UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Equity & Inclusion in Research Funding Forum

A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND OUTPUTS FROM THE STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

JUNE 2024

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Authors

Dr Tanita Casci, Director, Research Strategy & Policy Unit, University of Oxford

Dr Thandiwe Hara-Msulira, Research Policy Manager, University of Oxford

Andreea Iacoban, Senior Consultant, Oxentia

Hamish McAlpine, Director for Policy & Engagement, Oxentia

Britta C Wyatt, Principal Consultant, Oxentia

Acknowledgements

The work described in this report was funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture award to the University of Oxford. The Equity and inclusivity in research funding report from which this work has progressed was funded by the University of Oxford Diversity Fund and the Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund (reference 204826/Z/16/Z.

The authors would also like to thank the following individuals for their contributions at the meeting of the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding Forum held in Oxford in February 2024 and the wider stakeholder consultations leading up to the event:

Sarah Allison (Oxentia), Diego Baptista (Wellcome), Dan Blakey (Warwick), Henry Brefo (British Academy), Tim Brooks (Anglia Ruskin), Haley Carter (Oxford), Elizabeth Christopher (Chester), Stephen Conway (Oxford), Sumi David (Exeter), Aisling Dolan (Leeds), Kathleen Dolan (Oxford), Doris Eikhof (Glasgow), Ken Emond (British Academy), Jenny Gladstone (Oxford), Catherine Goodwin (Oxford), Ipshita Ghose (Birmingham), Annette Hay (De Montfort), Jennifer Hazelton (Edinburgh), Joanna Kemp (Oxford), Natasha Kriznik (Birmingham), Nick Lambrianou (British Academy), Jennifer Lockie (Oxford), Deborah Lodge (Sheffield), Maria McPhillips (Glasgow), Mary Muers (Oxford), Mani Narayanan (Queens University Belfast), Tim Newton (Kings College London), Anouska Nithyanandan (LSE), Jo O'Leary (UKRI), Rachel Oliver (Cambridge), Ian Penton-Voak (Bristol), Katie Price (Oxford), Faye Robinson (Leeds), Candy Rowe (Newcastle), Kat Scott (ESRC), Victoria Sharp (Birmingham), Natia Sopromadze (Oxford), Ivona Spill (Oxford), Rosie Timbrell (MRC), Rachel Van Krimpen (Nottingham), Pamela Varley (Soton), Sarah Warner (Newcastle), Mark Whelan (Queen Mary), Jenny Winsland (Oxford), Paula Wray (NIHR)

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Introduction

Background: Where we started

In January 2023, the University of Oxford published the report *Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding: Barriers and Delivering Change*. The report investigated and identified the systemic barriers and challenges that individuals in marginalised groups face to secure research funding. It also set out recommendations for how Universities and funders could make their funding schemes and systems more equitable and accessible to a diverse range of researchers, thinkers, and innovators.

While many of the recommendations may be readily implemented by organisations acting unilaterally, several require coordinated action by universities and funders working together to deliver sector-wide change.

Vision: What we set out to do

Building on the findings from the report, the team at the University of Oxford partnered with innovation management consultancy company, Oxentia Ltd, to convene colleagues in the wider funding ecosystem to discuss approaches for improving equity and inclusivity (E&I) in research funding nationally. They conducted a series of university focus groups and funder interviews to build consensus and identify barriers, ahead of a day-long meeting in February 2024.

