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IRIS Conference Health Check

Traditions, tensions, and reformations

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Abstract. Regional conferences support researchers to network in a cost-efficient way. Quite often, such conferences become tight communities where friends and colleagues meet and share ideas regularly, year after year. However, with increasing public interest towards universities and the ideology of private-public management, deans and other managers have started to urge for high-quality scientific impact. Under the circumstances, regional conferences, with limited publication opportunities and lesser worldwide visibility among academics, have begun to lose their status as an important venue for science and net-working. It is equally easy and cheap to travel and attend more prestigious venues. In this paper, we analyze the main conference of the Scandinavian Chapter of the Association for Information Systems (AIS), aka IRIS association, namely IRIS, Information Systems Research Seminar in Scandinavia. We aim to understand what makes regional conferences (and chapters) sustainable. Our argumentation is based on two empirical studies; an analysis of the IRIS participants between 2011-2019 and a survey among senior scholars in the region.

Key words: IRIS, regional conference, participation, case study.

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1   Introduction

"IRIS was for many years almost the only place where Scandinavian researchers in Information Systems Development could meet and discuss their work. But IRIS is not unique in this respect anymore." (Nørbjerg 1995, p. 82).

Academics love conferences. They want to learn about the latest discoveries and results, gain and share ideas, interact with colleagues, increase their reputation, recruit or be recruited, and network with old and new friends (Avison et al. 2005; DeSanctis 2003; Edelheim et al. 2018). Some may even want to travel to foreign places to attend conferences because of an exotic location or expectations for a good party (Hobson 1993). For these reasons, academics invest their time and their employers' money to attend conferences.

An increasing number of conferences and journals as possible publication outlets have emerged during the past years. At the same time, university deans and departmental chairs have become more and more interested in their faculty's research impacts. They try to answer public interest towards the universities and boost societal impact through private-public management -ism, and the emergence of publication ranking systems. Also academics have become cautious about these issues. They thus have started to be selective about where to submit their papers and invest limited financial resources, ultimately questioning what the return of such investments may yield (Edelheim et al. 2018). Publishing in journals is preferable over conference participation since journals are typically considered to be of higher quality and more impactful than conferences, providing a better return on investments for academics and universities (Heinzl et al. 2016; Mingers 2007; Recker 2012; Zhang and Niederman 2017).

The emphasis on top-quality publication outlets puts conferences, especially regional conferences, in danger. It can easily be argued that conferences are unimportant since resulting publications gain less worldwide visibility and thus have decreased international impacts. Under these circumstances, the return on investments is considered inferior despite such conference benefits as reduced travel expenses, experience presenting research, interacting with colleagues, gaining and testing ideas, and generally maintaining and establishing networks. These benefits are more difficult to quantify and consequently are considered less valuable. Accordingly, academic conference admirers have proposed different means to improve conferences and increase their value (cf., Nørbjerg 1995; Sørensen 1995; Urquhart et al. 2017).

The tendency to devalue conferences and the publish or perish culture has also had an impact on the Scandinavian information systems (IS) tradition (Lanamäki and Pers-

son 2016; Mathiassen and Nielsen 2008). Our long-standing event, Information Systems Research Seminar in Scandinavia (IRIS), organized by the Scandinavian Chapter of the Association for Information Systems (also known as the IRIS association), seems not to be immune to the declining conference interest among IS scholars. At least, this is our gut feeling as long-term IRIS participants and experienced board members of the IRIS association.

In this paper, we want to understand what has made IRIS a long-standing and sustainable conference, as it was organized for the 43rd time in August 2020 and is under pressure to publish elsewhere by competing outlets. We derive our arguments from an analysis of the IRIS participants between 2011-2019 and a survey among senior Scandinavian scholars in 2018.

Before presenting the empirical studies, we will briefly review the history of IRIS.

2 A brief history of IRIS

The history of IRIS is surprisingly well chronicled. Markku Nurminen, one of the founding fathers and a loyal participant at IRIS for tens of years, has documented the early days of the community, association, and seminars in detail (cf., Molka-Danielsen et al. 2007; Lanamäki and Persson 2016; Nurminen 1997; 1999). Next, we briefly describe the main events that took place over a period of 43 years.

