

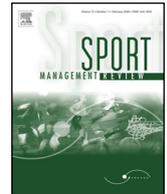


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Scoring on and off the field?: The impact of Australia's inclusion in the Asian Football Confederation

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ABSTRACT

The case follows Australia's move from the Oceania Football Federation (OFC) to the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). The case explores the impact of Australia's inclusion on other AFC member nations and highlights that Australia's relative success in the AFC may not be perceived as positive by all stakeholders within the AFC. The case considers the effect of Australia's inclusion in the AFC on the AFC in general, and also on both the sport of soccer in Australia, and the broader Australian economy.

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Teaching note

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) represents one of the six Confederations constituting the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the world's governing body of soccer. The AFC comprises 46 Member Associations and is recognised as the most populous FIFA confederation, representing over half the world's soccer. As the governing body for soccer across the Asian region, the AFC is responsible for the operation of the sport, which includes the regulation of the sport, the development of grassroots and youth soccer, and the staging of major competitions, such as the AFC Asian Football Cup and the AFC Champions League.

After years of lobbying for inclusion, Australia was approved to join the AFC in 2006. This resulted in Australia switching confederations from the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC). While there are many benefits associated with Australia's inclusion in the AFC, it is not without controversy. Australia's inclusion within the AFC has helped to improve the status of soccer within Australia, both on and off the field (Georgakis & Molloy, 2014; Moore, 2009). Australia hosted the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, where the Australian national team won the championship. Australia's success within the AFC, which has occurred in a relatively short time, has appeared to create controversy within the AFC with discontent being suggested among some AFC member nations. Media reports have emerged claiming that the AFC President, Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, had indicated rising dissatisfaction among certain AFC members regarding Australia's position within the AFC. While this was quickly denied by the AFC President, this has raised the issue of whether Australia should be included as part of the AFC.

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This case study explores the history and position of soccer in Australia, Australia's journey to become included in the AFC, and discusses the positives and negatives of inclusion. In doing so, the case is told through the position of Erik Neilsen, a fictional Football Federation of Australia (FFA) executive. Erik reflects on the state of Australian soccer, emphasising points necessary to understand the scenario from the viewpoints of Australia and of other AFC members. This case addresses several areas of management, which gives it flexibility for use in various courses at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Students are challenged to think critically on Australia's place within the AFC, specifically recognising positives and negatives from multiple viewpoints. Further, students can examine the role of stakeholders in international sport and events and/or assess equity within sport and event organisations. An overarching objective for students is to determine what management strategies and messaging needs to be undertaken in order to cultivate positive relationships with other AFC members.

1. Costs and benefits of inclusion in the AFC

This case provides a description of both costs and benefits of AFC membership to Australian soccer and, by extension, Australia. With member nations expressing discontent, it may be useful for the FFA to justify its own position within the AFC. The case spells out many of the simplistic pros and cons, but higher level students should be challenged to think more critically about the issues presented. Social exchange theory offers a frame of reference that can be used to explain the process by which individuals calculate their intention to continue with the relationship (Emerson, 1976; Lawler, 2001). Underlying social exchange theory is a cost benefit analysis conducted by the actor involved in the relationship. If the costs are perceived to outweigh the benefits, measures should be put in place to restore equilibrium, possibly meaning that the actor will be unlikely to continue its involvement in the relationship (Zafirovski, 2005). In considering this case, the following questions and activities should guide discussion while encouraging students to develop a holistic understanding through adopting multiple perspectives. Begin by asking the following from the standpoint of the FFA (and, by extension, Australia):

1. What are the benefits to Australia associated with its inclusion in the AFC?
2. What are the costs to Australia associated with its inclusion in the AFC?
3. What is the relative net outcome to Australia of its inclusion in the AFC?

As part of this analysis, students must also consider how Australia's inclusion within the AFC affected support for soccer in Australia. The benefits for the country extend beyond the Socceroos' performance to include a burgeoning domestic league and increased rates of soccer participation.

For class units that specifically discuss confederation realignment or competitive balance, the case highlights the impact that Australia's realignment had on the success of the sport within Australia. In addition to the introduction of a new governing body and the restructuring of the professional league in Australia, Australia's inclusion within the AFC provided an easier pathway for qualification in the FIFA World Cup. Further, when participating as a member nation within the OFC, the Socceroos faced limited competition from their opponents, which resulted in their domination within the confederation and minimal opportunities for player development within these games (Collett, 2005). Australia's move to the AFC has provided the men's and women's national teams with a tougher competition, which may lead to increased spectator interest and increased player talent (Borooh & Mangan, 2012; Lee & Fort, 2012). To understand the concept of competitive balance, Borooh and Mangan (2012), Lee and Fort (2012), and Perline and Stoldt (2008) are useful resources.

