



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Progress on the Oxford Action Plan for Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding

JULY 2026

Executive Summary

Securing research funding remains a key element of a successful UK academic research career. The University of Oxford's project on [Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding](#) was initiated with knowledge of a growing body of data that exposed inequalities in the research funding awarded to different groups of researchers: women, racially minoritised, and/or disabled researchers. The project produced the [Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding: Barriers and Delivering Change](#) report in 2023, which explored external and internal funding schemes as well as institutional practices with the aim to address these inequalities.

The project team catalysed sector engagement around the aims of the report: 30+ universities and 11 funders were engaged, leading to the launch of the 'Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding "Forum"' in June 2024. A [public joint statement](#) was shared in June 2024.

Oxford also developed its own [Action Plan](#). Significant progress has been made across all five objectives of the Action Plan through collaboration within Oxford and across the higher education and funding sectors. Led by Research Services at the University of Oxford, a cross-institutional working group has delivered on internal objectives related to diversity data, equitable access to funding and inclusive leadership. Members of the Forum have formed challenge-focused working groups to deliver outputs that are relevant across the sector. This report highlights the progress made to date and outlines how the University is continuing to pursue equitable funding practices.

The project was funded by the University's allocation of Research England Enhancing Research Culture fund, the University of Oxford Diversity Fund, and the Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund (reference 204826/Z/16/Z).

A note on language:

For consistency with the language used in the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding report, we use the term "marginalised researcher" to refer to people with any, some or all of these characteristics: women researchers, disabled researchers, racially minoritised researchers, and LGBTQIA+ researchers. This terminology emerged as part of a consultation with the University of Oxford (including the Race Equality Task Force). The original report explains that this language is used "to reflect intersectionality and to acknowledge the processes that lead to exclusion and marginalisation." For more information on language choices, please see p.2 of the original [report](#).



Sector-wide engagement has been central to building momentum for action.

Foreword from Dr Tanita Casci

Director, Research Strategy & Policy Unit

Two and a half years from the publication of the report on Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding, I am not sure how I feel about the fact that its recommendations are needed now more than ever.

Public funding in UK research is at a record high. And this, let's be clear, is an incredibly fortunate position for the UK Research & Development (R&D) sector to be in. Our national success in R&D will need all talents. Are sector circumstances conducive to upholding this ambition? Not necessarily, and not on their own...

The finances of UK higher education institutions are being squeezed. How do we ensure that decisions about financial sustainability preserve diversity and inclusivity and are not driven solely by balancing the budget?

By working together across research organisations and funders, we can anticipate, prepare, and provide for all groups and individuals to contribute and be represented in the sector's successful future.

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has changed how it invests in the spending review period to 2029/30, by ensuring a balanced portfolio between new ideas, serving the UK economy, and helping UK businesses to scale and stay. Each one of these three funding "buckets" needs all talents. How do we ensure that UKRI develops a people strategy in which equity considerations are upheld and promoted?

Across funders, so many competitive funding calls are challenged by historically high application rates. How do we ensure that research funders and research organisations are equipped to manage application demand in a way that is equitable and inclusive?

The sector Forum developed as part of the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding project was designed to develop practical tools that could be adopted by all organisations. New resources developed by the Forum address the very issues we should be concerned about, including guidance and resources for upholding equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in demand management, and implementing positive action in funding and careers.

The readiness to collaborate is an unrecognised strength of the R&D sector. By working together across research organisations and funders, we can anticipate, prepare, and provide for all groups and individuals to contribute and be represented in the sector's successful future.

Background

The Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding project was initiated to identify the barriers to securing research funding experienced by researchers in marginalised groups and to propose solutions. In 2023, the University of Oxford published a sector report on [Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding](#) (hereafter, the Report). The findings and recommendations described in the Report are based on examining external funding schemes, funder policies and practices as well as internal funding schemes and institutional practices. Oxford's Research and Innovation Committee, a high-level committee that is responsible for the University's research and innovation strategy and policy, approved the [Oxford Action Plan for Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding](#) (hereafter, the Action Plan) to implement key recommendations from the report.

To support sector-wide action, the University of Oxford led an engagement process with 30+ Universities and 11 funders including UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), British Heart Foundation (BHF), Cancer Research UK (CRUK), National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), and Leverhulme Trust.

In February 2024, 60+ delegates came together to identify shared priorities and opportunities for collective action. A [public joint statement](#) was shared in June 2024. The statement included principles to guide the sector in delivering the work, a list of priority areas for the sector to deliver together, and Terms of Reference for the 'Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding "Forum"'.

The public statement was signed initially by 29 delegates representing 24 Universities and four funders.