The first IRIS seminar took place in 1978 in Tampere, Finland. In the early years, a seminar was small and informal; discussions continuing in saunas and when out jogging. All participants were expected to contribute by submitting papers, which were then discussed thoroughly at the conference. Papers and comments were collected in the proceedings published by the organizing department. Thus, from the very beginning, IRIS aimed at providing a forum for in-depth, relevant discussions about IS research and recording these ideas in the form of scientific publication.

Participation in a seminar was by invitation only; the first seminar had just 14 participants (12 Finns, 2 Swedes), with the number slowly increasing to 19 in 1981 (IRIS'4). Both Danes and Norwegians were welcomed in the second IRIS. Altogether, the core group of people was relatively stable as at least seven persons came back every year.

The first four IRIS conferences took place in Finland, after which the Finns used a "Trojan Horse trick" (Nurminen 2017, p. 5) to disseminate the conference to other Scandinavian countries (Nurminen 1997). In 1982, IRIS'5 took place in Stockholm, Sweden, but was partly organized by Finnish guest researchers. IRIS'6 was organized in Norway but again by the Finns, who then hosted IRIS'7 in Finland. The first IRIS to not be organized by the Finns was IRIS'8 in Denmark in 1985. This conference was

also the last IRIS that took place on a university campus. In 1988, a rotating arrangement of IRIS hosting between Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark was set.

The IRIS community kept maturing. In 1989 the Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems (SJIS) published its inaugural issue. The journal gave the community identity (Nurminen 2017) as it focused on the Scandinavian IS tradition, either research about Scandinavian IS research or IS research done in Scandinavia. The journal also adopted a democratic organizational model; the editors, one from each Scandinavian country, worked as a self-organized group, an editorial collective.

In the early days, IRIS was organized informally with mutual agreements made among enthusiastic friends (Nurminen 1997). However, when the conference started to grow, some formalism to manage IRIS and SJIS was needed. Thus, the IRIS association was established in 1997. Its organization was simple: all seminar participants are members, and the board consists of four country members and two doctoral students. The association remained independent until 2005 when the general meeting decided that IRIS will join the Association for Information Systems (AIS) and become one of its regional chapters. The IRIS association thus became a local extension of AIS, supporting its mission of offering additional local networking and related services. At the same time, the SJIS editorial board had to reorganize to follow the Anglo-American model of an editor in chief and a group of associate editors.

In the early 2000s, the founding fathers were retiring, and an increasing pressure to improve the quality of papers, discussions, and to engage new (senior) people emerged. In 2009 and 2010, three new initiatives were taken. First, the first Scandinavian Conference of Information Systems (SCIS) was established and organized in conjunction with IRIS'33 (2010) "to extend and formalize a part of the seminar to a full conference in order to exchange and publish high-quality research with a particular view on the Scandinavian research community" (Kautz and Nielsen 2010, p. V). The hope was to attract more senior scholars to IRIS by providing the opportunity to publish high-quality conference papers in Springer's Lecture Notes series. Second, to make IRIS more appealing for junior faculty, doctoral students, and university administration, selected participants were offered an option to include their higher quality papers in the IRIS Selected Papers series, published in Akademisk Forlag[1]. Third, the SJIS papers were moved to the AIS Digital Library to increase their international visibility in 2009.

In 2014, the IRIS Selected Papers series also moved to the AIS Digital Library. In 2019, the SCIS proceedings moved there as well. These changes were made to tighten the AIS relationship and to provide a broader audience for one's research.

Eventually, the IRIS games also became formalized. Although "different sports activities (e.g., jogging) were part of the seminar" (Nurminen 1999) from the very first

IRIS, "they took the form of [formal] IRIS Games as late as 1995 at the IRIS18" (ibid.). However, still, their informal and very casual spirit remained; mixed groups of seniors and juniors competing with other teams around activities that no (wo)man had done before.

These incidents and activities, summarized in Table 1, have elevated the IRIS conference and community to its current state, the world's oldest consecutive conference in the Information Systems field.

