



DR MALCOLM READ OBE

THE FULL INTERVIEW

Dr Malcolm Read OBE, retired from his role as JISC Executive Secretary in January 2012, after 18 years in the position.

We look back at his career and achievements, and ask what Dr Read sees as the future for JISC, and for himself as he hands over the reins to Professor Martyn Harrow.


Dr Read talks here, about the original scope of his role at JISC being mainly to turn out the lights, and how that rapidly changed to providing an essential role in supporting and guiding libraries and institutions, in navigating the move to a digital age.

What were your first impressions of the role when you first took it on?

Well, I was not unfamiliar with the environment. I had been involved with the Computer Board's networking

activities, and JISC then was really only about looking after networking. I had worked for the past 15 years in the Research Councils, and HEFCE was a similar funding body with a similar bureaucracy.

The job was advertised as a three-year secondment to close JISC down in an orderly way. HEFCE's view was that as every university now had a Janet connection, that was its IT remit fulfilled, so it didn't need JISC anymore. Then Sir Brian Follett wrote a significant report recommending a huge investment of £45m in the university library community to help the profession get to grips with the digital age, recognising that libraries had to move from holding and curating physical objects to facilitating access to online resources. JISC was made responsible for channelling the funding, which pretty well doubled our agenda. HEFCE then recognised the broader impact of IT on universities: it was more than just giving them a network connection for research.



The library agenda was very successful, though many universities now don't appreciate the value of what their libraries do. They still do a huge amount of work, procuring and making resources available, but the value of their role in the whole scholarly process is not being recognised as it should be.

That was one of the two big jobs that took up most of the nineties. The other was setting up UKERNA. The idea of a company to run Janet was seen as hugely high risk and complicated. That was my first exposure to politics at the ministerial level, which was an education.

What have been your biggest challenges?

In 1999 Brian Follett wrote another report that turned JISC into much more of a single entity. Until then we had largely employed coordinators: people in the community who looked after various projects and programmes. Following the review, all these people became JISC employees. Since 2000 we've been much more like an independent funding body, more autonomous even though we remain part of the funding councils. This fits well into the HE approach, where, say, a research department has a great deal of autonomy in the way it works to stimulate innovation and fresh thinking. We've maintained a JISC that works within this ethos.

What have been the key trends of the many changes over the last 18 years?

The internet, the web and now the development of social media have made a radical difference to the teaching process. Not so much to research, as the research community knew the benefit of networking long before the web – BIDS (Bath Information and Data Services) goes back to the 1980s – but the e-learning and distance learning agendas have genuinely enriched and improved the student experience. That was another step change for the JISC agenda, broadening out to support learning and teaching, and now more recently work and ideas on cloud computing.

What opportunities do you think cloud computing could have for research and education?

The cloud has two big benefits and the obvious one is flexibility: being there on-demand, without having to go through complicated procurements and worry about depreciation and upgrades to hardware. Once you get the costings right – which

is one of the aspects the Janet Brokerage is trying to achieve – then you can enjoy genuine flexibility.

The second is security. The big projects tend to do things professionally but I bet not all students back up their laptops. Now, if they work in the cloud, issues about backing up data get sorted out, without them even realising.

It will also be beneficial from the point of view of history and heritage. It's already of growing concern to historians that as more material goes online, more gets lost. If you suddenly became a famous poet, all your early work – all your working outs, all your drafts – would be on a laptop which you've probably lost or destroyed. The cloud means that all that stuff will be preserved, somewhere, against the contingencies of time.

I also see the potential for an international research and education cloud service. NRENs can already connect together to make a seamless research and education network. All those private or semi-private cloud provisions could join up equally seamlessly, so that if you temporarily run out of capacity in country A you can without effort soak up spare capacity in country B.

When you started, would it be fair to say that the sector had very few non-academic senior management?

The question implies it's no longer so! Yes, and there still are very few. However, I wouldn't be inclined to be critical of the management of UK universities since UK HE is so clearly successful by international standards.

At the level of IT directors there is a trend to hire more people with commercial experience. It's perceived – I wouldn't necessarily agree – that there isn't the strength within university departments at the second tier of IT management to provide people for the job. I'd say, compared to what? Unless you know the calibre of IT managers in other industries, you can't make a judgement: but, that's the perception.

It's not particularly a case of where you've worked before, just that you have to be very brainy to be successful in a top class university – but why would you expect otherwise? The track record of people brought in from outside is very mixed. Some are very good, some find the university IT environment beyond comprehension and leave very quickly.

What makes the difference?

For some it's not that they're bad IT managers, it's just that they're used to giving orders and people doing what they're told, which doesn't strike me as a very good management style. I'm always amazed when anyone does what I tell them! The high degree of autonomy of senior academics means that you only push through a professional approach by sheer personality. People who have been successful people at the CIO level – like Professor Martyn Harrow, my successor at JISC – win arguments on the strength of the intellectual argument and not ever being seen to cramp academic autonomy and freedom of thought. No one is going to tell a Nobel Prize winner or FRS what to do! A head of faculty with a huge scientific reputation and a publications list as long as your arm won't take orders from anybody – but they will listen to people they consider to be their intellectual peers. A CIO has to succeed within that environment.

