

# Profile

## Keith Cole



**Your Editors have been looking round the information community to find people whose profile should be highlighted, turning the spotlight on some of the unsung heroes of the profession, so were delighted when Keith Cole agreed to be the subject of this issue's Profile.**

Keith is currently the Director of Mimas but his is probably not a face familiar to many in the information community, despite the fact that they have probably benefited from the results of his work. When approached, he responded modestly "I'm very flattered to be asked. I have to say I don't have a very high profile within the UKSG community as [other colleagues] have lead on that relationship for Mimas. If you think my journey from Research Assistant ... to Director of Mimas and all that falls in the middle would be of interest to your readership then I'd be very happy to say yes".

And very happy we are that he agreed. Mimas is a nationally designated data centre, based at the University of Manchester, and hosts a significant number of the UK's research information assets, including Copac, zetoc and The Archives Hub. They have a longstanding relationship with JISC, strong connections with research councils, especially the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and partnerships with commercial groups, universities and colleges, government agencies, and national libraries and archives. Another area of expertise at Mimas is in building applications that enable users to explore and exploit this rich resource – from students and researchers working

with census data to scientists using satellite imagery. They also provide the academic community with free access to key international data resources via ESDS (Economic and Social Data Services), which includes data from organizations such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank and OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). Keith's current role involves overseeing this huge portfolio of resources.

Keith has had a full and very varied career at the University of Manchester, which began almost 30 years ago when he took up a two-year appointment based at the UMRCC (University of Manchester Regional Computing Centre), supporting users who wanted to access 1981 census data. His career at Manchester has been memorable in many ways, not least for leading him to meet his wife, Diana, who was then working there as a Departmental Secretary.

After graduating with a Joint Honours in Geography and History at Keele in 1977, Keith moved to the Department of Geography at Portsmouth Polytechnic where he took up a position as an SSRC (Social Sciences Research Council) Research Student investigating the role of the local council as agent of change in the housing

market. What struck Keith was how difficult it was to access data electronically. Thus began his lifelong interest in census data, and he began to write data analysis programs.

In 1983, he moved to become a Research Associate in the Department of Geography at Salford University, which enabled him to develop his interest in data analysis. "The year I spent as a Research Assistant at Salford University in the early 1980s was pivotal. Obtaining access to the small area statistics from the 1981 Census of Population was critical for the research I was undertaking into the provision and use of local authority library services. Getting access to census data from remote mainframes over a regional network was a major challenge and having mastered the dark arts I was frequently called upon to help other researchers and students who needed access to census data. It wasn't just a case of downloading the data for them, they also needed expert advice and guidance about the data itself in order to be able to analyse it effectively."

Keith also had a brief spell as a Research Assistant analysing counter-urbanization and social change in rural Mid Wales at the Department of Town and Country Planning at the University of Manchester.

But then his world changed forever.

In an interview for the University of Manchester magazine back in 2008, Keith was quoted as saying: "I was reading *The Guardian* on the bus and saw an advertisement for a job – it was a heart-stopping moment ... I knew at once that it was absolutely the job for me. It was serendipity."

The job was working for UMRCC on a two-year contract supporting users who wanted to access 1981 census data. "Moving to UMRCC in 1984 ... was a logical step as it built on the role I had at Salford University. Not only was I responsible for making the data available online and troubleshooting access problems, I also provided expert advice on the data itself which brought in direct contact with researchers. It soon became apparent that as the user base increased, it was important to make users more self supporting through the provision of high quality documentation. Originally, support materials were in a printed form but with the advent of a national computer network and the move away from batch to interactive computing it became possible to use pre-web tools such as Gopher to provide online support materials – albeit text based." Keith says that it became clear

that "... in terms of increasing usage of key data resources, reducing barriers to access and providing value-added support services were the future. Of course, the web provided the platform to really take this forward and it was only a short step to start building some of the first web-based interfaces to data resources such as the Census".

That was almost 30 years ago! From that early role dealing, often personally, with a small user base of around 100 customers, Keith is now responsible for a service to hundreds of thousands of customers across the whole UK higher and further education community.

When asked what the high points have been along the way, Keith replied that "Looking back it's quite hard to pinpoint specific high points as there have been so many and they have all contributed to building Mimas. In many respects, one of the most significant developments has been the launch of the new Mimas identity and associated website in 2009. This has been a major success and has transformed perceptions of Mimas. Rather than just being seen as a data centre we are now recognized as an organization of experts with skills and expertise in technical development, information and data management, applied research combined with an understanding of user needs. It took us on a journey of organizational renewal supported by a change management programme which resulted in the development of a new organizational strategy and a greater focus on highlighting the benefit and impact of the services we provide which is really important in terms of engaging with users and funders".

