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Scandinavian versus UK research

The importance of institutional context

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Abstract

This debate outlines some of the institutional aspects of perceived research quality and the potential implications on academic behaviour across Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. In particular the paper discusses the differences in formal measurements of research output quality in the two regions considered. The paper draws upon my personal experiences living and working in Scandinavia and the United Kingdom, and as such represents a subjective account. I argue that the formality of the UK Research Assessment Exercise encourages a high degree of academic rigor and potentially discourages the willingness to innovate and expand the academic debate. Conversely, I argue that the relative lack of formality in the Scandinavian context can both encourage innovation and potentially discourage academic rigour. As an example, I highlight the emerging field of mobile informatics.

Keywords

Scandinavian Tradition, United Kingdom, Research Quality
Measurement

Introduction

At the IRIS Conference in Larkollen in 1992, Professor Markku Nurminen gave a dinner speech characterising the essence of the Scandinavian IS community. He has as the only person participated in all IRIS conferences and has investigated our community extensively. He had prepared slides outlining the participants main publications for the IRIS conferences. For me the most striking result came about when he presented a slide classifying IRIS papers according to the distinction between the papers formulating new home-grown theories, papers that presented empirical evidence for existing theories, and ones outlining and discussing other peoples' theories. This classification showed that the majority of papers formulated new theories as opposed to falsi- or verifying others' and Professor Markku Nurminen proclaimed in his usual understated fashion: "*As you can see, we are a community of dreamers.*" It is not the purpose of this commentary to establish if Scandinavian IS researchers still constitute a community of dreamers. It could, however, be argued that in line with Dahlbom's (1996) call for "The New Informatics" the community has perhaps become a community of *doers* designing new technologies.

I believe that the characteristics of Scandinavian IS research are greatly influenced by the context in which the research is conducted. The vantage point for the reflections will be my subjective comparison between Scandinavian and United Kingdom IS research. Through the past more than 7 years I have gotten to know the UK academic system from within, and at the same time kept a close contact with the Scandinavian community. In particular I will focus on how the institutional arrangements for our work shape the ways in which we engage in innovating and consolidating our field. I will do so in the space of a couple of pages, so do not expect miracles.

Measuring UK Research

Let us begin by looking at how the quality of academics is assessed in the UK where there is a highly formalized system of assessing research quality. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a stringent process where every research active researcher every four or five

years will be asked to submit their four best research publications – primarily books or journal articles (<http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/index.htm>). The quality of a research assessment unit, which is aggregated from the participating researchers within a department or together with researchers from related departments is measured as a number between 1, and 5* with 1 being poor quality, 4 national standing, and 5 and 5* international excellence. An additional letter grade qualifies what percentage of members of staff is submitted as research active. There is a direct relationship between the awarded grade in the RAE and the funding for basic research awarded by the three UK higher and further education councils. There is also a formal assessment of the teaching quality, but the results of this exercise are not directly linked to funding from the councils. There is no formal assessment of the quality of links with the surrounding world, for example, industry, government or non-governmental institutions.

When assessing the UK system, then it is safe to say that that the RAE has succeeded. Given the formalized measures, researchers have shown that they (we) are good at generating behaviour rewarded within those measures. At the 2001 RAE, the result has, therefore been that the government has not been able to financially reward all research institutions for their successes. As a result, the rules have had to be changed raising the level needed for getting research funding. Summarising, the UK research system rewards heavily a relative few high quality products. A department's individual score and the aggregated ranking of the around 190 UK higher education institutions (universities and colleges) is an important topic of conversation amongst academics. For example, the Information Systems Department at LSE was rated 5 at the 2001 RAE. There are only 5 and 5* departments at LSE, which is ranked second after Cambridge University when taking into account the percentage of staff submitted. Immediately after each exercise, there is an intense debate of the results and their interpretation.

Scandinavian Qualities

Comparing this powerful formalised mechanism for assessing research output with the everyday life of academics in Scandinavia obviously shows us a significant difference in the institutional context shaping the behaviour of individuals and departments. In Denmark I am aware that there have been research assessment exercises to assess, mostly by qualitative means, the quality of research within departments. They are, however, to the best of my knowledge, not nearly as stringent as the UK counterpart. As a doctoral student at Aalborg University I took active part in one such research quality assessment in the early 1990s, and although it had some of the features in the RAE in terms of articulating what had been achieved over a number of years, it had a much gentler touch and was, perhaps most importantly, not directly linked to the allocation of research funding. I am not aware of any formalized systems of assessing research quality in Norway, Sweden and Finland. I have, however, not investigated the matter in-depth.

If we look at the perceptions of IS research quality in Sweden and Denmark (the two Scandinavian countries I am most familiar with), then my impression is clearly that the issue of research quality is perceived in broader terms than in the UK. Although the formal documentation of research results in academic journals and conference proceedings clearly is gaining increasing importance in Scandinavia, other issues are equally important. Here I in particular wish to focus on the issues of innovation of our discipline and the academics' interaction with the surrounding world.

