

**The role of the JISC in changing the research library
and information culture in the United Kingdom:**

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It really is a great pleasure for me to renew contact with so many North American colleagues here in York today, as well as with so many friends from around the UK. I count myself very fortunate indeed to have been able to work with so very many of you over the last decade in particular.

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When the dates of this sixth JISC/CNI conference were first announced, I did wonder if the proximity of the conference to the 4th of July holiday might affect the attendance of our transatlantic cousins; but looking round the room I'm pleased to see that the very recent celebration of the 230th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence has not noticeably affected the lure of the old Mother Country! It's really good to be able to compare notes like this, and to keep in touch with what's going on across the water.

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Or perhaps you're just happy to get away from it all for a few days, by leaving King George Bush the Second to celebrate in his own peculiar way, and to commune with his own undoubted greatness?

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And speaking of leaders who are out of touch, did you know that on the very day that America's independence was originally declared, on the 4th of July 1776, the hapless King George the Third noted in his diary: "Nothing of importance happened today"! I can only hope that none of you will have reason to write those same words in your notes today, and that this conference will turn out to be an event of some importance for all of us.

And today is certainly an occasion of some importance for me – and not least because I get to share this opening plenary session with such global luminaries as Cliff Lynch and Derek Law. Some of you may well remember the last time that Derek Law and I shared the microphone.

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It was at a JISC Conference in Brighton a couple of years ago, where Derek was the after-dinner speaker, and where I had the drop on him by speaking first to introduce him and by getting a few cheap laughs at his expense. Perhaps you remember the table that Dave Cook reserved for 'The Friends of Derek Law' which remained conspicuously empty throughout the evening?

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Now movie actors, as you know, are advised never to work with animals or young children; and conference speakers should always try to avoid the 'graveyard slot' immediately after a good lunch. But today, I've added a new 'golden rule' to the list: you should always try to avoid following Derek Law onto the podium. And that's not just because he's such a good speaker. It's also because he can usually be relied on to upstage you or to steal most of your thunder!

But to be fair to Derek (and who wouldn't want to be fair to him?), he has, on this occasion at least, stuck nobly to the remit that we agreed between us; so there's still some hope that what I have to say will dovetail more or less neatly with Derek's remarks. And if it doesn't, at least it will be my fault! So here goes...

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As at least some of you will know, on the 31st of December this year I will be taking early retirement from the post of Bodley's Librarian, after exactly ten years in Oxford. My retirement was announced back in March, partly in order to give the University the opportunity to find my successor before I leave; but mainly (from my point of view) so that I could have time to finish off a few outstanding tasks and also sort out my sprawling personal archives, which represent the accumulated flotsam and jetsam of almost 37 years in academic librarianship! In the event, I think it will be touch and go as to whether any of those original objectives are actually achieved. (Who was it who said that it's easy to forget, when you're up to your neck in alligators, that your original objective was to drain the swamp? It was probably Derek; and if it wasn't, it should have been!)

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But one of the peculiar consequences of giving more than nine months' notice of your retirement is that you get to deliver more than one 'swan song' before you finally go. And today is not the first (and I hope not the last) of those occasions when I have the opportunity to sing – I hope more gracefully than Led Zeppelin – to the assembled gallery. (I'll say nothing about the fact that the origin of the 'swan song' expression lies in the curious (but mistaken) belief that a swan sings only once and then immediately dies! So perhaps if I survive until December, I'll be able to disprove what might perhaps be more accurately described as a *rural* myth, rather than an *urban* one?)

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But they also say that a drowning man sees the whole of his life pass before him in a few fleeting moments of clarity and revelation; and I can certainly vouch for the fact that the approach of 'death by retirement' brings with it a tendency to reflect on the big issues of life - though I have to say also that I'm still waiting for those final moments of clarity!

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But my brief review of the JISC's achievements over the last decade in changing the research library and information culture in the UK, and of our future challenges and directions, gives me a welcome opportunity to pull together a few observations, based on my own professional involvement in so much of what has been going on on this side of the Atlantic, as well as to a certain extent in North America. And if what I have to say doesn't come to any of you as new revelation, I still hope that I may be able to provide a useful contribution to this conference, including a few pointers about what might lie on the horizon, as you all continue to move on without me...

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My views about recent developments in the UK are inevitably coloured by the fact that for eight years, from mid-1997 to December last year, I was privileged to be a member of the JISC Board; and, during the whole of that time, I was also fortunate to be Chairman of one of the JISC's principal committees. The committee I chaired changed its name at least three times during my chairmanship - from the 'Committee on Electronic Information', to the 'Committee on the Information Environment', and then to the 'Committee on the Integrated Information Environment'. And then, when Sir Ron Cooke took over as Chairman of the JISC, we surreptitiously dropped the word 'committee' from the title of the committee, in order to play down the bureaucracy and to reduce the acronymitis which has plagued the JISC since Noah was in the ark. The various reasons for these subtle changes of name are perhaps best known to Malcolm Read; but I sometimes wonder whether the name-changes actually mirror the way that a criminal keeps changing his aliases - in order to stay one step ahead of the law (that's the police, not Derek!).

