifications (Ali et al., 2011). According to Corner et al. (2006), a case study competition reflects the four elements of a grounded learning exercise. These elements include creating a real-world experience, optimizing learning transfer, integrating theory and practice, and shifting learning responsibility to the students. Grounded learning

actively engages the student in "learning by doing" and can be seen as unfolding from a postmodern pedagogy.

Moreover, some authors point out that several business skills are essential for a successful business career. The skills that are critical for success include negotiation skills (Chebet et al., 2015), social/interpersonal skills (Lovett, Jones, 2008), time-management skills (Sevari, Kandy, 2015) as well as leadership skills (Johnson, Nandy, 2015). D'Amato and Herzfeldt (2008) point out that learning and managerial skills across generations need to be better understood in order to develop effective strategies for the selection, development and retention of talent in all generations. They also point out that younger generation prefer to stay longer in one organization to changing their job frequently to develop their skills. This implies that business skills can be trained and developed. One of the possibilities for developing these skills is through the case study (Jelenc, 2011) which reaffirms the need to incorporate them in HEI curricula.

This paper investigates Local Marketing Case Competition, a semester case competition in which teams of undergraduate students respond to the request of company representatives. The Local Marketing Case Competition takes place in Rijeka and Belgrade twice annually. The competition requires each team to analyse and present a case study solution in Power Point in front of a panel consisting of people from the industry (top management level and consultants). In the process of case study analysis and presentation, student teams are given a case or cases they have not seen before and are sequestered for a limited number of hours. The panel evaluates the content, presentation skills, and the question-and-answer session performance (Damnjanović et al., 2016). In each case study competition, the top three winning teams are selected.

Case-based learning in case study competitions was the starting point for our analysis. In previous research, students participating in case study competitions were asked to evaluate the benefits and challenges of case study analysis. The elements that were explored are based on methodology developed by Novčić et al. (2010) and Damnjanović (2012). 64 students from both countries - Croatia and Serbia, exhibited similarities in their perceptions. The perceived benefits and challenges are presented in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

**Table 1 Benefits of case study competitions – students’ perception of learning improvements**

	Average grade	Std. deviation
<b>MANAGERIAL SKILLS</b>		
Problem solving and analytical skills are developed	4.67	0.543
Argumentation skills are developed	4.64	0.552
Teamwork skills are developed	4.60	0.560
Presentation skills are developed	4.59	0.622
Time management skills are developed	4.36	0.831
Negotiation skills are developed	4.24	0.779
<b>ACTIVE LEARNING</b>		
Learning is more fun and more applicable than focusing solely on theory	4.53	0.731
Theoretical and practical perspectives are combined	4.50	0.800
Students can apply new skills and knowledge	4.48	0.778
Students learn from each other	4.45	0.753
<b>EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS</b>		
More attractive on the job market	3.74	1.178

Source: Damnjanović and Dlačić (2015)

**Table 2 Challenges of case study competitions – students’ perception of learning improvements**

	Average grade	Std. deviation
<b>LEARNING OUTCOME</b>		
Identifying financial effects of the proposed marketing strategy	4.13	0.963
Case study doesn’t have just one result	3.05	1.659
<b>ASSESSMENT CRITERIA</b>		
It is hard to evaluate individual contribution in teamwork	2.66	1.505
Some interpersonal issues occurred in teamwork	2.62	1.485
<b>CASE STUDY</b>		
Case study was not adequately written – lacking data, tables and pictures	2.64	1.195
Case study topic was uninteresting	2.21	1.253
Case study was not adequately presented	2.12	1.077
Case study materials were too long	1.98	1.116
<b>LACK OF TIME FOR PREPARATION</b>		
Case study was not adapted to students’ level of knowledge	1.91	1.144
Lecturers are not adequately prepared for coaching students	1.90	1.294

Source: Damnjanović and Dlačić (2015)

There are many important roles for teachers participating in local case study competitions. They need to select students, create student teams, and coach and motivate them in the preparation process (Damnjanović, 2011). “Coaching techniques encouraged the teachers to cooperate, to compete, to develop individual areas of expertise, and to access computers, reference, and faculty resources in solv-

ing case dilemmas”, according to Sudzina (1994). The main differences between teaching with case studies in a classroom and in a competition is that the teacher as a mentor to students participating in case study competitions has to select a number of excellent students, collaborate more closely with them, and stimulate them to improve their individual and team performance. Teachers need to devote

their time and find resources to prepare students to perform well in case study competitions.

