Professorial Hegemony Unveiled: Opportunities and Challenges in Building a Career in IS

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**Professorial Hegemony Unveiled: Opportunities and Challenges in Building a Career in IS**

*L’hégémonie professorale dévoilée: enjeux et défis pour les carrières en SI*

*Panel*

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**Abstract**

Information Systems (IS) academics who have recently achieved professorial status often confess that their promotion process has been long, sometimes painful, occasionally unfair, and almost invariably political. Also, it is clear that the perceptions about promotion criteria vary across schools, countries and continents. This situation is particularly worrying for 'mid career' academics, i.e., colleagues who are neither junior nor senior, but aspire to a professorial appointment. In response to this concern, this panel brings together professors from both sides of the Atlantic, who will expose this diversity in the practices, opportunities and pitfalls in the promotion process, reflecting on their own experience, but also shaping a debate on what makes a successful academic career in information systems. The panel is an opportunity for the IS community to reflect on current practices, defend or challenge them and discuss lessons that can be learned for the future.

**Résumé**

Cette table ronde rassemblera des professeurs européens et américains qui présenteront les différentes pratiques, les défis et les enjeux du processus de promotion au poste de professeur, proposeront une réflexion sur leur propre expérience, et débattront des éléments qui fondent la réussite d'une carrière universitaire dans les systèmes d'information.

**Abstract in Greek**

Σε αυτή τη συζήτηση στρογγυλής τραπέζης συμμετέχουν καθηγητές που θα εκθέσουν τις διεθνείς πρακτικές, τις ευκαιρίες και τις προκλήσεις της διδακτικής προαγωγής στη βαθμίδα του καθηγητή, αντλώντας από τις δικές τους εμπειρίες και θέτοντας τη βάση για μια συζήτηση σχετικά με το τι συνιστά επιτυχημένη ακαδημαϊκή καριέρα στα πληροφορικακά συστήματα.

**Keywords:** Academic career, promotion criteria, cultural issues, mid career forum
Background and Rationale for this Panel

The women’s breakfast at the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) 2007 started a stimulating discussion on mentoring. The importance of mentoring is indeed widely recognized in the IS community. Several conferences organize events offering mentoring to junior faculty but also opportunities for discussions among senior faculty. However, hardly any mentoring events are organized for IS academics who are ‘in the middle’ of their career (e.g., at Senior Lecturer or Associate Professor level). This observation led to the spontaneous set up of a new open group called ‘mid career forum’ at ICIS 2007, with a first group of interested parties meeting ‘on the spot’ to discuss the need and opportunities for explicit peer support.

One of the key concerns amongst members of the ‘mid career forum’ is career progress to a professorial rank. The inaugural meeting of the group at ICIS 2007 revealed an anxiety on this topic but also great variety in the practice and the (perceived) success factors for pursuing further academic development and promotion across countries and institutions. Recognizing the need to explore this topic further, the group has put together a panel proposal on ‘Developing a sustainable academic career in IS’, which was well attended at the European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) in Galway, Ireland in June 2008. The panel at ECIS confirmed that career progression is of interest to all IS academics, even though colleagues at different stages of their career may have different concerns: how to build a solid CV for a long-lasting academic career (junior) vs. how to avoid the ‘mid-career slump’ (mid-career) vs. what marks an IS professor as successful, given the current dispute about the importance of our field of study (senior).

The debate at the ECIS panel indicated that a successful academic trajectory is not only marked by journal impact factors and the number of publications (although it has been eloquently argued that ‘there is an expectation to have n+1 publications, where n is the number of publications you have at the time you apply for a Chair’). The actual content and impact of the research work itself matters, as does ‘the network’ and the exposure to international fora. Through a lively debate with the audience, seconding or disputing the advice of the panelists, clear differences in practice and the relative merit of certain career choices emerged (e.g., should one work ‘abroad’? does ‘abroad’ mean USA? how important is service to the home university? how important is service to the IS community? should one pursue a focused, singular research topic throughout their career? what evidence of leadership can a candidate for a professorial position demonstrate?). The difference in practice seemed to be both a matter of personal choice (‘this is what has worked well for me’) and of the national context (‘this is the accepted practice in my country’).

The present panel aims to take this debate further, unveiling and challenging the professorial hegemony. This hegemony, we argue, has two fundamental aspects. It concerns both the promotion process to the professorial level and the very nature of an IS professor’s role. This duality will be reflected in the panel discussion. On the one hand, the panelists will address the assumptions, the opportunities and the pitfalls in the set of practices and criteria that drive the promotion process to the professorial level in the IS field internationally. On the other hand, by looking closely at the promotion process and criteria at this level, the debate will also bring to the fore and question our dominant assumptions and understanding of the role of IS professors at present, given the contemporary challenges in our field.

