



People in the News

Martyn Harrow

According to the official website, JISC (historically, the acronym stood for 'Joint Information Systems Committee') "offers leadership and support to UK educational organizations at a local, national and international level" providing "resources, knowledge and expertise that colleges and universities would struggle to source individually due to cost and resource". JISC is funded by further and higher education funding bodies in the UK as well as the Research Councils. In tough economic times, when institutions are struggling with reduced budgets and with students facing increased tuition fees, it could be argued that Martyn Harrow, the new Head of JISC, has taken on an unenviable challenge, one that many others would have shied away from. It seemed an opportune moment for *Insights* to speak to him about his new role.

We are all (often painfully) aware of the pressures resulting from the current financial climate, so your Editor began by asking Martyn what he sees as the major challenges in his prestigious new role. He replied, "For me personally, I want to ensure JISC is run as one company and as a single organization. We know the pressure people are under in the current financial climate so we must make sure that we deliver the absolute best for our customers, giving true value for money not just in the services we offer but also in the way we work."

When asked how the role differs from other roles he has held, Martyn replied, "For me, JISC differs because it is an organization that has grown up over a long period of time and it has grown organically. So, there is a degree of complexity in bringing together the different parts and running the organization as a whole ... although that gives me a challenge, it also gives us a great opportunity to build JISC as we want it." However, he was anxious to point out the similarities as well as the differences. "What's the same about JISC compared to other places I have worked is that it is all about people. It is essentially about the people who work for us and the people who we work for – our owners, funders and our users."

That thought brought conversation very neatly on to Martyn's interesting career so far, and he was keen to point out that "I'm really fortunate that I have in fact had a lot to do with JISC over the years, from being a director of JISC Collections and JISC Advance, to sitting on the JISC Board to actually being a customer when I was Director of Information Services at Cardiff University." This role at Cardiff gave Martyn first-hand experience of using JISC services. He noted that "I was at the front-end, using JISC's services and advice to develop my own university's technology through the university IT and library services, the media centre and our high performance computing", before adding, "I enjoyed the mix of being able to provide the best support for our teaching and learning staff, the best learning

124 experience for our students and the best overall support for our university. For us to be able to do this we had to ensure we delivered the best customer service.”

Looking further back, Martyn said, “Prior to that role, I led ICT for global companies within Unilever and ICI. At various times during this period I was also responsible for IT across the USA, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia while based in the UK and The Netherlands.” He also has experience in local government, having held a senior role at Avon County Council.

In the press release announcing Martyn’s appointment, Heather Fry of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) referred to him bringing “a wealth of technology and leadership experience from higher education and the commercial sector”, so your Editor asked Martyn how he feels his past experience has prepared him for taking the helm at JISC. Displaying a great modesty, he replied, “It was very kind of Heather to make the comments that she did and yes I feel a little Churchillian about it – that all my previous life has been to prepare for this moment and this challenge.” He continued, “I think a major thread that has run through my career has been to bring together bright, able and talented people into organizations; to form high performing teams. This is central to creating a new JISC for new times; JISC is all about its people.”

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“For me bringing people together is really important. Very early on at JISC, one of my most memorable moments surrounds an event we held where we brought together for the first time all of the senior managers from across JISC. It was an event we called All Hands. We showed a video highlighting all of JISC’s achievements to date. I was amazed by the quality of the debate and by the passion, success and skills of everyone involved in the event in showing their commitment to contributing towards our transition and making a new JISC for new times.

This appreciation of the value of people in an organization extends to Martyn’s interests outside work. He is a passionate fan of Formula One, and confided that “... for me, it shows how one high performing organization, with many different pockets of expertise working together, can get results. This kind of approach is key to what I believe JISC will become.”

Work is obviously never far from Martyn’s mind. Returning to reflecting on his career, he said, “The experience I have gained from working overseas has given me a great insight into the common challenges facing people working in different locations and time zones. No matter where you are, technology has the power to bring people together in a virtual world, empowering them to deliver their working day. It also showed me the importance of reliability of service and communication – when people lose the seamless service they expect it has an impact and shows how important great customer service is.”

This awareness of the importance of service and communication will no doubt be invaluable to Martyn as he shapes what he is quoted as calling a ‘new JISC for new times’. These ‘new times’ include major changes to funding for both further and higher education in the UK, so your Editor asked Martyn about his vision for the sector, for JISC, and its relationship with the scholarly publishing industry.

“JISC is of, by and for the communities we serve; and we work entirely on their behalf. Our core purpose is to help our communities use the opportunities presented by information technology and information management in pursuit of high levels of efficiency, effectiveness and competitive advantage. I am especially keen that we foster research excellence and a digitally-enabled student experience in universities and colleges that is second to none ... For me one of the things that is central to making this happen is working together with colleagues in the scholarly publishing industry through content and licensing agreements.”

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Reshaping how JISC works with the information community will present some major challenges for Martyn, so your Editor was anxious to find out how he relaxes outside work. Aside from being a huge Formula One fan, Martyn has a range of interests that keep him busy. "I hold a degree in maths with statistics and computing from the University of Bath and am a member of various professional societies including membership of the British Computer Society and the Chartered Institute of Management Services." He also enjoys socialising with family and friends and loves music. "In years gone by you could find me happily on stage with a band playing guitar." Quite a change from the pressures of his working life!

And so the time came to draw the interview to a conclusion, but your Editor didn't want Martyn to escape too lightly! He was asked to do a little bit of crystal ball gazing, imagining that at some point in the near future he is asked to write an essay about his new role entitled 'My first 100 days'. What does he hope he will be able to say? "That's a good question and at the time of talking to you I have been in post for nearly 90 days. For me I would like to be able to reflect and say I had a steep learning curve joining JISC at a time when higher education is going through unprecedented change. I've come from being a Director of Information Services at Cardiff University and being on the factory floor, so to speak, delivering JISC's services for the benefit of my University to now leading the organization to deliver for the whole sector." But, Martyn remains remarkably grounded. "I am mindful that JISC's success will be down to how it works with others ..., so I'd hope to be able to mention a number of really insightful conversations I've had with people like UKSG, the British Library, BIS, Universities UK (UUK), Guild HE and the Association of Colleges (AoC) amongst many others who represent people in the sectors we serve."

Your Editor offered his thanks to Martyn for his time, and left the final words to him:

"I am delighted to be joining JISC at this time and we need to reshape JISC for new times. We need like everyone to work within a new financial envelope; we need to focus on what universities and colleges need from us and really deliver for them ... I believe I have made a good start in making this happen."

