

Summary of Athena Swan renewal application form for departments

Applicant information

Name of institution	University of Oxford
Name of department	Biochemistry
Date of current application	September 2024
Level of previous award	Silver
Date of previous award	April 2019
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Description of the department and its context

The Department of Biochemistry is one of 16 Departments in the University of Oxford's Medical Sciences Division (MSD). We are a community of 175 academics and researchers (AR, F:45%,M:55%), 59 professional service staff (PSS, F:61%,M:39%), 69 postgraduate research students (PGR, F:46%,M:54%) on MSc or DPhil courses, and 350 undergraduates (UG, F:61%,M:39%). The Department celebrated its 100-year anniversary in 2023.

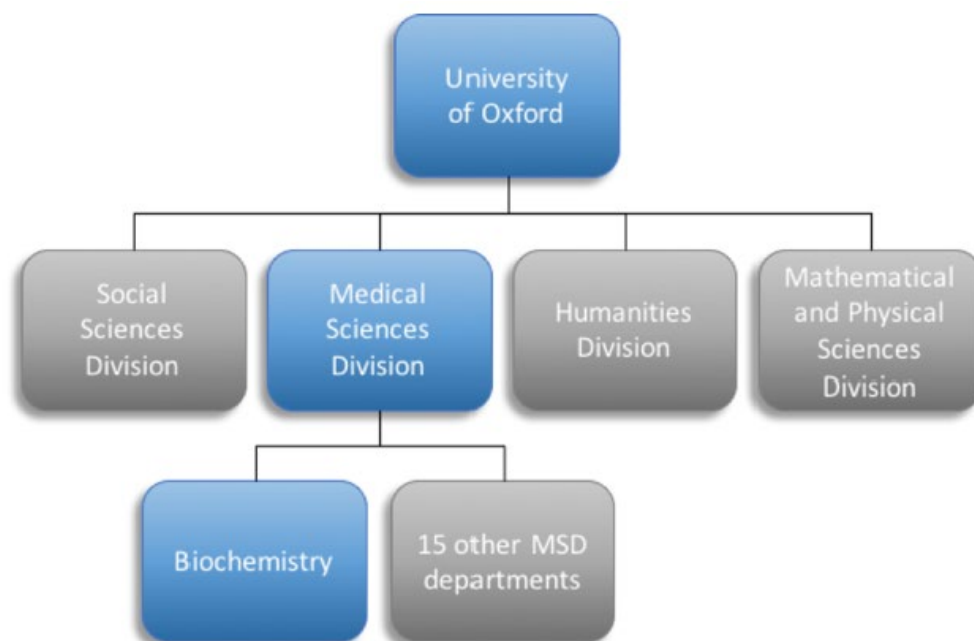


Figure 1. The Biochemistry Department in the University of Oxford

The Department is located in Oxford's central Science Area (**Figure 2**) in the Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin Building (DCHB). The DCHB was extended in 2022 to connect the Biochemistry Department with the Kavli Institute for Nanoscience Discovery and major shared university research services within a modern multi-disciplinary life sciences hub. It allows all staff to use communal facilities and associate easily with groups from 8 University departments (Biochemistry, Physics, Chemistry, DPAG, NDCN, SCNI, OCDEM and Psychiatry). Two staff members of the Nuclear Magnetic Resonance facility are based in the neighbouring Rex Richards Building and have easy access to the DCHB. We are a pre-clinical department, apart from five clinical staff who are integrated at the Churchill Hospital campus.



Figure 2. Location of the Biochemistry buildings in the Science Area

The Department delivers a 4-year integrated Biochemistry Masters course with an intake of around 90 UGs each year. We also contribute to teaching Biomedical Sciences and other undergraduate courses. Our research aims to understand the molecular mechanisms of life and disease. We are consistently ranked amongst the top Biochemistry research institutions in the world. Around 45 groups perform research organised into 5 themes (Cell Biology Development Genetics, Chromosome and RNA Biology, Infection and Disease Processes, Microbiology and Systems Biology, Structural Biology and Molecular Biophysics). Theme heads act as points of communication to promote fruitful collaboration of groups. We operate 8 facilities that provide research services, communal instrumentation and technical expertise.