Even though the case is from the perspective of an FFA executive, the argument for Australia's continued inclusion within the AFC will be bolstered significantly by understanding the opposing position. Therefore, students must ask the same three questions from the perspective of the AFC. Or, for even more detailed analysis, they would be better served by focusing on the perspectives of countries within the West Asian Football Federation region (e.g., Qatar, Iran) (see "Stakeholder Management" below for more on this). That is, from the standpoint of the AFC (or a specific region/country within the AFC):

4. What are the benefits to the AFC/region/country of Australia's inclusion in the AFC?
5. What are the costs to the AFC/region/country of Australia's inclusion in the AFC?
6. What is the relative net outcome the AFC/region/country of Australia's inclusion in the AFC?

Students should identify the economic and non-pecuniary benefits offered by Australia. On the pitch, Australia's possibility at World Cup advancement would give attention, legitimacy, and financial reward to the AFC. However, a complete discussion will also include issues relating to Australia's financial strength (both through increasing the AFC's market power and by giving AFC countries access to its consumer and business populations), Australia's connection to the western world, and the use of soft power through sport. On the negatives side, the added challenge to World Cup qualification is an obvious cost, as are the logistical and financial hardships endured by travelling to compete in Australia. Students must also identify the cultural challenges, specifically relating to the bid to host the 2022 World Cup.

This type of analysis is central to the kind of strategic planning done by high-level sport executives. A deeper level of analysis will ask the students to also assess the relevant stakeholders.

2. Stakeholder management

This case provides students with crucial lessons on the importance of understanding the stakeholders involved in a relationship. Moreover, it gives students the opportunity for practical application of stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory focuses on those who affect, or are affected by, a particular activity or event (Freeman, 1984), giving “attention to the interests and well-being of those who can assist or hinder the achievement of the organisation’s objectives” (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003, p. 481). The framework offered by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) proves particularly useful in examining various stakeholders involved in a relationship. In their approach to determining stakeholder salience, they evaluate possible stakeholders in terms of each actor’s power, legitimacy, and urgency in the relationship. For example, Yemen may have legitimate and urgent claims pertaining to Australia’s place in the AFC, but if Erik sees them as lacking power to enact change, his efforts would be better expended in dealing with those actors who possess all three elements. A possible project would ask students to appropriately place stakeholders within Mitchell et al.’s (1997) 3-circle Venn diagram and justify their decision for each actor’s location.

Further, in considering how to strategically position the FFA within relevant stakeholders, students must recognise that relationships inherent within the governance of international soccer are unavoidable in shaping decision-making strategy (cf. Dickson, Phelps, & Waugh, 2010). Similarly unavoidable are issues of social capital and trust among actors seeking to develop the organisation (Woolcock, 1998), which in this case is AFC soccer. Finally, while much emphasis is placed on the Arab members of the AFC, students should not overlook the impact of Australia for rivals like Japan and South Korea.

A second possible stakeholder project would have students develop a stakeholder map in order to assist them in conceptualising the interconnectedness of relationships within international sport. Hede (2008) should be utilised to guide classroom discussion on stakeholder maps.

1. Develop a stakeholder map that details the relationship among key member nations. It is unrealistic to map the relationships among all 46 countries, but students can identify primary countries and/or clustered regions; determining the key actors will be easy if stakeholder salience was already identified using Mitchell et al.’s (1997) framework. The stakeholder map should include the relative strength of the relationship (see Granovetter, 1973) between each key actor. The relative position and sentiment towards Australia, and by extension, Australia’s inclusion in the AFC should be considered.
2. While the primary focus of the stakeholder map should be on the relationship between soccer in each actor, students should be asked to identify broader relational issues including politics and culture.

The discontent towards Australia’s inclusion in the AFC expressed by some AFC member nations could be due to perceived inequities. Equity theory may therefore be useful in explaining the actors that underlie stakeholders’ perceptions (Burrai, Font, & Cochrane, 2014).