Year	Incidents and activities
1978	The first IRIS takes place
1981	IRIS moves out of Finland for the first time
1988	Finland-Sweden-Norway-Denmark rotation is established
1989	SJIS publishes its first issue
1995	The first IRIS Games take place
1997	The IRIS association is established
2002	Printed IRIS proceedings were replaced with CD proceedings
2005	The IRIS association joins the AIS as its regional chapter
2009	SJIS papers are published in the AIS Digital Library
2009	The inaugural issue of the IRIS Selected Papers is published
2010	The first SCIS takes place
2010	The first proceedings of the IRIS Selected Papers with ISSN is published
2014	Selected Papers proceedings move to the AIS Digital Library
2019	SCIS proceedings move to the AIS Digital Library
2020	IRIS moves to a virtual mode due to the Corona-virus outbreak

Table 1. Historical timeline of the IRIS conference and the association.

3   Understanding IRIS and its dynamics

To understand what had made IRIS so long-standing and sustainable, we conducted two sets of empirical studies: an analysis of IRIS participation between 2011-2019 and a survey among Scandinavian senior IS scholars in 2018.

3.1   IRIS participation between 2011-2019

We started the analysis by gathering the list of participants from the IRIS conference organizers. Initially, we wanted to include the year 2010, the initiation of SCIS and the Selected Papers, but the list was deleted. Thus, we had to rely on the available information. We first merged all participant lists from 2011 onwards into a single Excel file with names, countries, and years of attendance. This is illustrated in Table 2, where the num-

IRIS	Year	Total #	Finland	Sweden	Norway	Denmark	Other
IRIS 34	2011	87	35	21	9	14	8
IRIS 35	2012	105	21	50	12	16	6
IRIS 36	2013	78	12	29	16	17	4
IRIS 37	2014	73	18	26	8	17	4
IRIS 38	2015	109	51	23	8	17	10
IRIS 39	2016	83	10	36	12	16	9
IRIS 40	2017	78	7	29	27	14	1
IRIS 41	2018	86	14	24	4	35	9
IRIS 42	2019	70	29	11	12	10	8
Total		769	197	249	108	156	59
Average		85	22	28	12	17	7

Table 2. IRIS attendance by the participants' country of affiliation.

ber of IRIS participants from 2011 to 2019 is distributed according to their country of affiliation. Grey highlighting indicates the country where IRIS was organized that year.

In nine years, there were 769 IRIS participations in total. The number of participants per conference varies between 70 to 109, with approximately 85 people on average. About seven non-Scandinavians attend every year. Interestingly, but maybe not so surprisingly, the organizing country (or occasionally the Swedes) are overrepresented in the conference audience. This trend has been typical for IRIS since its early days (Nurminen 1999).

Sweden has the highest number of participants for most of the years (five of nine), and a group of about the same size attends annually. The Finns, on the other hand, primarily participate when IRIS is organized in Finland, and then they show up in great numbers. In general, Norway and Denmark have fewer participants. There is, however, an interesting related observation: while the number of the Danes is quite constant every year, the Norwegians seem to come and go to IRIS.

We then looked at individual participants and how regularly they participate. Table 3 shows how many times an individual attended IRIS.

Consequently, 507 individual people (Table 3) have attended 769 times (Table 2) at IRIS. Meaning, three quarters (72.2%) attend only once. It is relatively safe to assume, from the experience of being a regular IRIS participant, that many of those are doctoral students. Only one out of eight of all participants (13,4%) have attended three or more times. This indicates that every year only about ten participants are experienced IRIS visitors, passing the tradition to younger generations.

Table 3 also reveals interesting facts about frequent visitors. Very few individuals attend IRIS often. Only 13 participants (3 Finns, 8 Swedes, and 2 Danes) have attended more than half of the IRIS conferences in the past nine years. Again, it is quite safe to assume that these people are not doctoral students but seasoned seniors who have made friends and networks that they want to maintain. Maybe they feel they want to contribute to the community in which they have gained something from earlier?