The Oxford Action Plan has five key objectives:

1. Marginalised researchers have the resources, support, and adjustments required to ensure equitable access to research funding.
2. Adequate data is gathered and analysed to identify the scale, nature, and areas of disparities in the characteristics of those applying for and securing research funding, and to inform and monitor progress with the action plan.
3. Internal funding schemes administered within Oxford are inclusive.
4. Specific training needs identified in the report are met.
5. Sector-wide discussion are convened to identify collaborative approaches to addressing barriers to equitable access to funding.

Delivering the Action Plan

Since 2023, a thriving cross-institutional Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding Working Group (hereafter, the Working Group) has contributed insight to the objectives and outputs internal to the University of Oxford. This group ensures that delivery of the Action Plan remains practical and relevant to the University's research environment.

Objective 1: Marginalised researchers have the resources, support, and adjustments required to ensure equitable access to research funding

Access to funding depends not only on funding processes, but also on the availability of information, resources, and support. In this objective, practical resources

were produced to raise awareness and enhance support for researchers to access funding, see Table 1: Resources developed from the Oxford Action Plan.

Objective 2: Adequate data is gathered and analysed to identify the scale, nature, and areas of disparities in the characteristics of those applying for and securing research funding, and to inform and monitor progress with the action plan

Understanding who applies for and secures research funding is essential for identifying disparities and measuring progress. This objective aimed to improve understanding of the diversity profile of applicants and awardees for internal and external research funding.

Table 1: Resources developed from the Oxford Action Plan

Resource	Description
<u>EDI Responsiveness Matrix and Toolkit</u>	The Matrix and Toolkit guide self-assessment by fund managers, professional staff, and funding committees so that they can improve equitable and inclusive practices across fund design, communication, application, assessment, applicant reporting, and governance for their internal fund.
<u>Map of Internal Funds</u> (internal only, Single sign-on (SSO) required)	A comprehensive searchable map of internal funding schemes. Oxford currently has 66 internal funding schemes across all Divisions and central services: these were collated and categorised to improve visibility and access to opportunities, with information on the aims and eligibility for each scheme.
<u>Research Applications Library</u> (internal only, SSO required)	A library to share a collection of successful external grant applications (currently, 75) contributed by Oxford principal investigators covering all major funders and most departments. The library provides useful examples to assist with future applications and can be accessed by researchers and research professionals employed by the University.

Objective 2: Continued

New diversity reporting has improved understanding of application success rates and award values across awardees with different protected characteristics. In 2024/25 a research funding equality analysis was shared with the University's Research and Innovation Committee (RIC). The report examined protected characteristics for Principal Investigators and Co-Investigators for external awards approved in the five financial years (2019/2020 – 2023/2024). This analysis has since been incorporated into the annual research income and activity report to RIC.

The aim is to expand this type of reporting to cover applications and success rates, with a particular focus on fellowships. Ongoing efforts are being made to improve links between data systems to enable meaningful analysis.



Cross-functional collaboration helps translate evidence into practical actions.

Unsplash/Vitaly Gariev

Case Study: John Fell Fund Equalities Analysis

The John Fell Fund (JFF) is an internal University of Oxford fund that supports creativity and a proactive approach to research opportunities in all subject areas, with a particular emphasis on interdisciplinary work. Applications from Early Career Researchers (ECRs), defined as those within five years of becoming independent researchers, are especially encouraged.

JFF awards are available through Small Awards (up to £10,000) and Main Awards schemes. To allow fund managers greater insight into how awards are allocated, the Working Group collaborated across Research Services and the People Department to link JFF funding data with EDI data from the University's HR platform (People XD) analysing application success rates and award values across key characteristics, including legal sex, ethnicity, and age band.

The analysis enables comparison of JFF outcomes with the fund's strategic objectives and benchmarking against external funders, such as UKRI, which use similar classifications. The report is now embedded as an annual process, with findings presented each year to the John Fell Fund Committee and RIC.

The data can also be used by the JFF fund managers and Committee for an evidence-based approach to assess and enhance the equity and accessibility of the funding process.

Objective 3: Internal funding schemes administered within Oxford are inclusive

Internal funding schemes play an important role in supporting research careers and in generating research that can secure future funding. This objective focused on assessing and improving the inclusivity of Oxford's internal funding schemes and their approach to EDI.

A key output of this objective is the [EDI Responsiveness Matrix and Toolkit](#).

This resource enables fund managers, professional staff, and internal funding committees to self-assess and strengthen the equity and inclusivity of the funding schemes that they manage, oversee, and distribute. The matrix supports assessment of how a scheme incorporates EDI practices while the toolkit provides guidance and resources to support practical changes to funding schemes. This output was developed in collaboration with members of

the Working Group, trialled with 12 internal funds, and further tested in two workshops with fund managers from across the University in November 2025.

