

# Is research support IT's Cinderella?

---

I'm pleased to have been invited to join this year's judging panel for Research Excellence in the CAUDIT Awards. It has caused me to reflect on what constitutes outstanding research support.

## While education and administration are not the ugly sisters, research is special

University research is sufficiently different from teaching and administration, that research IT needs to be differently delivered. I'm referring here to IT related the *conduct* of research, not its *administration*.

One difference is that all research is a journey into the unknown. As a result, unanticipated needs are likely to emerge and changes in direction occur as the research progresses and insights are gained. Any IT delivered in support of research should not be limited to delivering catalogue services on request. Research support staff in IT can easily be branded as "going native" when they come back to the shop asking for a non-standard solution to be implemented to meet a specific need.

A second difference is that research projects commonly extend beyond the university's boundaries. This has several IT impacts, perhaps the most difficult being that the technology platform and software toolset to be supported are chosen by the global research discipline, rather than locally.

Both differences lead to the need for adaptability in the technology and approach used to support research. Adaptable platforms and tools are needed, that can be configured and combined as needed to solve unique problems. Researchers commonly need to be able to play with the technology in order to understand how it can be adapted to fulfill unique requirements. A safe "sandpit" environment is more appropriate than the tightly managed, well-ordered, "engine-room" approach appropriate for hosting enterprise systems.

If the (not so) ugly sisters have all the IT funding and resources tied down, and have already decided how they will be configured, delivered and supported, there is often little scope for Cindy, even if she is allowed out of the kitchen.

The moral of this story is twofold. Firstly, let your support staff colour a little outside the lines when supporting research. Secondly, encourage technology re-use by having a range of well-integrated, adaptable platforms on which bespoke solutions can safely be built; and by telling and retelling the story of each research support success, to encourage others with similar needs to come on board.

I have intentionally written this before looking at any of the submissions for the award, so there can be no hint of where my vote may go. Now that I've put some of my thoughts in writing, I'm better prepared to explore this year's innovations in research support.

### *Author*

Richard Palmer, Practice Leader, Public Sector, Ovum

[richard.palmer@ovum.com](mailto:richard.palmer@ovum.com)

Any views and/or opinions expressed in this product by individual authors or contributors are their personal views and/or opinions and do not necessarily reflect the views and/or opinions of Informa Telecoms and Media Limited.