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CONFERENCE PAPER

IRNOP 2017 – Reflections from a Co-chair

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Well, the dust has now settled on the 2017 International Research Network on Organizing by Projects (IRNOP) Conference, hosted by Boston University (BU) in Boston, Massachusetts. My project management faculty colleagues from BU and I spent 18 months planning, organizing and executing this project, and it seems to have been something of a success. This was to be the first time that IRNOP was held in the United States, and we were keen to make it a memorable experience.

My thanks go to the other co-chairs and members of the organizing team at Boston University – Professors Vijay Kanabar and Roger Warburton. Vijay was the one who persuaded the IRNOP committee that Boston would be a great venue for the 2017 conference, and Roger saw this as his “swansong” before his retirement from full-time academia. I also need to thank our other PM colleague – Ginny Greiman – and the support and sponsorship that we had from the Metropolitan College Dean’s Office. Thanks must also go to the department administration and our Marketing Department, whose members “stepped up” to advise on branding and to design the conference program, the banners and the other materials.

I previously attended IRNOP in 2013 in Oslo, and Vijay and I attended the IRNOP 2015 conference in London, where UCL set a very high bar for us to meet. They were also, however, extremely supportive, having produced a very comprehensive “Lessons Learned” document that gave us a solid starting point for our planning. They were also happy to make their budget available to us, which was incredibly helpful.

Even when you start to plan early, it is challenging to “lock down” the space and make the other arrangements that you need to make in a bureaucratic organization like BU, with 4000 full-time faculty looking for space and 33,000 students who have to take priority

over everything else that is going on. However, we acquired the space and facilities that we wanted, and we employed a freelance project manager to make things go more smoothly with the logistics, especially the food and the social events, which took some pressure from the organizing team as the conference deadlines approached.

The IRNOP conference is an interesting phenomenon as it is almost as much a social event as an academic one. The PM research community is relatively small and tightly knit, and IRNOP is the chance for us all to meet, exchange ideas and cement old friendships. When I said, in my opening remarks, that it was a pleasure to welcome so many friends to Boston, I really meant that! I probably knew at least half of the attendees personally. So, we were determined to build plenty of networking time into the schedule, even though balancing that with the desire to include as many papers as possible was challenging.

This was the largest IRNOP conference yet, with around 170 attendees and over 130 papers submitted. We were able to accept and create space for 81 papers, giving an acceptance rate of around 61%. We also accepted 12 poster sessions, mostly from PhD researchers. The peer review process was daunting, and we did about 60% of this within the BU academic community. However, I believe that the final program contained excellent and academically challenging papers, and interesting themes and tracks covering a wide range of areas. I was personally very pleased to be able to develop tracks focusing on Innovation in PM, Contemporary Approaches, and Sustainability. To me, IRNOP is about “new ideas,” and the discussion of those ideas as they – hopefully – move into mainstream PM discourse in due course. This view was reinforced in my conversations at the conference with Rolf Lundin, who was one of the initial driving forces behind IRNOP almost 25 years ago. It therefore seemed appropriate to ask him to deliver the opening keynote.

Almost every academic of substance working in the PM field attended IRNOP in Boston. This allowed us to arrange meaningful plenaries around the editors of the main journals, to explore the development of theory in PM, and to invite Harvey Maylor to close the conference with a provocative and interesting closing keynote session. Feedback from attendees was very positive, and we were also able to slot in a couple of book launches as a part of the proceedings.

Before the IRNOP Conference formally “kicked off,” a very successful Doctoral Workshop took place, with 12 doctoral students presenting their work, which was constructively critiqued by a group of experienced academics, ably led by Darren Dalcher and Yvan Petit. The organizers felt that it was very important to build this activity into IRNOP in order to support those who are destined to become the future of PM research. Encouragingly, Darren suggested that some excellent and academically rigorous work was presented at this workshop.

Needless to say, we tried not to neglect the “social stuff.” The opening reception and registration on the Sunday evening took place in the atrium of the Questrom Building on the BU campus. This was a meeting of old friends, and a few new ones, and although it was scheduled to end at 8.30 p.m., there was still a significant contingent socializing at 9.30 p.m.! Monday evening saw attendees being bussed to the Boston waterfront, where the dinner was on board a luxury yacht. It was a beautiful, warm evening, and most attendees spent so much time on the top deck chatting and watching the sunset that some of us were still being served dinner as the yacht docked a few hours later. Maybe this was helped by the free bar. It is important to thank the Project Management Institute (PMI) for their generous sponsorship of this event. We also fortuitously docked just as a fireworks display was starting over Boston Harbor. I was a little worried that maybe somehow this was coming out of our budget, but it was just a serendipitous and lucky aligning of fates, and a spectacular end to the evening.

Tuesday evening offered a "duck boat" tour for those that were keen to see a little of the city, and then attendees broke up into parties to eat at many of the restaurants and bars around Boston. I think it was fair to say that there were a few attendees who were "less dynamic" than usual listening to the Wednesday morning paper presentations.

Wednesday afternoon started with the aforementioned closing keynote from Harvey Maylor, followed by the conference handover, where Derek Walker, from RMIT in Melbourne, pledged to deliver the next IRNOP conference in December of 2018. The final activity was the Awards ceremony, with PMI and IPMA conferring sponsored awards on attendees for best papers and for exemplary research. I was also personally delighted to see the inaugural PMI award for Teaching Excellence go to one of my colleagues and co-conference chairs – Vijay Kanabar.

Thank you to all who attended, presented, sponsored and contributed to making this a valuable and enjoyable experience.



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