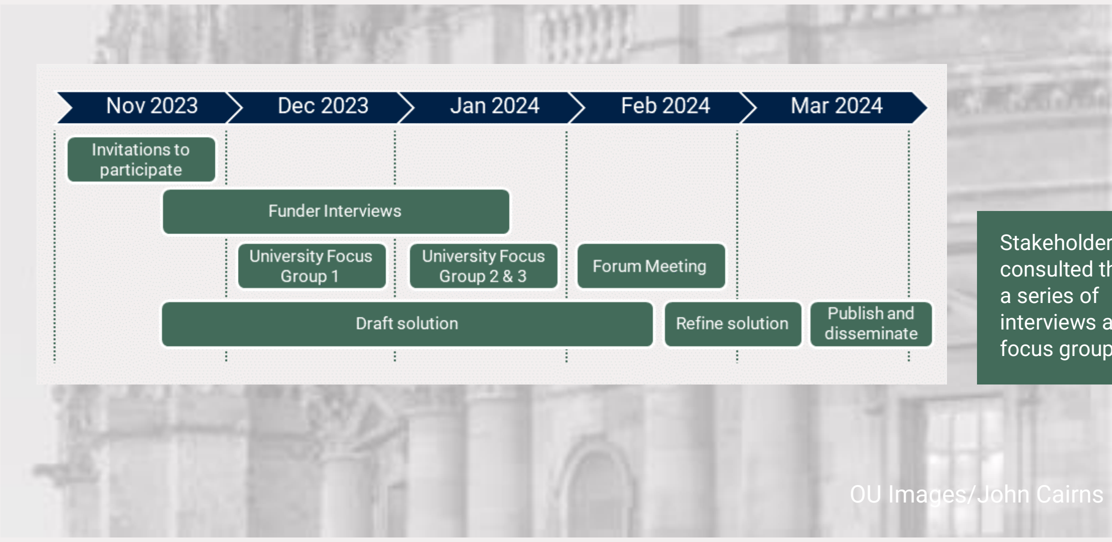
Initially, the focus group discussions and interviews were based on a set of 12 draft commitments which were derived from the recommendations of the 2023 report.

The plan was that the participants would refine the commitments, which would then be incorporated into a joint public statement that universities and funders would sign.

Other outputs from this process would include a set of actions between the universities and funders (harder to get an agreement for) or a set of principles which they could sign up to (easier to get agreement for).

Signatories to the statement would be members of the Equity and Inclusivity in Research Funding Forum (the "Forum"), through which they would work together to deliver the actions and commitments.

The figure below shows a timeline of the project activities.



Stakeholders were consulted through a series of interviews and focus groups

Stakeholder Consultation Findings

Feedback on the concept of a Forum

Overall, the participants in the consultation were in favour of coming together as a sector and to address E&I challenges through an action-orientated approach. They agreed that while there are other organisations engaged in promoting and discussing E&I in higher education, there remains a gap around E&I in research funding. In particular, they acknowledged the value of collective work, and the need to focus on areas that could not be tackled by institutions working alone.

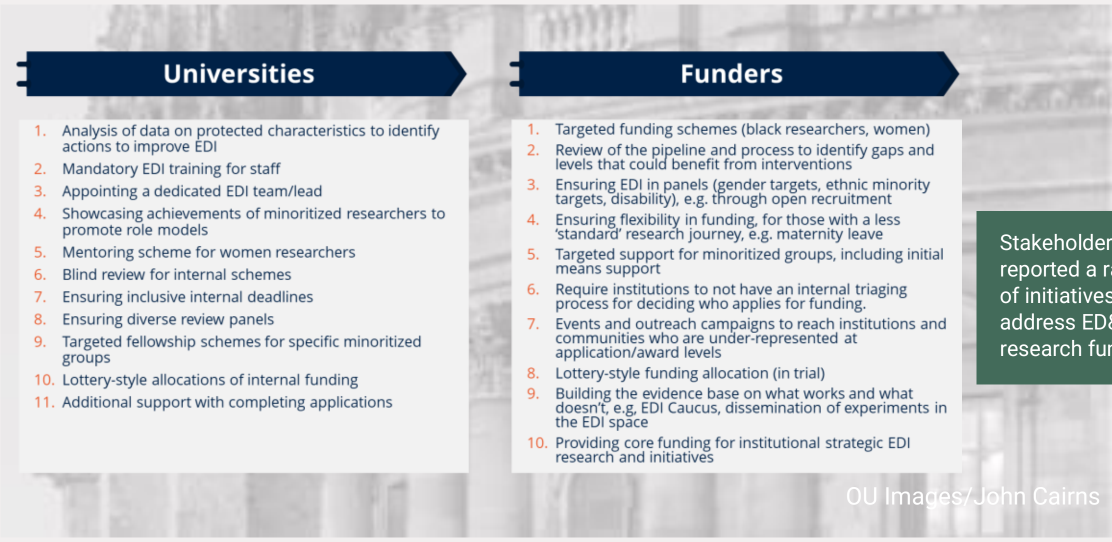
Importantly, it was felt that operating at the interface between universities and funders would accelerate the pace at which equity in research funding could be achieved. They agreed that a Forum would give stakeholders a valuable and unique platform for sharing best practice.