Case Study: Medical Sciences Division Pump-Priming Scheme

The Medical Sciences Division (MSD) Internal Fund Pump-Priming Scheme accepts applications for awards up to £12,000. It aims to enable post-doctoral researchers to obtain pilot data; supporting them to develop their independent research ideas and apply for larger-scale external research funding in the future.

In May 2026, the MSD Research Funding team used the EDI Responsiveness Matrix and Toolkit to review the equity and inclusivity of the scheme.

The review identified opportunities to improve accessibility and transparency, see Table 2: Identified improvements.

Table 2: Identified improvements from MSD Pump-Priming Scheme

Area	Improvement opportunities
Communication	• Include the full list of deadlines (term and week number) for the academic year on the scheme webpage. • Produce FAQs for the scheme. • Review language about the scheme for potential bias or discrimination. • Check whether guidance documents meet web accessibility standards and consider providing these in multiple formats to support accessibility.
Application	• Consider school holidays, religious observances etc. when setting deadlines for the next academic year.
Assessment	• Consider sharing more information about the assessment criteria with applicants. • Look at updating reviewer guidance to encourage consideration of different career progression pathways.
Reporting	• Provide more explanation to applicants of the purpose of reporting. • Provide clear information at the outset about reporting deadlines and how to request an extension. • Check that the reporting template meets web accessibility standards.

Objective 4: Specific training needs identified in the Report are met

The Report identified leadership, management, and decision-making as important factors shaping researchers' experiences of accessing funding opportunities. This objective focused on strengthening inclusive leadership capability across the University.

Several leadership development programmes are being piloted, or are in progress, to strengthen the skills of academic leaders, Principal Investigators and managers. Included are programmes that support the careers of researchers, inclusive communication, and consideration of equity in management approaches:

- The [Leading in Academic Research Environments](#) (LARE) programme pilot, funded through a Wellcome Institutional Funding for Research Culture award. This programme, co-designed by Oxford academics and leadership experts, aims to strengthen the role of academic leaders in fostering positive, collaborative, and constructive environments.
- The [Inclusive Leadership Programme](#) and [Leadership in Action](#), delivered by the Medical Sciences Division and Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division, respectively.

These programmes complement the existing suite of development courses, such as the [Confident Manager](#) series (internal only, SSO required), available to managers of researchers provided by the Learning and Organisational Development Team, and an online training course to reduce bias in research assessment.

All University staff are strongly encouraged to complete the Equality and Diversity Briefing online training course to understand what equality and diversity mean and why they are so important at a University and individual level.

Case Study: Inclusive Leadership Programme module on Breaking Barriers and Inclusive Cultures of Development

The [Inclusive Leadership Programme](#) is a multi-day leadership programme run by the Medical Sciences Division for approximately 70 academics and professional services leads per year. In 2026, the Programme included a new module to explore inclusive approaches for academics to support the professional development and career progression of research team members. Participants mapped out career milestones across a variety of roles, considered support needs and responsibilities across stages, explored types of professional development, addressed assumptions, and reflected on their own approaches to supporting development and progression.

The session considered barriers to progression experienced by under-represented academics at Oxford and recommendations for improving EDI in academic career pathways, supported by discussion with Dr Mahima Mitra and the ['Breaking Barriers' report](#).

Finally, participants used a strategy toolkit to develop proposals for positive change at Departmental or Divisional level, in relation to research culture or EDI.

Objective 5: Convene sector-wide discussions to discuss collaborative approaches to addressing barriers to equitable access to funding

This objective focused on convening UK research funders and university representatives to determine and agree on practical commitments to transform equity and inclusivity in research funding nationally. Sector-wide efforts include:

1. Through the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Forum, universities and funders have collaborated to develop practical resources and guidance addressing three priority areas: positive action, demand management and support mapping.
2. The positive action working group, led by Edinburgh, Nottingham, and King's College London, has developed a [Framework for Positive Action in Research Funding and Careers](#) to build confidence and capacity around developing and delivering positive action initiatives related to research funding, at Higher Education Institution and funder level. Work has included collecting examples of positive action in practice in research funding, a literature search, a funder workshop and a co-creation event to finalise the end-of-workstream resource.
3. The demand management working group, led by Birmingham, Nottingham, and York, has developed [Sector Guidelines and Resources for EDI in Demand Management](#). A set of parameters for equitable demand management, and funder guidance to enable better implementation of demand management practices across the sector. The group has concluded its work and presented at the Conversation Series convened by the

National Centre for Research Culture in June 2026 and the annual conference of the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) in June 2025. Plans for wider dissemination are under development.