Biochemistry is proudly international as indicated by 11% of staff, 17% UGs, 55% PGRs on visas. The department supports flexible working and currently has 16 staff working part-time (F:9,M:7). We have a large body of 106 postdoctoral researchers (PDRAs, F:45%,M:55%), most of whom are employed on fixed-term contracts funded externally e.g. by the UK and European Research Councils and various charities. Principal Investigators (PIs) are commonly recruited as either Research Fellows (RF, F:3,M:7) on externally-funded fixed-term contracts, Associate Professors (AP, F:9,M:13) who often hold permanent joint appointments with a College for teaching (APTF), or Senior/Statutory Professors (SP, F:4,M:10). In addition to direct appointments, all those employed in academic or senior research roles are eligible to apply for the title of Associate or Full Professor through the University's Recognition of Distinction (RoD) scheme. Our PSS staff provide wide-ranging support including finance, human resources, building maintenance, IT, research facilities, and health and safety.

The Department is currently reviewing its governance structure (**Figure 3**) to revitalise the contribution of its committees to support departmental strategy. Key

committees for Athena Swan (AS) are Research (RC), UG Teaching (TC), Graduate Studies (GSC), and the Equality Diversity Inclusion Team (EDIT). It is expected this will be supplemented by a People & Resources committee, to consider matters associated with HR policy, finances and enabling facilities such as IT and building matters. The PSS Network, PDRA Association, and Parent and Carers Group (PCG) promote the role that these groups play in the success of the Department and provide a mixture of professional support and social activities for staff. The student-led Oxford University Biochemical Society (OUBS) organises seminars to promote the subject, career planning, and to increase cohesion between UG and PGR students and the Department.

Committee leads report to the departmental Strategy Group (SG), consisting of senior academic and administrative staff (F:8, M:8), and representatives from EDIT, PGR, PDRA, and PSS groups. The Head of Department (HoD, male) has deputy Directors of Teaching (DoT, female) and Research (male).

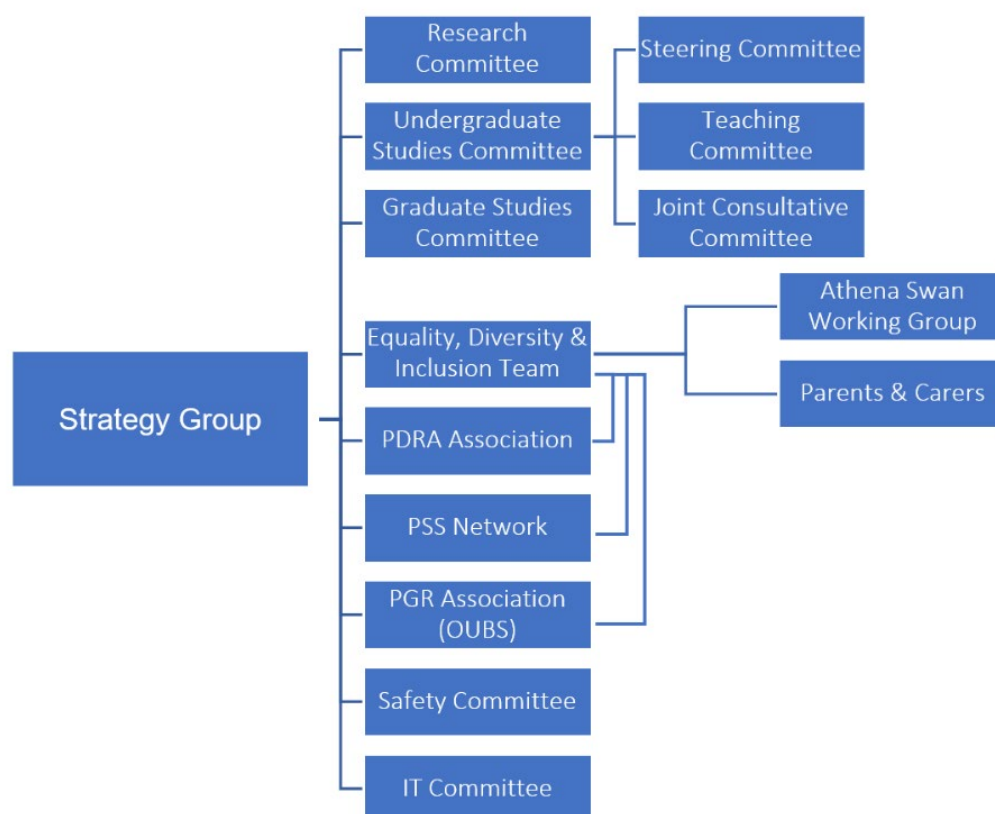


Figure 3. Committees and reporting structure in the Biochemistry department.