Current activities and challenges

The feedback revealed that both funders and universities are engaged in a range of E&I initiatives, such as monitoring data on protected characteristics, showcasing achievements of minoritised researchers, promoting role models (universities), offering targeted funding schemes, and ensuring that review panels reflect the diversity of the applicant pool (funders).

The figure below lists some of the activities mentioned during the consultation process.

Both groups also identified the lack of effective and harmonised data collection systems on protected characteristics and the limited access to data experts as significant challenges.



Stakeholders reported a range of initiatives to address ED&I in research funding

Feedback on the proposed approach

Participants believed that it would be challenging for organisations operating with different contexts and resourcing levels to sign-up to specific actions. They also suggested that solutions would need to avoid duplicating efforts with institutions' existing E&I action plans or creating an additional burden for members.

They further noted the concern that, without the support of larger funders, the initiative may not have a wider impact.

Overall, they suggested a move away from the set of high-level commitments, towards more collective actions on sector-wide issues.

Following this input, this project's approach was modified to focus on:

1. **The areas that require collective effort** to make a difference, as opposed to individual commitments that can be delivered at organisational level.
2. The **need for a structure and mechanism** through which collective action could be taken. i.e. the Forum.
3. Taking stock of the **actions that institutions and funders are already undertaking** – this provided insight into good practice and sector-wide gaps. i.e. identification of the priority areas of work.

Consequently, the event that took place on 27 February in Oxford considered **i)** the principles by which the proposed Forum would operate, **ii)** the priority areas that it would focus on and **iii)** the mechanism through which the priorities would be delivered, i.e. the Terms of Reference of the Forum.

Participants at the first meeting of the E&I in Research Funding Forum

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Agreeing a way forward

Convening the Forum

On 27 February 2024, over 60 representatives from universities and funders came together at the University of Oxford for the first meeting of the *E&I in Research Funding* Forum. The aim of the meeting was to further shape and refine the outputs from the consultation and agree on a way forward, through a commitment to collaborative action (see the agenda in Annexe A).

To guide discussions for the day, an initial draft statement was developed that included: **three guiding principles**, **eight priority action areas** and the proposed **Terms of Reference** (TOR) for the Forum.

The Forum would be comprised of professionals or member organisations who had signed up to the statement and had committed to working together to accelerate the pace at which E&I in research funding can be achieved in Higher Education.

The output of the event was the public statement that incorporates the principles, the priorities, and the Terms of Reference of the Forum that attendees and interested professionals and institutions are now endorsing.

Gathering feedback

Overall, participants were supportive of the revised joint statement, principles, and priorities, and they provided suggestions for clarifications and wording changes.

After small-group discussions on the eight priority topics, participants were invited to and cast a vote on i) their top three priorities, ii) areas they had concerns about and iii) priority areas they wanted to lead or may have been missed out of the list. Following this exercise, areas that did not have any volunteer leads were deprioritised, reducing the list from eight to six priority topics. A summary of feedback regarding the priority areas can be found in Annexe B.

Finally, participants offered feedback on the draft TOR for a Forum. This was the first time the TOR had been introduced, and participant views varied in terms of the level of details and specifics desired.