3. Perceived (in)equity

The case emphasises the feelings of discontent among some of the AFC member nations regarding Australia’s inclusion within the AFC (Harris, 2015). Equity theory can be used to examine the factors that underlie the perceptions of the various stakeholders. The premise of equity theory involves the perceived inputs and outcomes of one actor as compared to the perceived inputs and outcomes of another (Pritchard, 1969). Equity is achieved when an actor perceives its inputs and outcomes as equal to that of another; alternatively, if an actor perceives its inputs and outcomes as unequal to that of another, the situation is perceived as inequitable (Pritchard, 1969). According to Burrai et al. (2014), “if individuals perceive that there is equity and justice within the exchange relationship they are involved in, they experience feelings of contentment that results in positive reactions and perceptions” (p. 452). Given the statements in the news report, Erik may conclude that there is perceived inequality, and he will need to develop strategies to regain perceived equity among AFC member nations. Instructors should use Burrai et al. (2014) as a resource to discuss the role of equity theory in forming perceptions and the potential impact of perceptions on a relationship.

By focusing too much on the present and failing to properly account for history, students tend to overlook aspects of equitable contributions over time. The AFC existed as a confederation for over 50 years prior to Australia’s inclusion, being built by its members into an organisation desirable enough to elicit repeated attempts to join by Australia. Yet, historically, Australia’s contributions have been to the OFC, not the AFC. While the present situation is not exactly a case of free loading, it is fair to suggest that Australia has not paid its dues. When new pro sports teams join a league, they are usually asked to pay a significant licence fee. One of the rationales for this fee is that they are buying into a safe/stable business model that others have developed. Thus, a possible source of current perceived inequity felt by pre-existing AFC members may be that Australia is reaping significant rewards without a history of contributions.

Instructors may consider the following activity to help students apply equity theory to this case. The instructor divides the class into 17 groups so that each group represents one of each of the 16 AFC member nations that competed in the 2015 AFC Asian Cup; the 17th group represents the AFC in general. Each group is detailing the specific country’s position on Australia’s inclusion in the AFC. Students are encouraged to detail any perceived equities or inequities in the relationship

between that country and Australia, particularly inputs and outcomes relating to Australia's inclusion in the AFC. Groups are then encouraged to develop strategies that would restore perceived equity among member nations of the AFC. Each group presents its position to the class with the group representing the AFC acting as mediator. The AFC group is responsible for leading a group discussion that allows groups to negotiate while ensuring that the voice of each group is heard.

4. Overall questions to be answered

The background, frameworks, and projects offered above are all aimed at allowing Erik to best answer the questions raised in the case's final paragraph. Specifically,

1. What actions could be taken to ensure that Australia retains its position within the AFC?
2. What strategies should be used to help mitigate against any negative sentiment towards Australia within the AFC?

The depth of answers offered by students to these questions depends on the emphasis of the course and available class time directed to the case. For example, in a single-day unstructured discussion, students could skip straight to answering these questions without incorporating the earlier efforts; while this may provide some value, it is likely that answers will be surface-level and lack higher order thinking (Bloom, 1956). Encouraging students to apply theories such as those discussed above will lead to more strategic evaluation of the environment around international sport and events, whether the case is discussed over a week or continually revisited throughout an academic term as additional topics are covered within other course material. Instructors may also find that a case study on the 2015 AFC Asian Football Cup leveraging strategy (Fairley, Lovegrove, & Brown, in press) may be a useful resource to be used in conjunction with this case study.

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Scoring on and off the field?: The impact of Australia's inclusion in the Asian Football Confederation

Case study

In January 2015, Australia was celebrating international soccer success having just won the Asian Football Confederation's (AFC) premier international tournament, the 2015 AFC Asian Cup. Erik Neilsen, an avid Australian soccer enthusiast and Football Federation of Australia (FFA) executive, had attended the championship match and was elated. Since Australia joined the AFC in 2006, Erik's enthusiasm and support for soccer in Australia had increased substantially. After all, since Australian soccer moved from the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) to the AFC, Australia had qualified for two successive FIFA World Cups, came second in the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, and were just crowned champions of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup. Erik was sitting in the Qantas lounge on his way home from the final match in Sydney as the airport was abuzz with soccer fans flying home after their trip to the championship match. As Qantas was an official sponsor of the Australian men's national soccer team, the Socceroos, the lounge was themed with soccer paraphernalia, which acted as a talking point for many of the patrons. But Erik's thoughts drifted – instead of relishing in the accolades lauding the Socceroos and Australia's ability to host such a world class event, he kept thinking about a news story he had seen a week earlier questioning Australia's place in the AFC (Hassett, 2015).

