

# Research IT Strategy Data Gathering: A Case Study with University of Manchester

## Overview: Research IT Strategy Data Gathering

**Client:** University of Manchester Research IT Department

**Project Duration:** 3 months

### Scope:

- 9 university schools across 3 faculties
- 60+ researchers engaged

### Methodology:

- 8 in-person workshops, 3 online.
- 10 one-on-one interviews

### Key Areas Explored:

- Research needs
- Service portfolio familiarity
- Usage barriers
- Future needs
- EDIA considerations

### Key Outcomes:

- Comprehensive stakeholder map
- 5-year horizon scan
- Identification of common research needs
- Analysis of service utilisation
- Set of strategic recommendations

**Impact:** Informed development of Research IT's first-ever strategy, aligning services with diverse researcher needs across the university.

## Introduction

The University of Manchester, one of the world's top 25 research universities, boasts a diverse research community of over 7,000 researchers and postgraduate researchers across its three faculties and nine schools. The university's Research IT department plays a crucial role in supporting this community by providing high-performance computing facilities, data services, and technical expertise. However, the department faced challenges in assessing whether its services were meeting the diverse computational needs of the research community and required insights to inform the creation of its first-ever strategy.

## The Project

To address these challenges, Research IT partnered with Open Data Manchester to assess their service alignment with researchers' needs, identify gaps in provision, anticipate future needs, evaluate awareness of services, and explore barriers to utilisation. Open Data Manchester conducted an extensive engagement programme over three months, spanning all nine schools of the university.

The methodology employed was multi-faceted, including 8 in-person workshops, 3 online workshops, 10 one-on-one interviews, and a dedicated workshop focusing on Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA) considerations. Throughout these engagements, the team explored key areas such as research needs, familiarity with Research IT's service portfolio, barriers to using services, future needs, and EDIA considerations.

## Findings and Insights

The study revealed several significant insights into the research community's needs and challenges. Common research needs across schools included data storage, high-performance computing resources, IT support (both general IT and specialised support via Research IT's services), collaboration tools, and tailored training. While some services like databases and high performance computing resources were widely used, there was underutilisation of offerings like Edge computing and highly restricted data services.

Major barriers to service utilisation were identified, including lack of awareness, communication challenges, technical skills gaps among researchers, and confusion between IT services and Research IT responsibilities. The study also shed light on future needs, which included increased AI/ML capabilities, enhanced data governance, and a focus on environmental sustainability of technological advances.

EDIA considerations highlighted important accessibility challenges for neurodiverse researchers and those with disabilities, emphasising the need for more inclusive and accessible Research IT services.

## Impact

The insights gathered from this study are helping Research IT to shape its first-ever strategy. By providing a deep understanding of the diverse needs, challenges, and future requirements of the research community across the University of Manchester, the project has laid a foundation for strategic planning.

The findings are directly feeding into the strategy development process, offering data-driven insights that enable Research IT to align its services more closely with the actual needs of researchers. This alignment promises to enhance service delivery, potentially increase research productivity, and improve inclusivity in Research IT services across the university.

While the full impact of the study will unfold as the strategy is finalised and implemented, several key areas of potential improvement have been identified:

1. **Enhanced service offerings:** The study has highlighted opportunities to refine and expand services to better meet the evolving needs of researchers.
2. **Improved communication:** Insights into awareness gaps are informing plans to enhance communication about available services and their benefits.
3. **Accessibility and inclusivity:** The EDIA considerations raised in the study are being factored into future service design and delivery methods.
4. **Future-proofing:** The horizon scanning element of the study is helping Research IT anticipate and prepare for emerging technological needs in the research community.

As the strategy development continues, these findings will play a crucial role in shaping Research IT's approach to supporting computational research across all schools at the University of Manchester.

## Conclusion

The partnership between Open Data Manchester and Research IT has provided valuable insights into the current landscape of IT needs and challenges in the University of Manchester's research community.

Through a multi-faceted methodology of workshops, interviews, and EDIA considerations, the research was able to capture the diverse needs and challenges of the research community across all disciplines. The resulting insights, including a stakeholder map, service utilisation analysis, and strategic recommendations, are directly informing Research IT's strategy development. This user-centric approach ensures the strategy will align closely with researcher needs, potentially enhancing service delivery and research productivity.

As Research IT moves forward with finalising and implementing its strategy, we hope the insights provided by Open Data Manchester will continue to play a crucial role in shaping their approach to supporting computational research at the university. This project demonstrates the value of thorough, user-focused research in developing strategies that truly meet the needs of the research community.

## Testimonial:

*"Your work gave us our first real starting point for our strategy in terms of identifying customer needs and requirements and looking at how we can address those. Your findings really have been invaluable to us for the creation of our strategy framework, goals, priorities and ambitions."*

- Gillian Sinclair, Relationship Manager, University of Manchester Research IT