4. The 'support mapping' working group, led by the University of Oxford and NIHR aims to gather information from major funders about the support they provide and to compare this information to identify areas for mutual learning. Initial information on schemes across 12 major funders has been collated, including relevant EDI policies and where scheme-specific EDI support is noted. This project is ongoing and is likely to identify where additional resources might be required in universities.

Next steps at the University of Oxford

The Research Environment Programmes team in Research Services will oversee the Working Group and ongoing work related to the Action Plan. The next phase of work will focus on embedding successful resources into routine practice, monitoring progress against the Action Plan, and sharing learning across the sector. Attention will be given to strengthening diversity data reporting, supporting implementation of the EDI Responsiveness Matrix and Toolkit, and advancing collaborative work through the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding Forum.

Related Reading

[A Framework for Positive Action in Research Funding and Careers](#). Rachel Van Krimpen and Fiona McClement. 2026.

[Breaking Barriers: EDI in Academic Progression at the University of Oxford](#). Mahima Mitra and Sue Dopson. Saïd Business School. 2024.

[EDI in Demand Management - Sector Guidelines and Resources](#). Claire Edwards, Ipshita Ghose and Faye Robinson and EDI in Demand Management Working Group. 2025.

[Equity & inclusion in research funding forum: a summary of findings and outputs from the stakeholder consultation](#). Tanita Casci, Thandiwe Hara-Msulira, Andrea Iacoban, Hamish McAlpine, Britta C Wyatt. University of Oxford. 2024.

[Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding: Barriers and Delivering Change](#). Jennifer Gladstone, Lisa Schipper, Thandiwe Hara-Msulira, Tanita Casci. University of Oxford. 2023.

[Everyone Belongs: Collegiate University EDI Strategic Plan 2024-2027](#). University of Oxford. 2024.

[Making collective action happen when it comes to equitable research funding](#). Thandiwe Hara-Msulira, Tanita Casci. Wonkhe, 2 July 2024



Creating inclusive research environments requires diverse perspectives and collaborative approaches.

Unsplash/Vitaly Gariev

Acknowledgements

The project team would like to thank the following colleagues who continue to contribute to the project. Please note that this acknowledgement does not imply endorsement by the named individuals of the report or its contents.

Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding Working Group members and key contributors, University of Oxford:

Eugenio Barrio
Lotte Boon
Rachel Bray
Haley Carter
Tanita Casci
Jennifer Chapin
Marie Cooksey
Kathleen Dolan
Jennifer Gladstone
Catriona Hopton
Laura Jones
Joanna Kemp
Nathan Kirwan
Sarah Mallet
Thandiwe Hara-Msulira
Rebecca Launchbury
Anne Mortimer
Mary Muers
Stephanie Perrin
Katie Price
Julie Rees
Caroline Taylor
Adelyn Wise

Sector-wide working groups:

Katy Aylward, Royal Academy of Engineering
Gemma Bridge, University College London
Rosie Burdon, Anglia Ruskin University
Elizabeth Christopher, University of Chester
Chantal Davies, University of Chester
Aisling Dolan, University of Leeds
Snigdha Dutta, University College London
Claire Edwards, University of Nottingham
Laura Fenner, University College London
Lydia Fulford, UK Research and Innovation
Johanna Gascoigne-Owens, Newcastle University
Ipshita Ghose, University of Birmingham
Kirsty Grainger, University of Bath
Annette Hay, De Montfort University
Jennifer Hazelton, University of Edinburgh
Jamie Hodge, Lancaster University
Shomari Lewis-Wilson, Wellcome
Soo Lincoln, University of Leeds
Deborah Lodge, University of Sheffield
Fiona McClement, University of Edinburgh
Maria McPhillips, University of Glasgow
Tim Newton, King's College London
Kae Ohene-Yeboah, University College London
Rachel Oliver, University of Cambridge
Anneka Poole, UK Research and Innovation
Faye Robinson, University of York
Stefanie Schneider, EDI Caucus and Northumbria University
Victoria Sharp, University of Birmingham
Vicky Strudwick, University of Warwick
Rachel Van Krimpen, University of Nottingham
Paula Wray, University of Oxford and NIHR

Contact Us

For more information regarding the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding project and Oxford's work on the research environment, contact stephanie.perrin@admin.ox.ac.uk or researcherhub@admin.ox.ac.uk.



Research Strategy & Policy Unit | Research Services
University of Oxford
www.ox.ac.uk/research/support