Hence, the proposed research questions (RQs) can be framed as follows:

RQ1: How do students participating in the local case competition perceive the benefits and challenges of case study competitions?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive the benefits and challenges of case competitions and how should they prepare students for local case study competitions?

### 3. Methodology

In order to explore the proposed research questions, qualitative research was undertaken involving two different groups of respondents: students with experience in case study competitions, and their teachers - mentors involved in case study competitions. For each research question, several themes related to the benefits and challenges of case study analysis were additionally explored. The themes were identified based on the perceived improvements in student learning through case study analysis (Damjanović, Dlačić, 2015). Hence, qualitative research was based on the benefits and challenges that students perceived as having a small effect on their learning through case study analysis, i.e. those that earned a low average grade for benefits or a high average grade for challenges<sup>1</sup> indicated in the research. The identified themes that pertain to benefits include time management, negotiation skills, and employability; and those pertaining to challenges include identifying financial and sales effects; the case study doesn't have one result; and evaluation of individual contribution in teamwork/interpersonal issues among team members. Furthermore, for each research question a different set of interview ques-

tions was created, related to themes found to have a small effect on student learning, and adjusted to each subsample, i.e. students and teachers. The aim was to further analyse students' and teachers' perspectives and insights as to how to make the themes perceived to have a small effect on student learning more meaningful for case study analysis.

Even though they were perceived as having a small effect on student learning, it was decided that two themes, one pertaining to benefits and one pertaining to challenges, will not be included in the interview. The excluded challenge is related to *Case study can have more than one result*. This decision was based on the rationale that having more than one result represents the essence of the case study method and cannot be altered, but should be accepted as a common outcome of the entire process. The second excluded theme pertaining to benefits is *More attractive on the job market*. The rationale for excluding this theme from further analysis through interviews is that it represents, according to Burke et al. (2013), one of the key benefits of case study competitions. Hence, even though students indicated that the mentioned theme had a low impact it was not included in further analysis as in the early stage of their career students still cannot objectively judge how case study competitions will influence their future career.

Structured face-to-face interviews were conducted from March 2016 to June 2016. The taped interviews were transcribed and analysed. In the section of the paper containing the findings, the answers were analysed by group, i.e. students and teachers instead of by the country they come from. This was done because a similarity was observed in students' and teachers' answers from both countries. Moreover, all answers are related to local case study competitions. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Sample characteristics for qualitative research

		Faculty of Economics in Rijeka, Croatia		Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Serbia	
Subsample name		Students	Mentors	Students	Mentors
Number		16	4	20	5
Gender	Male	6	0	9	2
	Female	8	4	11	3
Age range		20-22	35-41	20-23	27-40

Source: Authors' analysis

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1 Students' perspective

Responses were gathered in two main fields – benefits and challenges. The benefit theme analysis included time-management skills and negotiation skills. The analysis of challenges focused on gaining new insights into the students' evaluation of individual contribution in teamwork/interpersonal issues among team members as well as on defining financial and sales effects. The analysis included answers given by students from both countries.