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But a rose, by whatever name it may be known, still smells as sweet; and it's undeniably true that during my eight years in the chair my committee was responsible at various times for some of the most significant and successful initiatives in the whole of the JISC's portfolio. These included: the eLib programme; the national datacentres at Manchester, Edinburgh, and (briefly) at Bath; the Arts and Humanities Data Service; UKOLN; the Resource Discovery Network; the National Site Licensing Initiative; the Distributed National Electronic Resource; the Digital Preservation Coalition; the FAIR programme; the JISC-NSF International Digital Libraries programme; the JORUM initiative; the Archives Hub; the Common Information Environment; the institutional repositories programme - and the impressive list could go on and on. It was all very heady stuff, as well as very heavy in terms of the paperwork, which was sometimes

almost nine inches deep! It was left to Sir Brian Follett, who reviewed the JISC committee structure in 2000, to tell us what we already knew: that my committee's workload was impossibly large, and that we needed to relinquish great chunks of our responsibilities to two new committees!

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Yet at more or less the same time, the Department for Education and Skills, in its infinite wisdom, decreed that the JISC and its committees should take on the daunting task of delivering its tasty range of networked goodies to the UK's Further Education sector (for the benefit of our North American guests, that means the whole of the sprawling post-16 non-university tertiary education world). And, boy, did we face some challenges in trying to meet that tall order, in what might be euphemistically described as 'collaborative tension' with the Learning and Skills Council! (One day, I hope, Malcolm Read will publish his memoirs on that colourful chapter of JISC's history – it's certainly not part of my brief today to tell you about the fun and games that went on in that arena!) For now, I just want to reflect in summary form on the way in which the JISC was able to pick up and run with the baton handed to it by the earlier ISSC, which Derek has already described so lucidly for us.

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All sorts of creative, and enduring, developments emerged from the JISC's eLib programme, of course; but today is not the occasion to describe eLib's many achievements in detail. (Others have done that elsewhere, in any case, and there is now a voluminous literature on eLib, to which a number of you here today have contributed.) Suffice it to say now that when I became Chairman of the JISC's Committee on Electronic Information in 1997, eLib was already well established as a going concern. And my predecessor as Chairman, Lynne Brindley (whose dominating absence is with us today), and Chris Rusbridge (who *is* present today, and who was the inspirational Director of eLib for most of its life) – those two together can take the lion's share of the credit for much of what the eLib programme achieved.

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For many years, in fact, eLib was effectively the JISC's flagship initiative. The JISC was rightly proud of it; and the initiative was widely envied across the developed world as an outstanding example of what can be achieved with 30 or 40 million poundsworth of national project funding if it is wisely invested in a managed programme which carefully blends top-down direction and bottom-up involvement.

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eLib was greatly helped, of course, by the national research funding structure of the British Isles, as well as by the relatively small number of higher education institutions in the UK - both of which were factors that made eLib feasible and manageable. But those contextual advantages – which are not shared by our North American colleagues – shouldn't be allowed to take anything away from the equally important fact that we were

fortunate to have such gifted political strategists as Sir Brian Follett and Bahram Bekhradnia (of HEFCE) pulling the strings behind the scenes, as well as creative planners like Lynne Brindley and Chris Rusbridge building on the legacy of Derek Law and the ISSC.

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Nor should we forget the key role that Malcolm Read and colleagues like Dave Cook played within the JISC itself to enable so many new digital developments to flourish.

But I haven't come here today just to spray well-deserved compliments all over the place. My real task is to reflect very briefly on the ways in which the research library and information scene in the UK has developed in the recent past, and on where it might be heading in the near future. And I want to try to do this as objectively as I can, from my dual point of view as a beneficiary and as a bit-part player.

And it seems to me that, with all the many achievements that could be listed to the JISC's ongoing credit – among the biggest of which is the undeniable fact that the JISC has implemented so much of the digital library vision which was first seen by Derek Law and his ISSC colleagues in the early 90s – there is one overriding aspect for which university research librarians like me should be especially grateful to the JISC. And that is that the JISC, in all its many research and development activities across the board, has changed the culture of the research library and information world, for ever, and for the better.

I've been a chief librarian now for the last 20 years; and before that I was a deputy librarian for another eight. And those three decades of experience, at or near the top of the research library profession, have fallen for me (as I believe they will have done for those of you who have been around during that same time) into two very different parts, with the last ten years in particular being quite unlike anything that preceded them.