From the viewpoint of continuation and passing the tradition, the small number of seniors is problematic. Three Finns from the average of 22 Finnish participants have attended five or more IRIS's (that is 14%; see Tables 2 and 3), eight Swedes of 28 participants (29%), no Norwegians of 12 (0%), and two Danes of 17 (12%). This observation illustrates that the Swedes now drive the Finn-initiated conference and keep up its tradition. In general, such a small number of senior participants means that the IRIS working groups and their practices need to be constantly re-invented. The lack of seniority also impacts the quality of working group discussions and feedback. Simply

Years in IRIS (max. 9)	From All Countries	Fin-land	Sweden	Nor-way	Denmark	Other countries
8	1	0	0	0	1	0
7	1	1	0	0	0	0
6	2	0	2	0	0	0
5	9	2	6	0	1	0
4	18	2	7	5	4	0
3	37	6	15	6	9	1
2	73	31	20	7	14	1
1	366	99	88	53	71	55
Total	507	141	138	71	100	57

Table 3. The regularity of attendance.

speaking, there may not be enough seniors and experiences to pass the tradition along and continue contributing to the high-quality debate.

3.2 Senior scholars survey

In spring 2018, we conducted a qualitative survey among senior Scandinavian IS scholars. We first identified all full IS professors in each country, and then sent them personal emails asking their opinions on IRIS (n=64). We were particularly interested in whether they have participated, and why, in the IRIS conferences during 2015, 2016, or 2017[2], and how to make IRIS more attractive to seniors, postdocs, and doctoral students. Altogether we received 30 responses[3], two-thirds declaring non-participation. This was not surprising considering the low number of senior participants earlier. We inductively

analyzed the free-form email responses to identify possible patterns and common issues. Table 4 presents the respondent summary.

Participated?	Finland (n=14)	Sweden (n=21)	Norway (n=8)	Denmark (n=21)	Sum (n=64)
yes	2	3	3	2	10
no	3	4	3	10	20
Total	5	7	6	12	30

Table 4. Senior scholars and their attendance to IRIS 2015-2017.

The participation motives range from general networking and doctoral student supervision to getting an overview of Scandinavian IS research and some compulsory reasons, such as presenting a SCIS paper or having a position on the SJIS editorial board or on the conference organizing group.

The reasons for not attending were equally distributed. Some scholars had received poor quality feedback 20 years earlier, some focus solely on journals or other fields of study, and some attend only some selected conferences (such as ECIS, ICIS, CSCW, or CHI). The most frequently mentioned excuses were personal reasons (6 mentions), including the overlap with a vacation period or the start of school year, a lack of time (too much work, administration, beginning of the teaching semester (5)), competing conferences and doctoral seminars (IRIS not prioritized outside Scandinavia (4)), AMCIS and AoM are at the same time (4), or other IS outlets being targeted (3)). It seems that there is no one single reason to attend or be absent from IRIS; it all depends on the person and their motives, career objectives, family situation, work duties, and previous experiences.

The suggestions for improvements also reveal underlying motives, assumptions, and values. For example, five people emphasized senior attendance from all Scandinavian countries, and two a good mixture of seniors and postdocs as desirable. Participants also preferred networking, sharing ideas, and the IRIS spirit (4 mentions). On the other hand, nine people mentioned the goal of supporting doctoral students. It was, for instance, explicitly stated that "IRIS is a venue for juniors, Scandinavian-based Ph.D.'s to meet each other, but it is also for senior faculty… [Also postdocs] need to see their role in the community building of junior staff" (Norwegian #3) and "Current IRIS is

good for early-stage doctoral students but is not interesting for postdocs […] This focus is actually quite ok" (Finn #5). They were thus expressing the educational intentions of IRIS. Although all these views are not mutually exclusive, they illustrate diverse opinions about what IRIS is or should be. Is it a place for sharing of ideas and knowledge or "a standalone doctoral consortium" (Dane #8)?

Other suggestions for improvements included the time of the year of the conference (6 mentions), fast-tracking and improving relationship with SJIS (3), marketing in general (4), having world-class keynote speakers (3), and broadening the scope beyond 'traditional IS topics,' e.g., to HCI (2) or outside Scandinavia. Interestingly, two people voiced the potential of possible brand dilution. For example, a Dane (#11) stated that:

> "IRIS lost its appeal when you decided to have another conference (SCIS) that would be a 'real' conference just next to IRIS. By doing that, you diluted the message/brand of IRIS: that we have an open and tolerant, not competitive but collaborative, conference."

On the contrary, another Dane (#2) voiced that:

> "IRIS papers do not 'count' as real papers anymore. This is not good for IRIS. This means that IRIS now is only a Ph.D.-seminar and that seniors and many Ph.D.'s cannot get credit for their papers: The submissions are 'only' Ph.D./paper-drafts to discuss. I do not know what to do about this. So, making IRIS more attractive means acknowledging that it's now only for Ph.D.'s. SCIS is still for seniors and the combination as vital for attracting seniors."