#### Time management

The data collected from student interviews was used to assess the level of awareness of the importance of time management in general (N=28). The results highlight the need to make students aware of the importance of this benefit. The respondents also emphasize that managing simultaneously their activities at the university and preparation for case study may cause high levels of stress, thus reducing their effectiveness in performing case study analyses. They pointed out that *"it was really hard to manage all obligations at the faculty and to prepare adequately for a case study"*. Others indicated that *"when you see the counter and how quickly time passes by and you realize you haven't started any work yet, you have to find a way to motivate yourself and be more efficient"*. Students put forward several proposals for improving the case study method as a time management tool:

- A detailed and consistent activities timeline has to be made to follow the procedure and to plan the time required. Hence they pointed out that *"after our team leader proposed to make a timeline and a detailed plan we were a bit confused but embraced the idea and I personally think that it helped us to win second place"*. Also, students stressed that *"making a detailed plan of our activities and allocating a specific time period to each activity was a really good strategy"*.
- Students have to be motivated by their mentor to be more engaged so they can adequately organize the time for a specific case study stage (Menna, 2010). Pointing to the necessity of good preparation with the mentor, students stated that *"without our mentor's guidance about what we should pay attention to in order to successfully prepare the case study we would have been lost in time and space"* and

also emphasized that *"the time that we had spent preparing for case study analysis before the competition helped us to estimate the time needed for each specific part"*.

- Emphasizing the importance of case study analysis will help students to rearrange priorities and reschedule other activities. Students noted that *"after winning first prize you realize how making smart choices in rearranging priorities can help you feel like a king in the end"*.
- Preparing a presentation is also a very important activity. So, students indicated that *"it is hard to focus and to finish on time. As a team we always want to share everything that we know and have found out. But I realize now that we need to practice more than once to deliver a timely presentation"*.

#### Negotiation skills

The majority of respondents (N=23) confirms that case study competition experience has an impact on the development of skills for negotiating with third persons involved in a case study project (e.g. company representatives), as well as with team members. Some of them pointed out *"wow...experiencing real-world communication is priceless. When you realize that in front of you sits the CEO of a famous company you try your best to both provide a grounded solution to the problem, and persuade him/her that your solution is the best one"*. They stressed several possibilities for improving negotiation skills:

- Mentors have to point out the importance of personal skills, e.g., self-confidence and openness, and help students develop them. Students noted that *"our mentor was really helpful in giving us several tasks during the preparation period that helped me to be more self-confident. We had a chance to watch some successful video presentations which helped us gain a better insight into how to formulate keywords, use body language and build arguments"*.
- Workshops, debates and simulation exercises have to be embedded in the case study process from the very beginning, with mentors' feedback and instructions. Students pointed out that *"mentor constructive feedback with examples of how to modify our performance during workshops on improving negotiation skills was enormous. Even though we were prepared, we made mistakes, oh yes, we made a lot of them"*.

- Each step of the case study analysis has to be properly and clearly explained by the mentor so students can build their argument. One of the students pointed out that *“learning how to build our presentation on arguments was a horrible experience. I remember one time when we thought we were absolutely fabulous but the company representatives pointed out that our presentation should be more professional and structured so that it supports our recommendations.”*

### *Evaluation of individual contribution in teamwork/interpersonal issues among team members*

In the introductory part of the interview about challenges faced in case study analysis, students were asked about personal competencies that could be developed through case study competition. Students (N=25) related their personal competencies with interpersonal skills, such as tolerance and patience. They stressed that *“I consider myself in general to be a patient person. But through case study competition I realized that my patience is diminishing when the clock is ticking. So, I took exercises suggested by my mentor to improve my level of tolerance in stressful situations.”* In general, students point out that unequal participation of team members is hard to prevent. But even though this is considered to be a possible pitfall, some interesting suggestions on how to resolve this were provided:

- Team members have to be able to reinforce each other's commitment and to motivate the ones who do not participate and contribute enough. They pointed out that *“I remember one guy that was constantly behind the time plan, and our team leader gave a really motivating speech to all of us, stressing the importance of being and working as a team. That was a great thing to do; without pointing at that person, he managed to motivate him”.*

- Unequal team member commitment is an issue that has to be resolved within the team itself. Students noted that *“the best solution is that team members resolve the problem among themselves,”* or even said *“we tried to resolve the problem of poorly motivated team members with the help of our mentor, but it just complicated things; we should have done it by ourselves”.*