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And the dividing line was drawn, I believe, by the powerful combination of the effects of the 1993 Follett Review of university libraries and the global consequences of the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web. (Sir Brian Follett, by the way, is the other famous personality to the right of the screen in this remarkable photograph!) The outcome of this 'double whammy' (of the Follett Report and the growth of the Internet) was a tangible and dramatic gear-shift, into overdrive, in terms of the rate of change in the academic library and information world. To borrow the language of evolution theory (however dubious we may be about its actual scientific validity), we experienced an explosive revolution in our world that suddenly punctuated the previous era of equilibrium and gradualism.

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The pre-Follett world now seems to me like a distant dream of stately and leisurely inertia. It was all positively ante-diluvian and glacial. There were changes in that earlier

world from time to time, of course. But they were very slow, and you could see them coming. You could plan for them well in advance. In those days, you definitely felt (unlike the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell in his poem *To His Coy Mistress*), that you had “world enough and time” to let your ‘vegetable’ plans grow organically; and you felt in control.

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Almost 20 years ago, I published the fourth edition of *An Introduction to University Library Administration*, with Jimmy Thompson, the Librarian of Reading University; and I was inordinately proud of that book, which for a few years at least became a standard library school text. But re-reading the book today is like drifting through the galleries of an ancient museum: it bears virtually no relationship to the book which I would write if I were writing it now. It describes, quite literally, another world that is dead and gone. The writer L.P.Hartley put it perfectly when he said that “The past is a foreign country”: *they did things differently there*. And the biggest change that I detect between then and now is the radical change of culture that has come about in our environment in the last ten years.

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Now, in referring to this radical change of culture, of course, I’m well aware that those of you below the age of about 35 may not understand from personal experience what I’m talking about. But those of you whose careers stretch back into the glacial, pre-Follett, world will know very well what I mean. We live and work now in a culture that has come to accept that the snow has melted fast, and that ‘white water change’ is the only certainty. Our world is now heavily project-oriented. Our library and information services are driven headlong by technology. And the future is permanently high on our agenda. As Cliff Lynch has so eloquently and so often reminded us, we face a plethora of *discontinuities* that mark off the gulf that separates us from the sedate and cosy world that was so heavily oriented towards print-on-paper.

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We operate today in an environment where the ‘Googlisiation’ of search and discovery has made our increasingly impatient users expect us to make *tomorrow* happen *yesterday*, and where the mirage of the ultimate integration of all the world’s information in a single place is driving us through the desert of *disintegration* towards the oasis of a new Alexandria.

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And in this very new and different world, I would argue, the achievements of the JISC have helped us, more than anything else, to accept and to adopt an entirely new conceptual and operational culture. It’s a mindshift which is as dramatically different as the rate of change which is now such an integral aspect of our technology-driven age. And the elements of this new culture that the JISC has made us accustomed to are very numerous: the aggregation of digital content; the licensing and nationwide availability of

so many key electronic research materials; the need for nimble footwork to obtain precious national project funding; the routine sharing of expertise and resources in new co-operative partnerships; the development of innovative techniques and standards for describing, discovering, and delivering new and existing information resources; the experimentation with previously unimagined information services; the need to continuously upskill our staff; the imperative to keep up with, and to second-guess, the ever-changing technologies – all these things have become part of our new culture thanks to the JISC’s leadership and insights.

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All these new necessities have changed, almost in their entirety, the ways in which we think about and pursue our work in the networked information environment. And although he was thinking about something entirely different in his early 19th-century world, the words of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth express our present position perfectly:

“So once it would have been, - ‘tis so no more;
[We] have submitted to *a new control*:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;”

The research library and information culture in the UK is very different now. It has been changed irrevocably; and the work of the JISC has played a massive part in getting us used to that inescapable fact.

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And, as we (or perhaps I should say ‘You’?) – as you continue to wrestle with the many as-yet-unsolved challenges, of digital preservation, of IPR and copyright, of the ultimate value of institutional repositories, of the e-Science data deluge, of the ‘Googlisation’ of the global information village, of the changing role of the research library in the emerging new paradigms of scholarly communications, and of all of Cliff Lynch’s other ‘discontinuities’ - as you prepare yourselves for all of these new realities, the UK’s research libraries can (and should) be grateful that the JISC has played a leading part in preparing the way to face the future, by acting as a primary vehicle of culture change, and by equipping the information community with the altered mindset that is so necessary as the ground continues to shift beneath everybody’s feet.

As you face the future, then, you should be glad, in the UK, that the JISC is still there, and that it will continue to develop that culture change without which the library and information world would be seriously disadvantaged to face all the challenges, both known and unexpected, that are undoubtedly still to come.

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For my part, I will have to leave that future in your hands. But as I prepare to take my final bow in six months’ time, I’m happy to be able to wish you all well, in the reasonable confidence that you’re well placed to succeed. And if, like Beavis, you think

that “the future sucks”, then I exhort you, in the words of the computer scientist Alan Kay, to “predict the future” by working with the JISC to invent it!