And of the most challenging parts of his long career at the University of Manchester, Keith said: "One of the characteristics of being a designated national data centre with a strong focus on R&D as well as service provision is that that there is constant churn in the portfolio of services and projects hosted by Mimas. Given short-term funding, long-term sustainability is a constant challenge. One of the specific challenges for Mimas is to ensure that it not only continues to develop innovative services which meet current user needs but that it also anticipates future requirements, such as mobile interfaces. In this context, Mimas is continually bidding for the R&D funding which is vital to enable Mimas to exploit new technology and organizational capability to build new or enhance existing services."



When asked about any moments that have been particularly memorable for him, he went on to say “Over the years I have given a number of presentations on all sorts of topics. However, there is one presentation that I’m really proud of. In 1998, I was invited to give a presentation on the ESRC Census Programme at an International Workshop in South Africa. This event was organized to promote research use of data from the first post-apartheid Census. It was extremely rewarding to be able to highlight how successful the UK had been in terms of building national social science data infrastructures to support research”.

Keith was then asked to reflect on the many changes that have occurred in the information community over the years, and he chose to pick up on the increase in collaborative working. “One of the key factors in terms of building Mimas into what it has become today has been the synergies that are generated when information professionals – with their subject domain expertise and knowledge of user needs – interact with technologists. It is that interaction that has enabled Mimas to develop the innovative services that are valued by the community.”

He went on to say: “One of the characteristics of Mimas is that not only does it employ information professionals to help build and support services, we also interact with our user community using

information professionals as intermediaries. Our usage statistics also give us some interesting insights into how different institutions use the services at Mimas. Levels of usage can vary considerably between institutions. We believe there is considerable scope to increase usage of online resources but to do so we need to understand more about reasons for non-use and the role that information professionals can play in terms of the local embedding of services.”

Your Editor then asked whether there is one development/concept that Keith thinks has been ‘bubbling under’ for some time that he would like to see move significantly forward in the next few years. “Mimas is constantly experimenting with new technologies to assess their potential for enhancing services. We are currently looking at making some of our data, such as COPAC, available as linked data as a way of opening up our resources to encourage new forms of use. We are also using meaning-based computing approaches to develop a semantic search and discovery interface to the huge volumes of text in Early English, 18th and 19th century digitized books and e-journal archives.”

And finally came the \$64-million question: Where do you see the information profession in five or even ten years’ time? “This is quite difficult to answer from the perspective of Mimas which is

one step removed from university libraries and the institutional context. However, from the Mimas perspective, information professionals need to be developing those next-generation services that exploit digital library developments to meet the future needs of students, researchers and the institution itself. These services could include developing the digital literacy skills of students or assisting researchers with using institutional repositories for research data management.

But, lest you think Keith is all about work, we finished by asking about Keith out of work, when he is not busy being Director of Mimas. "I live in a small village called Mellor, which nestles on the edge of the Peak District. Although distinctly suburban, it has a bit of an industrial past although the old water-powered mills have long gone. It doesn't take very long to get into the Peak District either on foot or mountain bike." One of the highlights of his weekend is putting on his running shoes and heading off-road for a five-mile hill run, in all weathers. "From Mellor, that lets me take in spectacular views across Kinder Scout in one direction and Manchester in the other", he says.

"After cleaning off all the mud, I'm ready for whatever the coming week has to throw at me."

Mellor is an extremely curious and cosmopolitan village. It has had a lacrosse club since the 1920s and this is a major focus of the community. "Although I have never played the game, I'm the parent manager of the under-14 boys' lacrosse team which takes up a lot of my time and is extremely rewarding."

But what is clear from all that Keith had to say is that Mimas is never completely off his radar – despite all its apparent success, at the heart of it all is Keith's commitment to providing a quality service to academics and students, and, in particular, getting information to the user's desktop. But Keith doesn't claim all the praise for himself. He is keen to point out that the success of Mimas is down to the concerted effort of all the people involved. "Our success is built on being an agile and flexible organization which is adept at responding to change and exploiting new technology with a proven track record in service delivery and innovation. In this context, staff are the most important asset of the organization."