- Factors not closely related to the team can also improve commitment and motivation of easy-going and poorly motivated team mem-

bers, e.g. participation in case study competition could replace part of their academic obligations such as a mid-term exam, or could be acknowledged in their diplomas. Students pointed out that *“acknowledging case study activity as a part of academic obligations would be really beneficial”* and *“I assume that team members with poor motivation would be more enthusiastic about participating if their participation were to be acknowledged as part of their courses”.*

- It is necessary to designate a team leader. Students pointed that *“without him/her as a team leader we would have been lost in space”, “having a down-to-earth and organized team leader gave us the opportunity to win the competition, as he/she could see the big picture and knew our strengths and weaknesses”,* as well as *“it is necessary to have a good team leader who can organize the team”.*

- 360° feedback is an important activity for team performance improvement. Students stressed that *“every team member should write about the strengths and weaknesses of other team members as this would provide direction for individual improvements”* and *“this insight into my weaknesses motivated me to get extra exercises from my mentor to improve my performance”.*

- Teams with fewer members are easier to manage. Students noted that *“I have been in teams with varying numbers of members and the smaller teams were better in achieving results”* and *“having been a team leader for several teams I must admit that in a smaller team everything looks like collaboration in a well-functioning family, while in bigger teams you sometimes get the awkward feeling of being in a dysfunctional foster family”.*

### *Defining financial and sales effects*

In addition to the fields of finance and sales, students identified other fields in which their prior knowledge was insufficient. Some of these are cost accounting, statistics, strategic management, marketing metrics and distribution. Recommendations for facilitating the most challenging topics such as the financial and sales topics (N=30) are as follows:

- One person with expertise in accounting or finances should be involved in the case study



preparation. This person could be a finance and sales expert from the business sector or a professor from a HEI. Students noted that *“it would be great if we had some workshops with finance experts or people who are engaged in marketing metrics”* or *“I love numbers but sometimes I miss the rationale behind them. So, a workshop or seminar on this topic by someone who sees the whole picture would be excellent.”*

- Participation in student associations as well as any prior work experience can improve some practical skills in finance and sales. Students pointed out *“I gained a lot of experience through volunteering in different associations. As I was in charge of financial planning this has helped me to more easily predict things related to sales or finances”* or *“summer jobs have helped me understand sales growth and how it is related to competitors’ actions”*.

- Self-study with mentor’s support. It was stressed that *“the mentor’s prior guidance has helped us perceive different implications of sales planning”* or *“having workshops on finances and solving practical examples was of great help”* as well as *“it would be great if several courses at the Faculty were interconnected so that you could apply the same example to different fields and get the bigger picture. This would certainly help me better understand finances in a case study environment.”*

Three basic points arise from qualitative analysis of student perceptions of the benefits and issues associated with case study competitions, hence, providing guidelines for RQ1. These insights can help teachers and mentors in preparing students for case competitions. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4 Students’ conclusions as to how to improve case study practice**

Mentors	Students	Background factors
Provide guidance and organize workshops to develop students’ skills	Personal motivation and preparation of team members	HEIs to promote case study competitions as a basis for a long-term partnership
Provide constant team motivation and feedback on individual case assignments	Orientation towards teamwork and professional development	Company representatives and other company resources dedicated to helping students in their preparation, e.g. university alumni
Organize workshops involving third parties (i.e. companies, experts, co-mentors)	Willingness to gain new skills and knowledge and develop the capability to use previous experience	HEI’s flexibility and openness to new organizational models

Source: Authors’ analysis

Students emphasized the need for mentors to engage more and to transfer know-how, while from their team members they want to see intrinsic motivation and team orientation. Students emphasized that HEIs should develop a framework for case study activities and put more effort in promoting the case study method.