The report suggested that while Australia had experienced great success since becoming a part of the AFC, Australia's inclusion in the AFC had not been perceived positively by all stakeholders. The report noted that in an interview with the Dubai-based newspaper *Al-Ittihad*, AFC President, Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, implied that there was growing discontent in regard to Australia's position within the AFC. The AFC President was quoted as saying, "Yes, it is true there are indications that there is a desire among West Asian federations to kick Australia out. . . But I also know that the Arabs are not the only ones who are not convinced of the usefulness of the continuation of Australia in Asia" (Harris, 2015, para. 4). The interview was rapidly picked up by Australian media in the lead up to the 2015 AFC Asian Cup finals and the Sheikh was quick to denounce these comments: "To read a story like this is really sad because there's no truth in it. . . It's been manipulated in a way to make it negative" (Davutovic, 2015, para. 5). The article that Erik was reading suggested that FFA Chief, David Gallop, was shocked at the reported comments made by the AFC president, saying, "We were extremely surprised to hear of these press reports from west Asia" (ABC, 2015, para. 11). Still, the comments concerned Erik.

This article created many questions in Erik's mind: Could Australia actually be kicked out of the AFC? What would this mean for soccer in Australia? What would this mean for the AFC? Why would the other member nations of the AFC want Australia gone? Erik believed that soccer in Australia has benefited tremendously from Australia's involvement in the AFC. Erik's interest in the Socceroos, and with the wider game of soccer in Australia including the national league within Australia, had certainly escalated given all of the opportunities that the team had been afforded since being part of the AFC. However, Erik knew his thoughts were purely speculation and that he needed to investigate Australia's journey into the AFC and the costs and benefits of participating in the AFC. He thought it would be useful to start by looking at the history and standing of soccer in Australia.

1. Soccer in Australia

Soccer was first introduced to Australia by British immigrants in the 19th century, and it has since grown to be the largest participation-based sport in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Despite its popularity as a participant sport, the elite soccer competition in Australia, the Hyundai A-League, has struggled to compete with other sporting leagues, such as the Australian Football League (AFL) and the National Rugby League (NRL), in terms of both spectator interest and attendance (Skinner & Kunkel, 2012; The Guardian, 2014). Erik knew that soccer, particularly the governance of the sport within Australia, had a storied past.

1.1. Governing soccer in Australia

Established in 1911, the Commonwealth Football Association was the first official governing body for soccer in Australia, and was responsible for supervising soccer activities across the country. It went through multiple iterations, including 1921, 1995, 2003 and finally in 2005, and even a brief suspension only a few years after being formerly recognised by FIFA as the sport's governing body in 1956 (Skinner, Zakus, & Edwards, 2008). Current form, the Football Federation Australia (FFA) was formed in 2005 (Skinner & Kunkel, 2012). Despite these changes, the influential Crawford Report (2003) indicated little had actually changed in the governance since 1961. Indeed an organisation controlled by 61 separate stakeholder groups within Australia had resulted in a dysfunctional, disparate organisation by the time the Crawford Report was published (Hamil & Chadwick, 2010). As the organisation ended up on the brink of self-destruction, Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, sought out reform by enlisting the help of billionaire and CEO of Westfield, Frank Lowy and included A\$15 million dollars in funding (Solly, 2004). The Crawford Report was commissioned and 50 recommendations were put forth.

Although it was before Erik had joined the FFA, he had heard many of the original board members and executives of the FFA were resistant to the reforms at first the Australian Sports Commission threatened to pull its funding, an important

source for the FFA budget, if they did not comply. This brought about much needed reform that many believed brought together the key elements needed for a successful entry into the AFC (Hamil & Chadwick, 2010). Erik struggled to put this all into perspective as the organisation of soccer in Australia seemed quite fluid. With all these changes in the national governing body of soccer, he thought it is not surprising the key underlying factors contributing to the state of soccer in Australia were the inconsistent structure and operations of the game at the national level (Skinner et al., 2008). Although reforms had brought about major change for Australian soccer, they were relatively recent changes and many of those still in power in the AFC had been around during previous failed attempts by Australian soccer to enter the AFC. Another related factor that Erik identified was the sport's national league in Australia, including issues relating to the role of ethnic social clubs in shaping the league's history.