Communication is facilitated by weekly email newsletters and termly all-staff meetings featuring a HoD briefing and Q&A. Regular meetings promote interactions of staff and students: weekly seminars of each research theme, weekly PI meetings, quarterly PSS network meetings, etc. Various professional and social events take place throughout the year. Our annual retreat provides networking opportunities for the whole Department. The PDRA Association has an annual recess for career development. Yearly poster sessions highlight the work of PGR, PDRA, and PSS. We organised two larger events in 2024 to highlight our commitment to gender equality, the international Suffrage Science Award ceremony and a celebration of

International Women's Day with a poster exhibition of 70 inspiring women nominated by department members.

Athena Swan self-assessment process

The EDIT (Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Team)

The EDIT is responsible for the AS process in our department, and the development and improvement of practical steps to advance equity, considering all under-represented groups. EDIT meets quarterly and performs self-assessment to ensure that EDI principles are embedded throughout the culture of the department. EDIT is co-chaired by a female and a male academic lead, who report to SG. We currently have F:14 M:9 EDIT members, and strive for balanced membership in various characteristics including staff/student group representation, gender, ethnicity, and seniority. Representatives join the committee for 1 or 3 years (students or staff), while academic leads rotate less frequently to provide continuity. The MSD's AS facilitator provides guidance on university-wide matters. Newly appointed APs are assigned to EDIT for 1 year to help embed EDI in their working practices. EDIT meetings are held in a hybrid format during core working hours on varying weekdays to facilitate attendance of those working flexibly or part time.

Overview of previous action plan evaluation and progress

Our previous 2019 Action Plan (PAP) had 21 objectives and 44 associated actions, which were RAG-rated: 28 Green, 14 Amber, 2 Red. 7 of 11 high-priority actions were rated Green.

Overall facilitators

Communication: We introduced dedicated resource and implemented a communications strategy to focus information to relevant parties via newsletters, Teams channels, meetings, and interest groups. This strategy is proving effective. 67% of staff and 91% of PGR agree that 'Communication in my department is open and effective', a 17% increase since 2021. This is driven by female staff: (AR F:+16%,M:+12%, PSS F:+35%,M:+14%). 89% of staff feel well informed about university-level news. Improved awareness of departmental matters will facilitate the NAP; e.g. the proportion of staff who know where to find information on HR policies and training increased to 72% (+8% since 2021).

Surveys and data monitoring: Investment in communications increased participation in staff surveys above university average (68%, University: 58%). Our trial surveys for UG and PGR have been very informative for our NAP and will be repeated yearly. Regular data analysis by EDIT, TC, and an EDI TC subcommittee helped us monitor progress and refine actions. For example, several PAP actions relied on staff inductions and communications, but SES21 revealed a need to re-structure these systems overall (see below). Another example is that workload surveys revealed a dissatisfaction among lecturers with allocation of examination

duties, leading to the creation of a transparent schedule until 2030. We will use similar approaches going forward.

Induction: Participation and satisfaction with staff inductions was low in SES2021, particularly among women. In response, we developed an improved induction programme with online and in-person components, which has increased participation to 71% (+12% since 2021) and satisfaction to 81% (+21% since 2021, AR-F:100%, AR-M:82%, PSS-F:67%, PSS-M:50%). Lower approval of PSS warrants further refinement of the system. Inductions facilitate staff training, awareness of policies, and will be utilised to deliver the new action plan (NAP).

Engagement: Members of the department are engaged in decision-making and research culture. 68% of staff would recommend the department as a great place to work (+3% above university, +4% above HEI). Their engagement is facilitated by representation in self-organised networks represented in SG (PDRA Association, PSS network, OUBS). As a result, we were able to co-create a relevant and impactful NAP with input from these networks. The departmental calendar features a range of inclusive events (annual recess, summer and Christmas parties, PDRA retreat, etc), which allow us to communicate policies, philosophy and behaviour codes, and showcase examples of gender equality. A high percentage of staff report having good relationships with colleagues (F:95%, M:99%, +5% overall since 2021).

Recognition and involvement of staff in EDI work: All senior members are expected to contribute to our EDI objectives. Academic promotion via RoD also expects involvement with EDI work. The Awards for Excellence scheme is continuously open for all staff who have contributed to the department's mission. For example, the leads of the PDRA Association were recognised in 2024 for initiating activities to promote gender equality and cohesion of PDRA and PSS staff.