#### 4.2 Teachers’ perspective

As previously emphasized, the teachers’ perceptions of the benefits (time management skills and negotiation skills) and challenges (gaining new insights into the evaluation of individual contribution in teamwork/interpersonal issues among team members and defining financial and sales effects) associated with the case study have also been ex-

plored. As with student sample, all teachers’ answers from both countries were analysed together. The responses included several proposals for enhancing the effects of the selected benefits and offsetting the challenges, as follows:

##### Time management

Time management skills are important because they help reduce the level of stress students experience in case study competitions, e.g. *“when the countdown timer shows that time is slowly running out, some teams start to panic. I’ve noticed that they have failed to follow their agreed timelines”*. Mentors emphasized several ways to build their competencies to help students improve their time management skills (N=7):

- Continuous mentoring through all stages of case study assignment. Some of them mentioned that *“you have to educate yourself and understand the business logic of the connection between analysis, problem and recommendation using the pyramid principle”* as well as *“only with the knowledge of the pyramid principle can you help students to be more productive”*.
- Using an activities timeline as a mandatory tool in the mentoring process in order to allocate time proportionally to different activities. Mentors pointed out *“I have learned from my colleague, who lives abroad, that they usually provide a short time-exercise to try out the timeline and suggest improvements as a team”* as well as *“sometimes it is hard to follow the timeline, especially when students are not familiar with the industry and they need more time to perform an analysis to be able to really understand the current situation of the company. It is good to suggest some modifications to the timeline and to let the team leader be the one to make that decision”*.
- Setting a presentation time limit to keep students focused on relevant issues (e.g. practicing a two-minute pitch). Mentors noted *“students are confused with pitches and at first needed triple the amount of time allocated for the pitch but once they embrace the pitch concept they are more focused and more to the point”* and *“practicing pitch presentations helps students become more self-confident”*.

### Negotiation skills

Negotiations skills refer to the ability to provide adequate arguments to reach a goal. Mentors pointed out (N=9) that *“students sometimes think they are good and focused but most of them are wandering around providing too much details”*. So, they offered several suggestions, such as:

- Use role-play exercises. Mentors noted that *“different exercises aimed at helping students gain different perspectives on the same problem are a great way to help them learn what is important”*.
- Case study presentation (partial or complete) in front of a mentor, other teacher(s) or company member(s) with required feedback. Mentors pointed out that *“presentations in front of an audience that students look up to, like CEOs or teachers, are of great help. A low controlled level of stress is necessary for them to be more focused and to the point”*.

### Evaluation of individual contribution in team-work/interpersonal issues among team members

Several mentors (N=6) pointed out that *“it is difficult to work with teams in which not all team members contribute equally. But it is best to let them resolve their problems themselves; all you can do is teach them how to overcome these problems. And they do occur, in many different forms.”* Thus, suggestions on how to help other mentors are as follows:

- Organizing workshops to motivate team members to be sincere and honest with one another. Mentors point out that *“having motivation workshops aimed at building respect and honesty among team members is necessary”* and that *“various one-to-one exercises in the preparation period are extremely helpful for students in learning how to overcome a lack of sincerity and motivation when they appear”*.
- Avoiding forming teams of students who happen to be friends. Mentors stressed that *“the worst possible way to form a team is to have friends working together; they will bring to the team all the good and bad experiences from their pasts”*.
- Team leader nomination. Mentors pointed out that *“with me deciding who will be the team leader, I can help them be more efficient. But, in order to do that I have to know them through and through”*.
- Mutual evaluation of team members' achievements. Mentors emphasized that *“when you tell them they will have to evaluate each team member's contribution at the end of the competition and that their future depends on it, they suddenly become very motivated”*.
- Previous training of students on teamwork and conflict management. Mentors also noted that *“coaching team members individually on conflict management can help them to understand their reactions and to understand why other team members reacted in a certain way”*.