Playing the UK academic game involves publishing, publishing and publishing. As a means to that end the researcher will of course be greatly helped if he or she through innovation has been able to identify novel areas of research. This will often take place through funded research projects maybe with the direct involvement from an external organisation acting as collaborator or client. As I view it, playing the Scandinavian academic game places much more emphasis on innovating and collaborating with the surrounding context, and then as a result document the research results through publications.

Mobile Informatics

As this is not a research project in its own right, I cannot prove that the observable differences in the underlying quality measurement systems (or lack thereof) lead to differences in behaviour, but it does seem a reasonable assumption. I will, however, finish with a small example illustrating the point.

The study of how we can manoeuvre in the field spanned by new mobile and wireless technologies, new working and living practices and new organisational forms is an emerging global research agenda. Last year saw the first Global Mobile Roundtable in Tokyo and this year the second was held in Stockholm. There has for some time been a highly technical discourse focusing on developing the basic technologies. There is also quite a few researchers who, mostly informed by social theories, explore how we live and work with these technologies. There has, however, been a relative lack of research investigating more substantially the concrete and theoretical relationships between technological properties of mobile and wireless technologies and the social arrangements in which these processes take place. That is, outside Scandinavia in general and Sweden in particular. In research institutions and programmes such as the Viktoria Institute (<http://viktoria.se>), Laboratorium for Interaction Technology (<http://laboratorium.htu.se>) and Centre for Digital Business (www.cfda.org) there has been a number of research efforts combining ethnographically inspired empirical studies, design, prototype development and theoretical reflections. Much of this work has related in some way or other to the mobilisation of interaction and the driving force has to a large extent been design oriented. Browsing the last five or six IRIS proceedings will reveal a wealth of papers on this topic.

In the UK, however, less than a handful of researchers have been studying the mobile revolution from a balanced socio-technical perspective. So far the only dedicated academic research institute has been the Digital World Research Centre (<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/dwrc/>).

Obviously it could be argued that the Scandinavian countries, through setting the NMT and GMS standards and widespread diffusion of mobile telephones, have a natural leading position. However, the UK also has a very high mobile telephone diffusion rate, and through the public auction for 3G licences has had very large private investments in mobile infrastructures. 3G services were launched in the UK in March 2003 ahead of the launch in Stockholm in May. One of the world's largest operators, Vodafone, is from the UK. As it happens, Sweden and Finland have major industrial interests in mobile telephony through for example LM Ericsson and Nokia, whereas the industrial interests in mobile and wireless technologies in the UK are more diffuse.

Use Informing Reflections

It could be argued that the UK quality assessment system symbolised by the RAE primarily rewards publications, secondarily innovation. It primarily defines other academics as the customers of the research. In the Scandinavian context, I would argue that there is more emphasis on innovating the field. This can be explained in terms of the surrounding world of public and private enterprises and individuals being an equally important constituency for research results from "The New Informatics" (Dahlbom, 1996).

If we accept the hypothesis that technology is interactively defined in its context of use, then the theoretical reflections of relationships between technological characteristics and human behaviour can be informed by studying how technologies are appropriated and used in actual social contexts. It can further be argued that many of the emerging technologies such as email, the mobile phone, short messaging services and instant messaging are flexible networking services supporting a great variety of use patterns (Mathiassen and Sørensen, 2002; Sørensen et al., 2002). The intricate complexities of contemporary technology use are astonishing, thus calling for empirical research as an important element. However, it also places a greater emphasis on innovating our discipline, and this innovation may in turn be more substantially achieved through enrolling a

variety of constituents. Reconsidering the field of mobile and wireless technology use, we can meet the complex challenges of understanding the development and use of location based mobile services through placing ourselves in the melange of stakeholders as opposed to primarily focus our attention towards an academic audience. This way we can, as it has been demonstrated by many Scandinavian researchers, gain a degree of worldly realism or relevance a primarily academic focus will not render possible. However, it can be argued that what may be lost in terms of innovating the understanding of ICT use within our field, may be gained in the degree of academic rigor within the UK system. It could be argued that the emphasis on publications and focus on narrow academic debate within the UK academic system may result in a relative lack of willingness to innovate the academic debate. However, it also places an emphasis on exactly a specialised and narrow debate leading to more essential theoretical insight through systematic reflection and specialisation. This academic rigor is perhaps traditionally less important in the Scandinavian context where a range of success criteria and maybe less direct academic pressure exactly can be argued to help create an environment conducive for innovation.

The interaction between a rigorous academic debate and a sophisticated knowledge of the general state-of-the-art of ICT use will be increasingly important to fully understand and influence both the academic discourse and technology practices (Mathiassen, 2000). As argued in a recent presentation at the LSE by Kalle Lyytinen on the crisis of the IS discipline, perhaps true innovation must emerge from outside the traditional academic discourse. Elements of Scandinavian IS research can in that sense be viewed as outside the mainstream. However, to gain academic influence on the development of ideas and not only on the development of technologies, it must subsequently situate itself in an academic discourse.

Summarising, I strongly believe that both the Scandinavian and the UK IS research traditions can benefit from reflections on how their institutional contexts shape the formulation of research programmes and interaction with the surrounding world.

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