Overall barriers

New building: Joining Biochemistry with the multi-departmental Kavli Institute in the new DCHB in 2022 has been very positive overall. However, the building work, group relocations, establishment of communal facilities, and administrative reorganisation generated substantial workload and disrupted working patterns, especially for PSS staff. Our NAP aims to maximise the benefits of cross-departmental interactions in the shared building.

Staff turnover: Between 2021-2024, we filled vacancies in four of the most senior administrative roles in the department (HAF, HHR, Building Manager, Safety Officer). We also recruited new leads for ASWG and EDIT. Two previous Directors for Outreach left the department in 2023. While these changes provide opportunities, they caused discontinuities in some actions. The HAF vacancy left the PSS Network without leadership for over 6 months, which likely affected career support and job satisfaction of PSS staff. We designed our NAP to be less impacted by potential staff turnover. For example, overlap of the new and outgoing ASWG leads helped passing on expertise. Better organisation and sharing of information will facilitate on-boarding new EDIT members.

Workload due to the new UG course: All academic staff in the department contributed to a major restructuring of UG teaching, improving course organisation and addressing attainment gaps. This drew attention and resources from other activities, and likely contributed to workload dissatisfaction among academic staff. The completion of this work and planned actions in the NAP should ease workload issues.

Survey format: An option for neutral responses to questions was introduced in SES since 2021 ('neither agree nor disagree'). This likely reduced the percentages of positive responses overall and made it more challenging to reach some of the numerical success measures in the PAP that were based on the previous survey format.

Impact of COVID-19

We developed a separate action plan in March 2020 to mitigate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions to work and study. We enrolled the department in the university's 'return-to-onsite working' pilot scheme which allowed our staff to be amongst the first in the university to start working on-site from June 2020. This was essential for the continuation of our predominantly lab-based research work and training. Communication was sensitive and ensured there was no pressure for onsite working for staff who were not able to for various reasons. We organised a shift working system following risk assessments and held a targeted survey to ensure equal opportunity for the return to work and working rules. We introduced a weekly staff newsletter to ensure efficient communication from March 2020, which we have maintained since. To mitigate for delays in research projects and restrictions to staff mobility, we supported extensions to funding for PDRAs, RFs, and PGRs wherever possible, utilising departmental, university, and external funding schemes. Research projects were altered to include computer-based work where appropriate. UG admissions changed to online format from 2020, and all lectures were online between March 2020 and June 2021, delivering the full course material. UG exams and course deadline were adjusted, with input from student consultation. For example, UG exams were remote open-book exams and move by one term to autumn 2020. We developed online practicals and Part II research projects, but then reorganised these to run in the labs as soon as possible to offer maximal hands-on practical experience. Equality in degree attainment was monitored and maintained near pre-pandemic levels. The pattern of SES was shifted by one year, with surveys happening in 2021 and 2023.

Several actions in the PAP were strongly hindered by the pandemic:

- Recruitment of new APTFs to the EDIT was delayed due to a committee recruitment hiatus during the pandemic. We have since picked up recruitment to EDIT and are on track to meet the target of 100% of new APTFs in the next 3 years.
- A joint SAT meeting with UCL did not take place due to meeting restrictions.

- Uptake of the mentoring scheme increased steadily (from 23 to 33 mentees by 2020) but this was disrupted by the pandemic, and participation dropped to 16 mentees post-pandemic. We are changing the enrolment into the scheme to achieve increased uptake.
- There was a freeze in outreach activities during the pandemic. In addition, the two outreach directors retired or left the department around the time when pandemic restrictions eased so we did not have the capacity to consistently monitor participation in outreach activities. Nevertheless, we provide training whenever new people express interest in participating in outreach, and a section on public engagement activities and training is included in the annual PDRs.