### Defining financial and sales effect

Mentors pointed out that financial and sales effects are challenging tasks for students (N=9) and they noted that *“you have to additionally motivate students to search through their memories and to awake all that dormant knowledge on financial data. It is*

there, but they forget it so quickly.” Hence, several possibilities are emphasized:

- Each student should attend a workshop on explaining the financial implications of the suggested solution, because company representatives often ask for detailed explanations (Mijatović and Damjanović, 2016). Many mentors point out: “the workshop should cover practical examples of marketing strategy“, or “it is important to teach students to identify benchmarks and prepare initial data for calculations. Good practice is to use the cases of McKinsey, BCG, and Bain for a better understanding of sales and financial calculations”.
- Teaching students to comprehend the case study in its entirety, rather than just partially. Mentors pointed out “there is an urgent need to start working with students as freshman so they can get the bigger picture. It is necessary to point out to them that no solution is isolated in the business world”.
- Involving co-mentors (other teachers) that teach finance and sales courses at the HEI. They also stressed that “introducing cooperation with other colleagues, either through additional

workshops or by motivating them to introduce the case study approach in their classes, can help students to see the bigger picture”.

- Identify and explain some company specifics with regard to financing and sales and include those guidelines in the case study material. Mentors pointed out that “a good case study also has to have detailed information on finances and sales. By not giving students enough details during the preparation period, they will not learn the mechanism behind decision-making”. They also stated that “I provide them with so much detailed information that they very often get lost in the data. But I figured out that this is the best way to teach them to see what is important. If you provide them with just enough data related to the case, they will be lost in tables and information at the competition” or “it is also important to teach students how to present numbers in their presentations”.

In general, the conclusions as to how to improve case study practice drawn based on the perceived benefits and challenges that provide guidelines for RQ2. They fall into three themes. The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5 Mentors’ conclusions as to how to improve case study practice**

Mentoring goals	Networking	Organization
Provide students with opportunities to develop both professionally and personally	Promote close cooperation between HEIs and business institutions to provide students with real life examples	Establish appropriate and effective organizational logistics as support
Integrate specific exercises and instruments to help students overcome identified challenges	Involve other colleagues from HEI	Promote benefits of case study competitions to both students and companies (Ulery, 2015) <sup>2</sup>
Acquire additional skills in coaching, mentoring, leadership and motivation to help students work in a team (Debbie, 2011)		

Source: Authors’ analysis

Mentors emphasize that future mentors should constantly learn and apply new skills in the teaching process. Also, establishing relationships with students and other organizations is important in providing a good case study that students can learn from and in providing feedback that students demand. So, seeing the bigger picture that includes the perspectives of both the company and the consumer is important in enabling students to gain more benefits from a case study.

## 5. Practical implications

Based on this research guidelines have been created for teachers who want to be involved in case competitions. Their role in case competitions is demanding and involves three major activities: selecting students for case competitions, creating successful teams, and preparing them for case competitions. The guidelines are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6 Guidelines are provided based on previous experiences and the results of this research**

Role of the teacher in local case competitions	Recommendations
Selecting students - choose the best students in a class	Evaluate individual practical knowledge and teamwork For individual evaluation of team members - provide one case study that students can solve in five hours without Internet access, and give a 10-minute presentation, followed by questions from the teacher panel For team assessment – provide a short case study with several alternative possibilities. Students in the group are to discuss it, evaluate their reasoning, present their opinion and provide arguments to support it.
Creating successful student teams	In a team include people with different viewpoints and backgrounds to assure diverse reasoning patterns. Each team needs to have one creative person, one with good Power Point skills, one good with numbers and with good Excel skills, and a team leader who can easily see the bigger picture of the problem, has more practical knowledge and advanced personal skills.
Preparing students for case competition	Mentors should work with teams in different areas and teach them how to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- do market research on the Internet</li> <li>- do brainstorming sessions</li> <li>- make assumptions when data are missing</li> <li>- set priorities and apply criteria analysis</li> <li>- make recommendations – align analysis and problem identification with solutions</li> <li>- create Power Point presentations</li> <li>- present and provide arguments for the solutions</li> </ul>
Watching other teams during competition	Learn from other student teams Learn from company representatives on the panels
Assessment of results	Provide individual and team feedback Ask for feedback from company representatives – discuss with students so they can improve their performance