The last quote points out the dichotomy of the senior scholars' perceptions. We need IRIS for doctoral education, but we also need to do something to attract the supervisors and seniors. A Finn, not having participated in IRIS for many years, proposed that:

> "In the IRIS conferences in the '90s, the comments were about the content, not about how to tune the paper into a publishable form. I think this is a big problem in management research and IS fields. There are most bizarre beliefs about 'theoretical contributions' and others, which then steer the research activities. So, when you attend a workshop at ICIS (or elsewhere), they focus on how to publish things, not on good research per se. You may end up having not a single content-focused comment." (Finn #1).

This indicates that IRIS working group discussions should focus more on the content, not on publication practices, to make them more meaningful, useful, and attractive for the seniors. However, this focus depends on the career stage, because for example, doctoral students are still learning about the publication practices. Thus, they would appreciate more comments about how to get the first paper published.

Other suggestions were more pragmatic: a need for inclusion in national ranking systems (3), professional, but not commercial conference organizing (2), and ensuring enough time for interaction and discussion in the program. Only one person mentioned the conference fee: "when we organized IRIS/SCIS, we had a really low conference fee, but that did not affect the numbers of attendees." (Swede #5).

4   Reflections

Today, the importance of academic conferences has been challenged (Edelheim et al. 2018). Especially questioned is the return of investment from time and money, as well as the impact of conference papers (Edelheim et al. 2018; Heinzl et al. 2016; Zhang and Niederman 2017). IRIS is not invulnerable to these issues (cf., Lanamäki and Persson 2016). Although the number of participants has significantly dropped from early 2000, IRIS, as both a regional conference and association, has survived for 43 years. For instance, IRIS'24 in Ulvik 2001 had about 340-350 participants, making it one of the largest IRIS events ever. Since 2011, the average has decreased to approximately 85 participants. This significant reduction makes us question whether and how IRIS, as a small regional conference, can survive. Following some senior scholars' statements, IRIS may not be that important anymore because there are alternatives.

We argue that to be long-standing and sustainable, regional conferences and associations need to be responsive and reactive to varying economic situations and trends, changing values, isms, and research cultures. Over the years, for example engaging researchers with the practice has changed (Mathiassen and Nielsen 2008), action research, as a method, is endangered (Simonsen 2009), and participatory design has transformed (Kyng 2010). Also, researchers' interest, means, and opportunities for conducting longitudinal and intensive research have changed (Kyng 2010). Altogether the more dominating publish or perish trend has had an impact on the Scandinavian IS tradition (Bødker and Pekkola 2010; Stein et al. 2016). This development means that conferences need to evolve in response to contemporary needs. They must publish topical and impactful research, or they will perish. As the IRIS history illustrates (see Table 1), new initiatives and adjustments have been made in about every six years. IRIS has partly reformed itself.

Reformation discussions have taken regularly place in the IRIS association's business meetings and the SJIS debate articles. For example, already in 1995, Nørbjerg (1995) and Sørensen (1995) argued over IRIS attendance without a paper, senior scholars' participation by invitation, improving IRIS paper review process, and the types of submissions. These topics sound very familiar even today. The initiation of the IRIS Selected Papers, the SCIS, and allowing IRIS participation without a paper are indeed long-term results of such discussions. However, such reformation has been an emergent series of responses to different incidents and problems rather than following a carefully planned roadmap. This emergence has created a set of contradictory objectives, incentives, and motives influencing the present-day conference. We will elaborate on these tensions next.

First, it is unclear whether IRIS should target doctoral students (educational objectives) or senior scholars (community building, content development, idea testing). It seems that the shift away from the early by invitation only IRIS conferences, that followed the latter objective, neglects the needs of senior scholars, leaving them questioning what value IRIS has for them. Maybe the transition to doctoral education was gradual, unnoticed, and unintended development. In this chain of evolution, the first SCIS conference "to extend and formalize a part of the seminar to a full conference" (Kautz and Nielsen 2010, p. V) can be seen as a means to bring back the seniors and provide them a forum to publish high-quality research.