Summary of changes

The outcome of this meeting is a refined public statement committing to uphold the agreed principles and to focus our efforts on the priority areas.

In response to participant feedback, the refined statement and TOR incorporated the following changes:

- Clarified the wording around the principles.
- Reduced from eight to six priority areas.
- Clarified the role and expectations of priority area project teams.
- Outlined how progress on the priority areas will be tracked or shared.
- Clarified the overarching aim of the Forum.
- Added the option for professionals and individuals to sign up as well as institutions.
- Added information on who can become a member of the Forum.
- Added details on the expected roles and responsibilities of the public statement signatories.
- Mentioned how marginalised groups will be engaged.

Taking it forward

Reflections on the process

A secondary output from this activity has been the opportunity to reflect on the benefits – and challenges – of collaborating for the purpose of sector change.

At the start of this project, it was clear from what we heard that collective action would outweigh the activities of individuals and organisations acting on their own. The question now was: How do we bring people together to make change in a coordinated matter?

Below are some brief reflections and advice for others seeking to take on a similar project:

1. Seek input throughout the process, to build consensus and test assumptions.
2. Don't start with a blank sheet – having a skeleton or draft to reflect on can be helpful when seeking input.
3. Use an iterative process to test assumptions, and address feedback.
4. Don't forget about operational issues and questions – consider if a 'terms of reference', FAQ document, or other supplemental materials may be needed to gain consensus and buy-in.
5. Seek engagement with the right level of stakeholder – who has decision-making authority? And who is aware of the context and needs?
6. Don't shy away from acting when you see opportunities for collective collaboration and change – your neighbours and peers are likely to also be facing similar challenges.
7. Remember that we are lucky to be part of a collaborative and open-minded sector that wants to improve – people will provide constructive advice, improve your ideas, and work together to make things happen.

Next steps

Both the stakeholder consultation and the meeting of the Forum reinforced the wide interest of the UK funding community in creating opportunities for funders and universities to work together to create tools, harmonise best practice, and share knowledge on creating an equitable and inclusive research environment.

As a next step, a working group will be convened to finalise the operational aspects of the Forum. Participants who signed up to join the Forum and/or priority area project teams have been contacted, and we are working towards convening the first tri-annual meeting of the Forum.

To get involved and find out more about the Forum, please visit: https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/equity-and-inclusivity-in-research-funding

"The premise on today's forum is that our organisations are interconnected. Funding involves the interplay of university and funder processes. If we think of the system, maybe we can identify solutions that will make things better quicker". *Prof Patrick Grant.*

Annexe A: Forum Meeting Agenda

Below is a copy of the agenda from the first meeting of the E&I in Research Funding Forum on 27 February 2024 at the Saïd Business School, Oxford. The meeting was attended by over 60 representatives from UK universities and funders.

Time	Topic
09:00 – 09:30	**Registration & coffee**
09:30 – 09:40	**Introduction to the day**
09:40 – 10:00	**Findings from the stakeholder consultation (Part I)** • Analysis of the data gathering during the consultation • Proposal for a way forward based on stakeholder input
10:00 – 10:10	**Welcome address from Patrick Grant (PVC Research, University of Oxford)**
10:10 – 10:45	**Findings from the stakeholder consultation (Part II**) • Facilitated discussion with Q&A
10:45 – 11:15	**Coffee break**
11:15 – 12:15	**Practice sharing – Examples of sector-wide work and what we could learn** • Thandiwe Hara-Msulira, University of Oxford (Chair) • Diego Baptista, Wellcome • Ken Emond, Henry Brefo & Nick Lambriano, British Academy • Candy Rowe, Newcastle University • Doris Ruth Eikhof, University of Glasgow
12:15 – 13:00	**Workshop 1 – Refining priorities for action (Part I)** • Recap: About the Priority Areas • Breakout groups (1 per area; option to rotate halfway through)
13:00 – 14:00	**Lunch & Networking**
14:00 – 14:30	**Workshop 1 – Refining priorities for action (Part II)** • Recap: Summary from Part I • Voting and prioritisation exercise
14:30 – 15:15	**Workshop 2 – Mechanisms of delivery** • Recap: Draft Terms of Reference • Table discussions + feedback to group
15:15 – 15:45	**Coffee break**