The Debate

As the panelists present their experiences with the professorial hegemony, they will help us form a better understanding of its nature and manifestations, leading to a debate comparing and contrasting different perspectives and discussing the implications for the Information Systems discipline.

One facet of the professorial hegemony, as stated earlier, is a core common set of practices and understanding about the promotion process to professorial level in the IS field and the criteria used in this process. For example, there is an understanding that professorial promotion is typically judged under three broad sets of criteria, to do with research, teaching and service activities (e.g., Alshare et al, 2007; Dennis et al., 2006). Dennis et al. (2006) argue that “Teaching and service often have well-established local benchmarks” (p. 2). Whether this is the case or not, there is a widespread assumption that research output seems to be most critical promotion criterion. (Note that Alshare et al., 2007, challenge this assumption in their review of the relative merit of different criteria between teaching and research institutions).
The research merit is reflected, primarily, in the number of publications in top journals. While the debate about which (and how many) are the top journals in the field has been debated for a long time, with multiple articles published on the topic (e.g., Chua et al., 2002; Gallivan and Benbunan-Fich, 2007; Lowry et al., 2004; Mylonopoulos and Theoharakis, 2001; Rainer and Miller, 2005), there is a uniformly accepted hegemony of two journals, namely MIS Quarterly and Information Systems Research (ISR). Yet, at the latest ECIS conference, Galliers (Galliers et al., 2008) reported that only 2 and 5 per cent of the papers published in ISR and MIS Quarterly respectively were written exclusively by authors based in Europe – the respective percentages for authors with North American affiliations were 74 and 83 per cent (a regional hegemony?). It has also been debated that these two journals typically favored –at least in the past– positivist research (a hegemony in research methods?).

Current evidence therefore suggests a hegemony in the publication process, despite the reservations against journal ranking tables (e.g., Paul, 2007) and the observation that “there is a growing divergence between research performance and research standards within the Information Systems discipline” (Dennis et al., 2006, p. 1). Perhaps more importantly, there is a hegemony in the perceived relative merit research output receives in promotion decisions. The panelists will discuss how they have experienced this trend and the pitfalls it may entail: is research activity promoted at the expense of other activities or skills that are critical for an IS professor? Does the emphasis on the research activity mean that we spend less time and resources in enhancing our teaching skills or providing services to our institutions or the community? Is this desirable?

While different countries and institutions may follow slightly different procedures, the hegemony suggests that promotion criteria may increasingly become common across countries and institutions. The panel will debate whether this should be the case. What are the dangers of developing ‘one size fits all’ criteria? Conversely, what are the risks of ‘too much diversity’? Is the diversity justified culturally, or is it just mimicking past practice in a particular country or procedures followed in a related discipline? What lessons can we learn from international practice in IS? More generally, does the professorial hegemony represent a set of best practices in our field? Which are they? Should we defend them or challenge them?

The initial discussions within the ‘mid career forum’ suggested that the criteria for professorial promotion are not necessarily transparent. Additionally, colleagues in ‘mid career’ and senior colleagues may have different perceptions about the criteria for professorial promotion. This is another fundamental issue for this panel: should these criteria be clear, fixed and openly advertised? Or should each professorial application be considered independently on its own merit?

The discussion on promotion criteria actually reveals that the current professorial hegemony, as this is manifested in the promotion process, possibly provides a limited and skewed understanding of the skills necessary for a professorial appointment. An important point to consider is whether a professorial title is awarded for academic excellence at the time of application or in anticipation of leadership. What does leadership entail in this context? Is an IS professor a leader in the discipline or a leader in the home institution?

At the core of the panel debate is therefore the question of what the IS community feels should be the role of an IS professor. Why should people in mid career aspire to become IS professors? And, how can the IS community help people in ‘mid career’ acquire the necessary skills?

**Discussion format and panel contribution**

The panel chair will briefly introduce the topic (how the term professorial hegemony is used), the panelists and the structure of the discussion. In particular, the motivation for this discussion in the context of the mid-career forum will be presented, summarizing the lessons from the earlier panel at ECIS on ‘Developing a Sustainable Academic Career in IS’ and opening up the debate with further issues that may form the current hegemony.

