

People in the news

David Prosser



David Prosser took up the role of Executive Director of Research Libraries UK (RLUK) in March this year. Despite the demands of this new position, he found time to catch up with Lorraine Estelle to talk about his background and the mission ahead.

David said that his route to the library world had been an unusual one. After graduating with a PhD in physics, he found there was not much of a call for astrophysicists, so instead went into publishing. He started out in the production team at Elsevier in Oxford, copy-editing, proofreading and 'doing all the red pen stuff we did before we had computers'. After progressing to a commissioning role for material science journals, David then joined Oxford University Press as a biomedical journals editor.

At about that time, the open access initiative started and David was intrigued by the opportunities this new model offered. His background in publishing meant that he understood the costs

involved and the value that publishers added. David's view is that this value is dwarfed by the contribution of researchers and peer reviewers and that it is odd having a situation where the group providing the smallest value controls the access.

In 2002, an advertisement for director of SPARC Europe caught his eye and he took the job. SPARC Europe is an alliance of European research libraries, library organizations and research institutions. When David joined, it already had support from JISC and some UK libraries. He was successful both in building up the membership and in raising the profile of the open access movement. The transition to SPARC Europe, with

its many library members, marked David's 'half shift' from the publishing to the library world.

March this year saw David complete the 'full shift' to the library world, when he joined as Executive Director at RLUK. The organization was formed in 1973 as the Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL) with a focus on a shared bibliographic database and the sponsorship of COPAC. Now it has developed into a body that not only provides shared services but which also speaks for the interests of its members at the highest level. Today, RLUK represents 29 leading research organizations: 23 UK academic libraries, Trinity College Library Dublin, the three UK national libraries, the V&A Museum and the Wellcome Library.

David has taken up the new role in interesting times and there are many challenges ahead. The greatest of these is the impact of the economic climate on research libraries. He says that these libraries face a huge sea change and as public spending tightens, they will have to evaluate everything they do. This naturally includes the way in which they purchase journal subscriptions.

The economic situation could lead to institutions withdrawing from collaborative effort because they feel they do not have the resources to share. However, David believes that there is an enormous amount of goodwill in the community and a proactive desire for innovative, collaborative solutions to budgetary issues.

There are of course areas of work where the local focus is best, especially in the case of unique resources, but there is also scope for collaboration to cut costs and to share effort and expertise.

The UK Research Reserve (UKRR) has demonstrated how the collaboration to de-duplicate print journal holdings and ensure there are back-up copies has allowed libraries to liberate valuable space. RLUK can build on that and perhaps extend the initiative to books.

The other issue that RLUK will work hard on is the biggest item in the research library's budget: journal subscriptions. RLUK members are spending millions of pounds each year on journal

subscriptions and in the current economic climate even 'reasonable' price rises are untenable. David pointed out that a 5% price increase on a journal subscription is likely to lead to redundancies. This is evidenced by the recent negative response from the University of California to the price rises proposed by Nature Publishing Group. A collective approach is required, and RLUK will be proactive and even bullish on the issue of price rises for journal subscriptions.

The UK library community also needs to speak with a strong voice to ensure the case for research libraries is heard. David will work with members to establish the value of the library and its holdings to the institution and to the wider environment. David noted that while we should not get too hung up on usage statistics, there is a need to use the available technologies to gain real evidence in order to demonstrate the benefits of the library to researchers and students.

On the day that David and Lorraine met, David Willetts, the new Minister of State for Universities and Science, announced that the cost of higher education is a 'burden on the taxpayer that had to be tackled'. Lorraine asked what David Prosser thought the impact of higher student fees would be for his university members. He said that things are likely to be very different from the days when he decided which university to attend. Institutions will need to consider students as customers who will want real metrics on which to base their decisions on where to study. Library facilities and working spaces are likely to become more important from the marketing point of view.

Despite the challenges ahead, David seems to be relishing his new role. He says much of the enjoyment comes from working with colleagues in the world of scholarly communications who have such a wide variety of interests. When away from the world of work, David's own interest is the theatre, and the move to RLUK has also meant relocation to London, which is providing the opportunity to visit the city's galleries, opera houses and theatres.