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Gail Ridley

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ABSTRACT

There are many advantages in understanding the nature of a discipline and how progress has been achieved in its development. Although it has been recognised since the 1970s that disciplinary development is a social process, there is a dearth of empirical studies about the development of the IS discipline set within such a context. Instead, studies of the development of the IS discipline treated it as "historically and sociologically isolated" (Whitley 1984) and generally referred to theoretical or methodological issues.

This broad ranging empirical study examined mainstream Information Systems (IS) research in Australian universities between 1980 and 1996 and compared it against three models developed to predict its evolution. The investigation had three goals, the first of which was to investigate the demography of Australian IS researchers by examining their numbers and research education between 1980 and 1996. The second goal was to characterise Australian academic IS researcher output during the investigation period. Multiple facets of the phenomenon were examined for the characterisation, including the scope, epistemology, research methods and quality of the research published over the period. The results of the first two goals were used to achieve the third goal, which was to determine the degree of diversity displayed in Australian IS academic research between 1980 and 1996. The third goal tested an assumption in the literature of increasing diversity in IS research (Benbasat & Weber 1996).

Another objective of the study that was undertaken in parallel with the achievement of the three goals was to investigate the contribution of some social mechanisms and processes to the development of the IS discipline in a region. In order to be able to do so, the role of IS-specific research education, journals and conferences, scientific communities and researcher collaboration was examined.

The methods used in the study included email surveys of 201 Australian IS researchers and a literature analysis of 336 Australian refereed papers from ten leading publication outlets.

Although other factors had impacted on its development, the pattern of change of the research higher education of the researchers was found to be a major influence on the nature and development of Australian IS research for the period. It was concluded that the development of IS research higher degree programmes contributed to the

establishment of Australian IS mainstream research traditions and invisible colleges, which appeared from around 1993.

Despite an expectation of increased diversity in Australian IS research some convincing indications of convergence were found, signs that are likely to be associated with a positive development of the Australian IS research discipline and its traditions.

NOTE

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