Time	Topic
15:45 – 16:15	**Workshop 3 – Action planning** • Recap: Where are we now • Plenary Discussion: What needs to happen next
16:15 – 16:30	**Closing Remarks & Reflections from funders** • Jenny Gladstone, University of Oxford (Chair) • Paula Wray, NIHR • Dan Burkwood, CRUK • Kat Scott, ESRC • Jo O'Leary, UKRI • Rosie Timbrell, MRC
18:00	**Dinner**

Annexe B: Priority Area Discussions

Of the original eight suggested topics for priority areas projects, six were shortlisted to proceed. The shortlisting process was done through a voting exercise at the February 2024 meeting of the Forum, whereby participants were invited to i) vote for their top three priority topics, ii) identify those topics for which they held concerns; and iii) offer to lead-or co-lead a topic. Any topic that had sufficient participant interest, and at least one self-nominated leader was shortlisted. Below are notes from the discussions for the six shortlisted topics.

Priority #1: Map of Support

Map the available support for individuals in marginalised groups provided by UK funders, to highlight different approaches across the sector and bring these to the attention of applicants, Higher Education institutions, and funders.

Aim:

To share information about where funders are providing support to address equity and inclusivity, to enhance visibility of best-practice across funders and to support decision-making in HEIs (e.g. alert applicants to appropriate support).

Important to:

- Ensure that highlighting gaps leads to better practice, check for unintended consequences.
- Map of support should be complemented by data on who is seeking/receiving support.
- Be aware of incentives at play in individual RCs.
- Resource will be needed — by HEIs or funders — to fill in current gaps in support Individuals fall between the cracks; the more categories you create, the greater the number of gaps.
- Should educate panels and ensure joined-up process, e.g., allowing observers on panels might improve inclusivity and support for diversity.
- Be open about failures.

Priority #2: Positive Action

Develop sector guidance on mechanisms for introducing positive action, i.e. putting into practice the existing legal provision for increasing representation of minoritised groups to overcome disadvantage or under-representation.

Aim:

To develop guidance on how universities and Higher Education Institutions can implement positive action with confidence.

Important to:

- Take full assessment and consideration of the risk associated with the processes of implementing positive action.
- Take appropriate advice on existing legal provision.
- Have a clear narrative on the objectives.
- Incorporate full consultation at all stages of the process to ensure clarity and whole institutional support.

Priority #3: Data-Gathering

Consolidate data-gathering specifications and protocols to secure a more consistent data-sharing framework across the sector.

Aim:

- To understand the data and to track (and report on) the effect of interventions to improve equity in funding.
- To relieve the effort of reporting, often required by funders.
- To improve opportunities for collaboration across HEIs/funders, as readouts will be common across sector.

Important to:

- Supplement data with lived experience (story telling), to avoid misinterpreting data; this would avoid exacerbating the experiences of marginalised individuals.
- Be selective in the data specifications chosen; data abundance and/or low specification would undermine efforts to achieve sector consistency and collaborative progress.
- Make use of the expertise that exists in institutions.
- Be mindful of external factors that might affect the data (e.g. COVID, me too, BLM)
- Ensure that the data chosen is a valid readout of the change we want to see.

Priority #4: Demand Management

Develop guidelines on implementing an effective standardised approach to demand management of funding calls to ensure that EDI is considered in the design and execution of the calls.