Source: Authors

## 6. Conclusion

The future mission of HEIs will be oriented towards the implementation of interactive learning methods that will support both the teacher as a provider of educational services and the students as clients. This paper highlights a new, innovative way for improving the case study method. On the one hand, it presents the students' perception of learning improvements when case studies are used as a learning tool and provides additional insights as to the perceived benefits and challenges and how to make those perceived as less important more meaningful to students. In addition, the paper provides guidelines on how to motivate students to get more out of case competitions. On the other hand, it presents the teachers' perceptions of how to use and

improve the use of the case study method in the learning process. It also provides recommendations on how to motivate students and prepare them for case competitions in order to prepare them better for their future careers. Moreover, although a plethora of previous studies have investigated the case study method in the classroom, it has seldom been explored from the perspective of case study competition (Salles et al., 2015; Greenhalgh, 2007). This paper highlights that case study competitions are an innovative way of learning aimed at closing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice.

The findings revealed that students need to be prepared to learn more and focus on individual preparation and motivation techniques. Also, students need to improve their team building skills and learn how to activate previous knowledge and ex-

perience. Students need to learn how to integrate knowledge from different courses and how to make assumptions (Ammerman, 2012) in order to be able to justify their financial and sales suggestions. Active mentors who are supportive of students in the preparation for case study competitions are essential (Greiner et al., 2003). A useful framework is provided for teachers as mentors to help them improve students' as well as their own knowledge and skills because developing business skills such as negotiation, time management or interpersonal skills can help students in their future careers (Apaydin, 2006; Black, 2009; Lovett, Jones, 2008).

The main limitation of this study is its focus on qualitative research in only two countries. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar research in several different countries at universities participating or organizing case study competitions at a local level. Nevertheless, this approach provides a deeper insight into and gives a better understanding of the drivers behind students' and mentors' perspectives on learning through case study competitions. Future research should focus on identifying the benefits and challenges of student learning through local or international case study competitions in order to obtain more generalizable results.

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## (ENDNOTES)

- 1 Note that the question on challenges was negatively framed, that is, a high average value indicates that this was the hardest thing.
- 2 Ulery, A. (2015), "Case Management: New Mindset for Solving Business Problems", *KM World*, Supplement, pS4

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## UNAPRJEĐIVANJE UČENJA STUDENATA KROZ NATJECANJA U RJEŠAVANJU STUDIJA SLUČAJA: IZAZOVI ZA NASTAVNIKE I STUDENTE

### SAŽETAK

Glavni je cilj ovoga rada identificirati različite perspektive studenata i nastavnika, iz dvije države balkanske regije, vezano uz njihovu percepciju metode učenja kroz rješavanje studija slučaja u lokalnim natjecanjima studija slučaja. Istraživanje se usredotočuje na percipirane koristi i izazove od strane studenata i nastavnika uključenih u natjecanja u rješavanju studija slučaja. Prethodno istraživanje je prošireno. Uključena je perspektiva nastavnika te je provedeno kvalitativno istraživanje u Hrvatskoj i Srbiji kako bi se dobili dodatni uvidi u individualna razmišljanja zainteresiranih strana. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju da studenti imaju probleme s upravljanjem vremenom te kod identificiranja financijskih i prodajnih rezultata uz predložene marketinške strategije, dok mentori naglašavaju da studenti imaju problema s vještinom pregovaranja te kod identificiranja financijskih i prodajnih rezultata uz predložene marketinške strategije.

Predložene su preporuke za studente i za nastavnike kako bi se unaprijedilo učenje kroz natjecanja u rješavanju studija slučaja. Predložene smjernice trebale bi ponuditi putokaz za nastavnike i studente kako bi se unaprijedilo učenje kroz studije slučaja u području marketinga.

**Ključne riječi:** učenje kroz studije slučaja, lokalna natjecanja u rješavanju studija slučajeva, marketinške studije slučaja, Hrvatska, Srbija