1.2. National soccer competition in Australia

The National Soccer League (NSL) was founded in 1977 and is recognised as the first national soccer competition in Australia. In the years following, the governing body established national youth and women's leagues, which enjoyed success during the early years but succumbed to financial difficulties along with the NSL. The NSL's demise was attributed to a combination of factors including an inability to attract and retain high quality players, and tensions between those from different ethnic or racial heritage, which largely stemmed from "traditional" European politics. These tensions were prevalent within and between the clubs themselves, and also filtered out to spectators (Skinner et al., 2008; Vamplew, 1994). The major restructuring of Australian soccer also impacted grassroots and club soccer based on the recommendations within the Crawford Report (Georgakis & Molloy, 2014). Consequently, when FFA replaced the Australian Soccer Association, it was entrusted with the task of de-ethnicising and rebranding the game of soccer in Australia. In Erik's mind, this was one of the defining moments in the cleaning up of soccer within Australia.

In 2005, the FFA launched the A-League as a reworked and rebranded national competition, replacing the defunct NSL. The A-League was formed with a focus on geographical divides between teams rather than the ethnic connections that had been prevalent in the NSL (Georgakis & Molloy, 2014). Strict guidelines were implemented which required all A-League teams to acquire a license through a competitive tender process in order to compete within the League (Skinner et al., 2008). The constitution of the A-League was such that clubs would be privately owned and detached from any political or ethnic identity (Hallinan, Hughson, & Burke, 2007). To coincide with the inaugural A-League season, a \$3 million television advertising campaign was launched, promoting the new slogan "Football, but not as you know it" (Skinner et al., 2008). This strategy helped to diffuse ethnic and cultural ties that had previously been problematic in soccer in Australia. While Erik's focus up until this point had been on the domestic issues within Australia, he was also aware that Australia's place in international competition has also had a profound effect on soccer within Australia.

1.3. Australia in the OFC

Australia was one of the founding members of the Oceania Football Federation, now known as the Oceania Football Confederation in 1966. The OFC established a tournament with New Zealand Soccer, Fiji Football Association, and Papua New Guinea Football Association in response to not being included in any other Confederations (Skinner et al., 2008). Before leaving the OFC in 2006, Australia was both the largest and most successful nation within the Confederation.

Australia's success within the OFC did not translate to participation or success in the FIFA World Cup. Indeed, out of the six Confederations, the OFC is the only one that does not have a guaranteed position within the finals of the FIFA World Cup. Consequently, the winner of the OFC tournament entered into intercontinental play-offs against teams from other Confederations (Skinner et al., 2008), a qualification process that Erik viewed as unfair. In contrast, there are four spots reserved in the FIFA World Cup finals for Asian teams. This would suggest that Australia's inclusion in the AFC would increase Australia's chances of qualifying for the FIFA World Cup, which was a crucial factor in Australia seeking confederation realignment within the AFC.

1.4. Australia in the AFC

Australia had continuously appealed to the AFC for inclusion within its confederation (Georgakis & Molloy, 2014), even forgoing OFC membership from 1972 to 1978 to further pursue membership within the AFC. For years the AFC rejected all advances from Australia before finally approving Australia's inclusion in 2006 (Skinner et al., 2008). The AFC viewed this as a strategically smart move, and it provided the remaining 11 OFC members more opportunity to qualify for FIFA competitions without having to beat perennial finalists Australia (Collett, 2005). That said, the OFC also endured hardship from Australia's defection (Waugh, Dickson, & Phelps, 2014), but Erik's current focus was on Australia's future in the AFC.

Australian soccer has enjoyed considerable success during their time in the AFC. In addition to the recent AFC Asian Cup Championship, the Socceroos placed second in the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, qualified for the 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cup tournaments, and twice were named AFC men's national team of the year (2006, 2015). Erik recognised that the benefits of Australia being included in the AFC were not limited to the men's national team. The women's national team, nicknamed the Matildas, won the 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup and a year later advanced to the FIFA World Cup knockout round for the first time. They topped that achievement by upsetting soccer powerhouse Brazil in the 2015 Women's World Cup round of 16

(Lynch, 2015). The AFC has a long history of success and interest in women's soccer, and the development of Australian players is benefiting through competing against teams like Japan, China, North Korea, and South Korea. The same is true on the men's side, where Erik believes that games against better competition are a major reason for the team's success in World Cup qualifying.

