

## Editorial

# The Twelfth International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS)

December 16–18, 1991 New York

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ICIS remains unquestionably the largest annual gathering of teachers, researchers and participants of information systems. It may also be the most important. This meeting attracted over one thousand participants, many of them from Europe. The official theme was 'innovative research and practice in information systems', and even as innocuous as that seems, it failed to provide an umbrella for the meeting. Nevertheless, it did provide a slightly better excuse to be eclectic than might otherwise have been the case and some effort was made to bring together research and practice in a few sessions. More significantly, there was increased attention paid, at least rhetorically, to the 'international focus . . . following on the success of the Copenhagen ICIS last year' (p xi, *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference on Information Systems* (New York, 1991)).

The conference was distinguished in terms of European content by a special 'mini-track' dedicated to research in Europe. The premise was that since information systems research is always dependent on the economic, social and political context in which it is carried out, research traditions and profiles of information systems research in Europe are quite different from those in North America (as well as elsewhere). The choice of information systems research objects is shaped by contingent historical events, just as many organizational choices are shaped by their context. For example, research into information systems in the public sector is very different in Scandinavia, from that in North America, because of the general goals, policies and practices associated with the Scandinavian welfare state. In addition, the prevailing research institutions, funding policies and research evaluation practices, which vary considerably in these two contexts, shape significantly the institutional context in which information systems research is performed. Such issues as scale factors, national or institutional boundaries, and linguistic publication policies also make information systems research different in Europe.

Increasingly, researchers are thinking in terms of European research collaboration and cooperation. The liberation of the Eastern Bloc, which has removed significant technological and ideological barriers to infor-

mation systems implementation and research, has also added a remarkable potential to the European information systems research community.

In the conference, *EJIS* was represented by Jonathan Liebenau on a panel organized by Mary Culnan concerned with journal editing, along with Jack Baroudi of *MIS Quarterly*, Burt Swanson of *Information Systems Research* and Bob Zmud of *Management Science*. This high profile for the journal is a conspicuous reminder of the role we are expected to play in providing a forum for debate on research in information systems in Europe, as well as a recognition that *EJIS* is the 'flagship' of non-North American publications.

The doctoral consortium was a particular highlight this year in terms of the relationship between North American and European participation and scholarly differences. At the level of faculty, participation by Bob Galliers, Henk Sol and Frank Land (plus Niv Ahituv from Israel) brought more of an international dimension to the proceedings than might have been expected, and the participation by 20 European students (half of the total participation) was a very strong influence. The students, most of whom were picked by a competitive process, came from Denmark (2), Finland (2), France, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands (5), Sweden (2), Switzerland and the United Kingdom (5).

In addition to the chance to meet people from different kinds of doctoral programmes, the meeting provided the opportunity to compare research approaches. These can be summarised by differences in choices of topics and in career aspirations, and how they affect the conduct of research. The need for North American students to use their doctoral theses to launch their careers has made it necessary to assess the risks associated with the choice of topic. The goal, then, is to minimise risk, and the easiest way to do that is to choose a well documented problem. This provides an easy justification for the work, it makes it visible to those who are working in the area, and is straightforward to assess. Occasionally high risk projects are chosen, but the students know the associated high potential cost, and they expect very high returns.

In Europe, in contrast to evidence presented at ICIS,

the key connection tends to be that between student and advisor, rather than between the institution and the field. In such a context, the risks of one kind of choice versus another are not normally assessed, and if they are perceived at all it is the result of the student's broad overview of the subject, rather than as a result of graduate level survey courses. Doctoral students in Europe suffer the same introspective and existentialist worries, but these are catered for better within the system.

There are also implications for the methods of research. North Americans tend to do more quantitative work and qualitative analyses are rare, suspect and risky. Quantitative work can easily be modelled after papers published in mainstream journals, while considerations of local peers seem more important in Europe.

The sustainable growth in business education is over and this will affect IS research and teaching careers. Business schools are themselves less attractive and need new products. Four issues were key to the late 1970s: ethics, quality, competitiveness, and IT & corporate information. A similar list could not be drawn up now. There is a need for a new link between IS education and business needs and problems.

Although Americans dominate the literature, there is no reason to believe that their approach to setting research priorities is the only way to proceed. The European approach is based on longstanding traditions of research and they are being slowly interpreted for information systems research. **EJIS** is in the best position to encourage a European flavour to research and to avoid being swamped by North American pressures.