Reflection on red and amber actions

- The planned action was implemented, but did not reach the target 90% of staff agreeing that AS raised EDI awareness (F:53%, M:46%). However, only 12% disagree, and F:75%, M:81% agree that the “department is committed to promoting EDI”. We aim to increase awareness.
- We are not yet satisfied with our progress towards reducing gender imbalance in senior academic roles.
- We are pleased with the new website overall, but did not meet the target 75% of staff agreeing that it promotes a family-friendly environment (F:49%,M:55%). Although only 5% disagree, we recognise a need to improve.
- Recording training has been challenging. Staff inductions now include role-specific training suggestions, but no mechanism exists for recording training outside the department. We trialled an online form, but uptake was low; we now prompt self-reporting via PDRs. Monitoring training for PGRs is successful, with a training-needs-assessment in place and monitored termly via central Graduate Supervision System.
- Perceived usefulness of PDRs has not reached our 90% target (F:52%, M:53%), albeit only 13% negatively rate the system overall. Whilst PDRs improved for male AR staff to match female (+12% since 2021), low satisfaction for male PSS staff impacts overall favourability (PSS F:42%, PSS M:18%). We then refined PDRs in several iterations and will monitor effectiveness. A key learning is that staff perceived the PDR as a performance review, so the questionnaire and guidance were changed to encourage open conversations about wellbeing and career development.
- We implemented the planned actions but did not reach the target 10% of leavers with no destination (F:38%, M:23% in 2023). PGR employment statistics are encouraging (no destination: 0%F,5%M). Career development is in the NAP.
- Bullying/harassment: We obtained funding for in-house bystander training. We expanded a network of harassment advisors with a peer-support group and

included external advisors. Reports indicate issues around communications between staff, motivating the development of a behaviour code and lab philosophy handbooks.

- We found rigid workload quantification could not adequately score the variety of academic work, so we will trial a nomination committee to spread workload fairly. We streamlined processes such as graduate admissions and are making teaching allocation fairer.

Key priorities for future action

Our action plan addresses five priorities that encompass the major gender equality issues across the department. Our plan is financially sustainable and designed to involve staff and student groups (PDRA association, PSS network, PCG, OUBS). Our time plan considers the rollout of HR processes and prioritises actions that facilitate multiple aims. Where possible, we have trialled actions to test feasibility and effectiveness, especially for high-importance actions. By liaising with university representatives, we ensured that our plan benefits from central systems. In turn, we contribute to EDI initiatives beyond our department, e.g. the university's Research Culture Toolkit pilot and by hosting the International Suffrage Science Awards Ceremonies.

Priority 1: Target the decreasing female representation in the academic career path from undergraduates to senior roles

Priority 2: Support career development for students and all staff groups

Priority 3: Create an inclusive work environment

Priority 4: Tackle bullying and harassment

Priority 5: Foster health and wellbeing

Transformed Athena Swan Application feedback

The panel is satisfied that the application addresses the renewal award criteria and is pleased to confer a Silver Athena Swan award.

The panel commends the leadership and senior buy-in which is evident in a number of ways including:

- The strong letter of endorsement from the head of Department which communicates a solid organisational commitment to Athena Swan (including personal involvement in the work) and demonstrates that staff groups are well engaged with progressing gender equality and that it is a core element of the Department culture. The letter provides a helpful outline of key achievements and highlights priority areas for the forthcoming award period – this overview frames the subsequent application very well;
- Senior team representation on the Athena Swan Working Group (ASWG) including the Head of Department and the head of Administration and Finance
- The Departmental practice of assigning newly appointed Associate Professors to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team (EDIT) for one year – this supports the embedding of EDI into working practices and demonstrates the value of this work to the department.

The reflection on the panel feedback from the previous application is thoughtful and is commended.

Appendix: Glossary

Abbreviations and acronyms used in the application.

AP: Associate Professor
APTF: Associate Professor and Tutorial Fellow
AR: Academic and Research Staff
DoT: Director of Teaching
DPhil: Doctor of Philosophy
EDIT: Equality Diversity and Inclusion Team
EDU: Central University's Equality and Diversity Unit
GSC: Graduate Studies Committee
HAF: Head of Administration and Finance
HEI: Higher Education Institutions
HHR: Head of Human Resources
HoD: Head of Department
JCC: Joint Consultative Committee
MSc: Master of Science
MSD: Medical Sciences Division
NAP: New Athena Swan Action Plan
PAP: Previous Athena Swan Action Plan from 2019
PDRA: Postdoctoral Research Associate
PDR: Personal Development Review
PDC: Personal Development Conversation
PCG: Parent and Carers Group
PSS: Professional Services Staff
PGR: Postgraduate Research Student
PI: Principal Investigator (research group leader)
RC: Research Committee
RF: Research Fellow
SES21,23, etc: Staff Experience Survey 2021, 2023, etc
SG: Department Strategy Group
SP: Senior Professor
TC: Teaching Committee
UG: Undergraduate Student