High-quality research may, however, not be the only SCIS objective. Having a SCIS paper is often the reason why the costs can be accepted and reimbursed. In that vein, even IRIS Selected Papers may not be counted as it is unclear before the conference whether the paper will be selected to the Selected Paper series. This emphasizes the pragmatic value of SCIS as a funding mechanism for conference participation. This mechanism is crucial for postdocs that are often dependent on project funding and the dean's goodwill. Under these circumstances, the competition between conferences influences the choice of which conference one submits their best work. Regional SCIS, with limited international impact, and workshop-style IRIS, without national rankings and possibly unfunded participation, may not always be the first choice.

This leads to the second tension: the unclear relationship between SCIS and IRIS. Some senior scholars questioned the role of SCIS as being just another IS conference. They claim the idea of IRIS and its reputation is diluted since it can be considered as just an IS conference. From the viewpoint of current IRIS papers and their almost 100% acceptance rate versus about 35% acceptance rate of SCIS, this confusion is understandable. The papers have different submission deadlines, are reviewed following separate standards and criteria, presented in different formats, published by various

publishers (until 2019), and consequently valued differently. Yet they are submitted to the same IRIS/SCIS conference, with a joint website and a submission system, held at the same location, and follow a tightly interwoven program. For the outsiders, SCIS and IRIS seem to be the same. For the insiders, they are, of course, very different.

This highlights the third tension: the objective of IRIS. Senior scholars seem to agree that IRIS is unique in terms of engaging juniors and seniors and has a special spirit. The IRIS games, where the groups with members from different countries and career stages playfully compete with each other on unknown events, are also a part of this informal tradition. However, the emerging publish or perish trend has influenced ambitious researchers to seek venues where their research has an impact (Heinzl et al. 2016; Zhang and Niederman 2017). In that game, informal chats, developing and commenting on doctoral students' paper drafts, and the absence of a large number of world-class seniors do not make IRIS a winner. Publishing in either SCIS, which is a conference paper in the world of prestigious journals, or the Selected IRIS Papers, that is also a conference paper but with lower quality, pleases neither the ambitious researchers nor their deans.

Yet conference participation and the value of informality cannot be underrated. IRIS is more than just discussing papers and getting feedback. First, doctoral students and postdocs may build their networks and possibly coauthor with new people—as reportedly happened with Lanamäki and Persson (see their 2016 paper)—because the community is rather small and stays together in a remote location for few days. Second, seniors chairing IRIS working groups practice apprenticeship where the juniors can learn how to supervise research, give constructive feedback, and debate academic details. Third, the IRIS games promote networking and social bonding. These informal ways of learning and playing postulate the IRIS spirit, which enables the informal transfer of knowledge and skills, but is not valued in the world of metrics or by all researchers.

The fourth tension questions the importance of the Scandinavian IS community. IRIS started to move around Scandinavian countries in 1988 in a pre-defined order. This made it Scandinavian as everybody had the opportunity to attend and organize IRIS. Nørbjerg (1995) for example argued that "IRIS was for many years almost the only place where Scandinavian researchers […] could meet and discuss their work." (p. 82) However, there are now many European or international conferences and events for researchers to meet. In this respect, there is no need for a Scandinavian specific IS community. As Table 2 shows, Scandinavians attend IRIS with very different patterns; constant size groups from Sweden (larger) and Denmark (smaller) almost every year while Finns and Norwegians attend more randomly. This indicates that the IRIS community is highly appreciated and valued by Swedes and Danes, while much less by others. For

example, the Finns attend IRIS in large numbers only when it is organized in Finland. This may mean they value IRIS mostly as a place to meet their national colleagues, not their Scandinavian counterparts.

IRIS has been successful in reforming itself over the years. Introducing some formalism in terms of establishing the association and SCIS, offering alternative publication outlets (SJIS, the IRIS Selected Papers, the SCIS proceedings), and increasing global visibility through the AIS. At the same time, IRIS has successfully retained its informalism through the IRIS games, keeping the IRIS spirit and conference alive. Yet the conference size has stagnated to around 85 people, and the competition with other conferences and publication outlets is not getting any easier. The aforementioned tensions influence, perhaps implicitly and subconsciously, how IRIS is perceived and valued now and in the future. This means future participants; doctoral students, postdocs, and senior scholars, assess the objectives of IRIS (doctoral seminar vs. knowledge generation) and what they personally gain from it (e.g., comments on paper drafts, some publication, ideas, satisfaction from helping others, meeting friends, creating networks, maintaining a community, or having a good party). These issues need to be carefully considered when developing future IRIS conferences.