Qualifying for the FIFA World Cup makes Erik feel proud to be affiliated with Australian soccer. But the increased media attention is not the only benefit of World Cup participation – it comes with a monetary reward as well. The total prize money for the 2014 FIFA men's World Cup was US\$576 million, with the winning team awarded US\$35 million and runner-up taking \$25 million (FIFA, 2014); Australia received \$9,500,000 despite being eliminated in the group stage. Erik sees this money as just one example of how the move to the AFC has helped domestic soccer, in addition to A-League teams' inclusion in the AFC Champions League and an increase in soccer participation within Australia.

Membership within the AFC means that the top A-League teams have the opportunity to compete in the AFC Champions League, an annual continental club soccer tournament coordinated by the AFC. Australia has been granted two spots in the competition, which are awarded to the two best teams in the A-League. Like their national team, Australian club teams have experienced success within AFC competition, such as the Western Sydney Wanderers winning the 2014 AFC Champions League tournament (AFC, 2015). Interest in the A-League has coincided with the move to AFC, as evidenced by a 53% increase in average attendance during the 2011–2012 season as compared to previous years, an average increase of 66% in television viewing (Smith, 2011), and a 160 million television broadcast deal (Hallinan & Heenan, 2013). Soccer participation has also grown, with the number of people playing outdoor soccer in Australia increasing 45% from 2001 to 2009 (Smith, 2011). Following Australia's success at the 2015 AFC Asian Football Cup, the FFA predicts an increase of 8% in participation at outdoor soccer clubs, the equivalent of an additional 45,000 extra players across the nation (Rolfe & Kinniburgh, 2015). Further, interest in women's soccer across Australia has grown as a result of the Matildas' second-place finish at the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup, with a participation increase of 5% (Thomas, 2015).

Erik paused for a moment. While he had been contemplating and researching these topics one by one, he realised that these events were not happening in isolation. For example, the change of governing body in Australia to the current FFA was tied with the creation of the A-League. Further, Australia's performance on the international stage created an enhanced interest and focus on Australia that the A-League were able to leverage (Moore, 2009). Although the FFA implemented numerous changes in order to modernise soccer in Australia, it is believed that it was Australia's move to the AFC that was the most significant change in Australian soccer (Georgakis & Molloy, 2014). Erik saw that the litany of benefits that Australia has received since joining the AFC would not have been possible without strategic thinking, planning, and decision-making. He also saw the impact, both positive and negative that Australia has had on the AFC.

2. The AFC and Australia

Erik wanted to better understand the perspective of the AFC. Why did they accept Australia in the first place? Why were they now raising objections? He searched for articles from 2005, when the AFC decided to accept Australia. He was reminded that, at the time, the AFC executive committee's vote was unanimous; then President Mohamed bin Hammam explained, "...it will be of benefit for Asia to have Australia join us. It will increase the image of Asian football standards and competition" (Cockerill, 2005, para. 5). Erik continued searching, digging up some emails that he had received from soccer colleagues from within the AFC when the decision was announced. One of the first related topics that he came across was discussion of Australia's expertise in hosting international sport events. The experience in hosting events, as well as the knowledge creation surrounding the management and execution of events of an international scale, are believed to be areas of needed expertise for AFC nations. Erik found an email from a colleague stating he was about to attend a knowledge-sharing management workshop on event management and commercialisation which touted key Australian event executives as central to its delivery. This was evidenced by Australia hosting of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

2.1. Australia hosts the 2015 AFC Asian Cup

The 2015 AFC Asian Cup involved 16 teams and 32 games played across five host cities spanning over 1300 km: Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne. Touted as the biggest football event ever to be held in Australia, the tournament proved to be a huge success, far surpassing original expectations. Now recognised as "the most watched AFC Asian Cup ever" (Hill, 2015, para. 1), the cumulative attendance for the tournament was around 650,000, averaging more than 20,000 attendees per match (Smithies, 2015). The success of Australia throughout the tournament provided further encouragement for attendees with the final game between Australia and South Korea attracting over 76,000 spectators to Sydney Stadium (ESPN FC, 2015). All month, Erik heard from colleagues within the confederation that the Australian hosts provided a blueprint for future AFC tournaments to follow in terms of organisation and management. Others were sceptical of overstating the transference of Australia's expertise to the Asian market noting that event management concepts such as volunteering and sponsorship are not culturally universal (c.f., Fairley, Lee, Green, & Kim, 2013).