The panelists will be invited to respond by briefly presenting their personal trajectory, especially their professorial promotion, reflecting on how they dealt with the hegemony. In particular, they will refer to the criteria used in their promotion process, commenting on whether these are typical of their country, and drawing lessons from what they consider good practice and what they consider problematic. Each panelist will provide advice to colleagues in mid-career for one or two of the key areas that typically influence professorial promotions: research, teaching, service and network building.
At this point, the audience will be invited to join in the discussion by highlighting additional promotion criteria and divergence of practice. Colleagues from regions that are not represented on the panel will be invited to comment first, so that a truly international picture of current practice can emerge.

The panel chair will briefly summarize the conclusions from this first part of the discussion (promotion criteria, diversity of practice, lessons learned and pitfalls) and invite the panelists to reflect on the implications of the debate for the profile and role of IS professors, leading to an open debate about what constitutes leadership in our field now and in the future. The main points of the debate will be summarized at the end by the panel chair.

While this panel has been planned in response to a concern among colleagues in the ‘middle’ of their academic career, interested in further advancement in academia, the topic is of interest to the broader IS community. On the one hand, more junior colleagues, presently planning out their career paths, are keen to explore these issues, identify choices, opportunities and pitfalls. On the other hand, senior scholars will find this a useful opportunity to reflect on current practices and discuss improvements for career advancement in our field. The questions above will give the opportunity to the panelists, but also to the audience, to express different views, raising awareness about the multiple open issues in the promotion process. We anticipate a lively debate that will highlight pitfalls, challenges and success stories in this process. In turn, this debate will hopefully help us draw useful lessons, of interest to all of the IS community, about our aspirations for the leading people in our field. Finally, this panel aims at creating momentum and visibility and raising membership for the mid-career forum, so that networking and knowledge sharing among our peers can be facilitated.

The Panelists

The panelists have worked in different national contexts and bring together diverse and valuable experiences about the pitfalls and the opportunities they come across as they made it to the professorial rank. The panel is chaired by a ‘mid career’ academic who launched the mid career forum.

**Athanasia (Nancy) Pouloudi (Panel Chair)** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management Science and Technology at the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB), Greece. She holds a first degree in Informatics (AUEB, Greece), and an MSc and PhD degree in Information Systems (London School of Economics, UK). Her research focuses on strategic and social issues of information systems development and implementation. She is Associate Editor of the European Journal of Information Systems and IT & People. She has taught information systems at Brunel University (as lecturer) and the London School of Economics (as teaching assistant) and held visiting positions at Erasmus University (The Netherlands) and the University of Hawai‘i (USA). She has acted as scientific coordinator for AUEB in a number of European Projects. She has led the initiative of forming a ‘mid-career forum’ at ICIS 2007.

**Kim V. Andersen** is Professor at Copenhagen Business School. He has been visiting scholar at UC Irvine, Tokyo University, Melbourne, and Örebro University. He has taken part in implementation of projects in China, Pakistan, Vietnam, Laos, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. His publications include several books (The Past and Future of Information Systems, Public Sector Process Rebuilding, EDI and data networking in the public sector, and Information Systems in the Public Service) and journal contributions including Government Information Quarterly, Information Society, European Journal of Information Systems, Social Science Computer Review, and Information Communication and Society. He has been Head of the Ph.D. School in Informatics at the CBS and initiated and managed M.Sc. e-business program He teaches master-level and PhD-courses on IT and organizations.

**Debra Howcroft** is Professor of Technology and Organisations at Manchester Business School and a member of the ESRC-funded Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC). Broadly, her research interests are concerned with ICTs and socio-economic restructuring in a global context.

**Bruce A. Reinig** is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Information and Decision Systems in the College of Business Administration at San Diego State University, where he has served as a faculty member since 2000. He received his Ph.D. in Management Information Systems from the University of Arizona in 1996. He served as a faculty member at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology in the Department of Information and Systems Management from 1996 to 1999 and at Trinity University in the Department of Business Administration from 1999 to 2000. His research interests include the development and evaluation of technologies and work
practices to support decision making. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Communications of the ACM*, *Journal of the AIS* and *Decision Support Systems*, among others.

**Virpi Kristiina Tuunainen** is Professor of Information Systems Science at the Department of Business Technology, and Director of GEBSI (Graduate School for Electronic Business and Software Industry) of the Helsinki School of Economics (HSE). Her research focuses on electronic and mobile business, software industry, and economics of IS. She has published articles in journals such as *MIS Quarterly*, *Communications of the ACM*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, *Information & Management* and *Information Society*.

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