What commercial sector experience do you think the sector could benefit from?

Private sector HE teaching provision has got to be tackled – that is now the sector's biggest challenge – and that means recognising the bottom-line: the right number of students with the right fees doing the right mix of subjects. A university has to be broad based, and that must mean having a number of loss leader subjects that you carry on with for your own reputation, but hard-nosed decisions must still be made: whether ultimately you close failing subjects or grow successful ones.

There was a genuine concern 5–6 years ago that too many physics and chemistry departments were closing, damaging the country's ability to produce scientists. Universities said they weren't getting the students to continue these courses, but now the school system is producing students with adequate science A-levels. Once a country recognises it's not producing a reasonable amount of, in this case, scientists, it can do something about it. So, I'm optimistic that HE will handle the trauma of moving to a more private-sector provision and the UK will retain its very high research output.

Twelve years ago FE was brought into JISC's remit. Do you see a difference between HE and FE?

FE is benefiting from a real recognition that the country needs a stronger skills base. In the working environment, more and more jobs are internetised and no longer office-based, which

means they can migrate to other countries. However, if your pipe springs a leak, you need a plumber *here*. A country must maintain a solid skills base of jobs which can't be internetised and which can't move out of the country, and that is the domain of FE.

But funding is still parlous and there are a lot more colleges going bankrupt, compared with universities. One might expect a series of mergers to produce an adequate critical mass, which will address the situation.

In the meantime, right now FE has less money and resources, including technical skills and expertise, but precisely because it's less well protected it's much more entrepreneurial and open to new ideas. The FE sector is prepared to be imaginative and take risks.

What achievements are you proudest of, both professionally and personally?

I'm proud of the way JISC has grown in influence, breadth and relevance. I'm proud it's been able to provide support to the HE and FE community and I'm particularly pleased with the help it's been able to give to the student learning experience.

I'm very proud of the commitment and sheer determination to promote the open access agenda. I've ensured JISC promotes a reasoned and informed approach – there are some people whose enthusiasm exceeds the bounds of reasonableness and that taints its image.

Personally – I've brought up a couple of kids who seem to have done okay and I'm very proud of them. I'm also proud that I have a reasonable international reputation. Having an international outlook is increasingly important.

Your PhD was in the hydrometeorology of glacial catchment. Did you have an ideal job in mind when you finished?

No, there was never a grand plan or a mapped career. I had to make a clear decision about whether to become a lecturer and carry on as a glaciologist, but I didn't fancy the teaching and the fact that every year the students would seem younger. My first job was research for the Ministry of Overseas Development as a tropical agronomist, which might not seem ideal for a PhD in glaciology – but of course they wanted my mathematical modelling skills.



Think internationally. If you want a serious professional career, don't be xenophobic. Art degrees need beefing up in the languages sector – one thing I really regret is my inability to speak any foreign language.

When I go onto a glacier there's still a part of me that thinks it might have been fun to spend my life running up and down them, but another part realises even that would pall after a while. I do still keep up with the field.

What advice would you give a student graduating this year from university?

Think internationally. If you want a serious professional career, don't be xenophobic. Art degrees need beefing up in the languages sector – one thing I really regret is my inability to speak any foreign language.

There's a lot of scope for international research collaboration and leverage. The world's scholarly repositories could link together seamlessly so that you could search every openly available scholarly resource – not just journals but data. It's technically feasible and not impossible to achieve. If you publish in an academic journal, you have made it openly available. So why not do it properly in a way that networking makes possible?

And, as already mentioned, there's scope for an international cloud service. Those are two things worth striving for and you can't do either of them just at the UK level – you have to be heavily engaged internationally.

What challenges face Professor Martyn Harrow at JISC in the next year?

The big task is a closer coupling of the JISC family.

The risk of moving to a private sector environment is that a university feels it can protect its own personal interests by

buying cheap'n'cheerful from Bandwidth'R' Us – who needs all that eduroam and CSIRT and other Janet stuff? But that would destroy an essential national asset. The same holds true for other JISC services. To continue a successful and relevant broad range of national activities, what we now know as the JISC Executive and the services must pull together to a common set of ideals and aspirations.

A recent count showed the JISC umbrella covers 625 staff of 32 different employers. The challenge is to bring them all into a much more coherent, joined-up set of activities for a common purpose, pooling intellect and resources.

Martyn is better placed than I am because he doesn't have the baggage. The decisions of my leadership were made in an environment of growth, but his environment will be one of financial constraint and change. Martyn can ignore what happened in the past and do it his way.

Once you have handed over to Martyn and retired from JISC, what is the first thing that you are going to do?

The very first thing is fly to Buenos Aires, then down to Ushuaia and get a cruise ship to the Antarctic. We booked it a year ago. After that: well, I have a lot of interests. I'm very into wood working and cabinet making. I'd love to take up model engineering – I really fancy building a steam engine. Photography is another big interest.

But, going back to the international theme, I'd love to go into consultancy: I'd like to continue work in some role. I'm interested in pursuing the whole open academic scholarly debate. JN