For Australia, the Local Organising Committee (LOC) hoped to deliver a legacy of increased football participation and a larger fan base for the sport (Asian Football Confederation, 2014). It also hoped to open the door for increasing trade and investment with key Asian partners, who are also member nations in the AFC, and boost inbound tourism from Asian nations.

The trade and investment opportunities developed through networking with other AFC nations were key legacy outcomes for Australia's hosting of the event. Yet, Erik realised that the relationship is reciprocal.

The AFC nations gain through building stronger economic ties with Australia. Having Australia as a member gives the confederation a 5th country within the top 15 globally based on gross domestic product (GDP) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015). Sport can serve a role in fostering international trade and diplomacy (Bubalo, 2005), which would benefit AFC member countries and their businesses. More familiar to Erik are the direct benefits to the confederation itself. Specifically, Australia and its purchasing power enhance the commercial attractiveness of the AFC to television broadcasters and potential sponsors. These entities are interested in using sport to try reaching Australia's more than 23 million residents and their 5th highest GDP per capita among major world countries (World Bank, 2015). While some stakeholders believe that the AFC could benefit from Australia's event management expertise and economic power, others see Australia as a competitor.

2.2. Risks to the AFC

On the pitch, Australia's more straightforward passage to qualify for the FIFA World Cup creates further competition for pre-existing AFC nations. As Erik recalled from the news story, there are rumoured grumblings among AFC officials that Australia's inclusion is merely taking a FIFA World Cup qualifying spot away from other AFC nations. Off the pitch, political schisms have appeared within AFC leadership. For example, in 2010, Australia and fellow AFC member Qatar both bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It is highly unusual for two countries from the same confederation to place bids for the same FIFA World Cup and demonstrated a split in support within the AFC for the bidding countries. This is also highly contentious given the high cost of placing a bid for the FIFA World Cup, with Australia's bid efforts costing around US\$45.6 million. The resulting win by Qatar amid deep controversy added to the tension between Australia and the West Asian countries. The realisation that politics were rife in international soccer was not news to Erik, but he recognised that Australia has increased its interest in soccer-related politics with its bid for the FIFA World Cup and the provisional appointment of Moya Dodd, a former Australian women's national soccer player, to the FIFA Executive Committee.

As Erik was making his way to the boarding gate, he was greeted by two soccer friends and colleagues from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. They were about to board their long flight back home. This started a conversation about another potential point of contention with Australia's inclusion in the AFC: logistical considerations. His West-Asian colleagues highlighted that it can be extremely expensive and logistically difficult to organise match play at all levels of the sport between AFC nations. Geographic and temporal differences were noted as key difficulties with his colleagues, who were dissatisfied that they had to frequently negotiate sending teams to play in AFC-related matches while the players were in the midst of the national league competition. The differences in time zones between the nations in the AFC also create potential difficulties with communication. Erik listened to their concerns, bid them farewell, and continued to the boarding gate.

3. Where to go from here?

Erik believed that he had a better understanding of Australia's place in the AFC. He could understand why some AFC nations could perceive Australia as potentially detrimental. Within the short amount of time since Australia joined the AFC, they had won numerous major tournaments including the AFC Champions League and the AFC Asian Cup, which has put the spotlight on Australia's place in the AFC. He further contemplated what expulsion from the AFC would mean for Australia.

If Australia were to be dismissed from the AFC, it would be certain to have detrimental effects. Australia's inclusion within the AFC has allowed Australia to pursue numerous social and political alliances with key nations within the region. Further, seven of Australia's top ten trading partners are located in the AFC region, and Australia's move to the AFC has allowed local businesses to develop closer relationships with their partners in the region. If Australia were to be removed from the AFC, it is likely that these aspects would suffer, along with the sport of soccer in Australia itself. Erik then considered what actions could be taken to ensure that Australia retains its position within the AFC. What stakeholders were central to Australia remaining part of the AFC? What strategies should be used to help mitigate against any negative sentiment towards Australia within the AFC? As Erik boarded his plane, he realised these questions still needed further consideration. He emailed his colleagues at FFA to schedule a meeting for the following week to discuss the recent events and potential strategies to secure Australia's position within the AFC for years to come.

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