We started this paper by Jacob Nørbjerg's (1995) quote about the uniqueness of IRIS. Although IRIS is no longer the only place where Scandinavian IS researchers can meet and discuss, there still must be some uniqueness there. Perhaps it is the innovativeness of IRIS papers and discussions that matters? Sørensen (2003) compared UK and Scandinavian IS communities and stated 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." (Sørensen 2003. p.98).

The academic freedom of innovating without worrying about the publish or perish pressure and 'unnecessary' academic rigor may have differentiated Scandinavian research from the others earlier (see also Drejer et al. 2000). But the world has changed. A booming pressure for improved research productivity (Leišytė 2016) and the favorability of certain types of research in top journals (Lyytinen et al. 2007; Sørensen 2003)

does not support research that is overly innovative or is lacking in some rigor. Maybe the foci on innovation is the future direction for IRIS?

Idealistically speaking, we know the reasons for not attending IRIS include the uncertain publication outlet and the requirement to publish in high ranked journals. But, following Sørensen's (2003) argument above, brave researchers are those who dare to go against the mainstream and challenge the results of new public management where bibliometric measures are more important than what you actually know. For example, previous IRIS's have attracted participatory design, human-computer interaction, computer-support cooperative work, and software engineering scholars. Today, most IRIS participants can be to position to classic IS community, at least according to our observation. Traditional Scandinavian inclusion has vanished, and IRIS has become a subset of broader IS approaches. Maybe it is time to be brave and make IRIS more inclusive by re-attracting colleagues from other fields.

5   Summary and conclusions

In this paper, we have tried to understand what has made IRIS so long-standing and sustainable. The answer is simple: constant reformation. IRIS has indeed renewed its format and practices while still maintaining (at least some level) of informality and the the IRIS spirit. This reformation has mostly been emergent, a set of responses to different incidents. As these responses lack long-term planning, they have made the IRIS objectives and the relationship between different elements unclear, resulting in the development of several tensions. This, in turn, has alienated some parts of the community. They do not participate in IRIS anymore, stagnating IRIS participation to around 85 people per year. What is more concerning is that the number of senior scholars has significantly declined as IRIS has become more of a doctoral seminar. The lack of seniors could lead to a situation where just doctoral students are only commenting on each other's work. At the end of the day, this would mean that IRIS is not healthy and could come to an end.

We argue that acknowledging the traditions, tensions, and the uniqueness of IRIS is a step for another reformation and sustainability. Following Sørensen (1995): "approximately six hours have been allocated for discussion of papers in the working groups […] for providing the author with critique and suggestions. This is for me a unique feature of IRIS" (p. 83). We agree. How this can be maintained and supported is another issue. This realization and our analyses are our contribution and legacy as long-term IRIS participants, conference organizers, and board members.

As always, there are some limitations to our study. First, IRIS archives are practically non-existent. For example, we managed to obtain some business meeting minutes, board memos, IRIS participant lists, etc. from numerous personal folders. For this reason, there is for example no analysis of 2010 (or earlier) participants as such files have been deleted. Second, the minutes and memos are very short, stating only the decisions, not necessarily the details or background discussions. We thus had to rely on personal memories and experiences of people involved. Third, it would be interesting to study how different topics have evolved and whether that evolution has impacted the conference participation. Unfortunately, old IRIS paper archives are not available (the printed proceedings were replaced by CD in 2002 and an online database at some point in the 2010s), so this is a very challenging task. Fourth, we have analyzed only one conference in one special region, which obviously limits the transferability of our suggestions.

Notes

1. The Selected Papers was launched already in 2009 but it was only recognized by the Norwegian ranking system in 2010 when it recevied its ISSN number. Later Denmark and Sweden also acknowledged its value. Finland did not acknowledge the series as a serious academic outlet.
2. Three previous IRIS conferences before the survey.
3. Response rate 30/68 = 44%.

Acknowledgments

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