Feedback points:

- Aligns well with the principles.
- Need consistency for when demand management needs to happen vs when other ways of managing volume should be used, e.g. randomisation.
- Demand management increases workload funder > HEIs.
- Anti bureaucratic vs effectiveness
- Rarely scaled for size/scale of organisation
- Data from those who put themselves forward.
- Everybody needs to do this to benefit the sector.
- Need a central demand management [guideline/policy]
- Could be a shared framework that is adapted locally? It needs to somehow recognise that there are different types of organisations.
- Internal funding demand management
- Challenge: ad-hoc funding allocation
- Standard triage for ineligible/not yet/not this, time of academics and support staff
- MRC – reduced demand management + due to inclusivity consequences
- Funder data for different application stages – interviews?
- Organisations take different approaches against success levels.

Priority #5: Intervention Points

Map the funding process, to identify the intersection points of funders and Higher Education institutions that could benefit from coordinated action to support marginalised groups in a way that avoids duplication of effort and administrative burdens on both.

Aim:

Understanding the process and what is already being done to address EDI in funding to help the sector:

- Avoid duplication
- Identify gaps that need to be actioned
- Help harmonise the sector approach to EDI – is there a best practice that all organisations should adopt?

Feedback points:

- Essential to do as a first step – look at the process from early-stage to post-award management
- no need for rewording
- This could get very complex very quickly for different types of funding (e.g. include networking grants, career dev grants)/career stages; need to agree the level of detail we need and is most helpful;
- Should include all career stages, including PhDs
- Can do this by also mapping the types of minoritised groups
- Will not be a linear process
- Must have funder-university co-ownership

Suggested Leads (not from the group):

- This could be a PhD project
- UKRI
- ARMA
- A group at Bristol University is looking at this

Priority #6: Short-Term Funding Calls

Identify mechanisms for both funders and universities to mitigate the negative effect of quick turnaround and short-term funding calls, such as more use of pre-announcements, and wider information-sharing on upcoming calls.

Aim:

Recognising that eliminating short-turnaround funding is not within the gift of funders, to explore a range of mitigations. These mitigations involve both funders and universities.

Comments:

Ideally, we would work to eliminate quick-turn around and short-term funding. However, we recognise that it is usually not the choice of the funder. Mitigation strategies are therefore important.

Whilst we feel that short turnaround calls are problematic from an EDI perspective, we lack good data on this. In coordination with wider work on EDI data, we should explore the scale of the effect, taking into account the different types of call (e.g. institutional funding vs. Individual application), discipline area and size of the call.

Recognising that both funders and universities have roles to play, the effects may be mitigated through actions such as:

- Developing good practice (e.g. ensuring application length, monitoring requirements etc.) are proportionate to the size of the funding. This applies equally to applications to funders, but also researcher applications to internal calls, as a result of institutional funding.
- Improving communications such as greater use of pre-announcements or briefings and, for universities, ensuring effective communication of time-critical information to a wide range of staff.

Priority #6: Short-Term Funding Calls (continued)

- Universities to consider supporting a wide range of staff to develop potential bids (including building partnerships) to allow them to respond quickly to opportunities.
- Monitoring and evaluating the results of short-term calls, using this to both feed good practice and, where negative effects are in evidence, to make the case for longer-term change.

Disclaimer

This report is the output from a project between the University of Oxford and Oxentia Ltd on terms specifically limiting Oxentia's liability. Our conclusions are the result of our professional judgment, based upon the material and information provided to us by the client and others. Use of this report by any third party for whatever purpose should not, and does not, absolve such third party from using due diligence in verifying the report's contents. Any use which a third party makes of this document, or any reliance on it, or decisions to be made based on it, are the responsibility of such third party. Oxentia and University of Oxford accept no duty of care or liability of any kind whatsoever to any such third party and no responsibility for damages, if any, suffered by any third party as a result of decisions made, or not made, or actions taken or not taken, based on this document.

Contact us

Research Strategy & Policy Unit | University of Oxford

researchsupport@admin.ox.ac.uk

#EquityInResearch

http://dx.doi.org/10.5287/ora-6qzgb8yoy