

*P. LANSLEY. Research capacity building in the UK: The case of SPARC. Gerontechnology 2010;9(2):227; doi:10.4017/gt.2010.09.02.257.00* **Purpose** The capacity for gerontechnology and other ageing-related research is severely limited by the lack of suitably experienced scientists. This is partly because of unpredictable funding streams, but mostly it results from the increasing demand for research outstripping present capacity to undertake research, coupled with the changing nature of research, which is increasingly multidisciplinary, collaborative and user-engaged. **Method** A modest, four year initiative (SPARC<sup>1</sup>) was established in 2005 to encourage early-career academics in the UK to become engaged with ageing-related research. It provided modest grants for pilot projects, mentoring, access to prestigious national and international dissemination platforms and to policy makers, advice on the production of materials for non-academic audiences, introductions to sources of financial support for research and other useful facilities designed to accelerate the development of newcomers to the field. It also organised many national, and some international, workshops mostly for all-comers (e.g. professionals, older people and scientists) and was active in representing the needs of older people and the role of research to policy makers in government. **Results & Discussion** Thirty-four of the 200 applications for support, received in response to two calls for proposals, were funded. Of these, 22 were from very early-career researchers, mostly having just completed their doctorates and secured their first academic posts. Twelve were very experienced scientists working in other fields, but seeking to move into ageing. Financial support was enough to support a research assistant for a year to 18 months, and to meet some office and subsistence costs and, for some projects, new equipment. In many cases, resources were supplemented by the host institutions to further support the development of their staff. The 34 projects involved about 100 investigators and research assistants and a further 100 collaborators, research scientists and professionals based in industry, charities, the public sector and older people's organisations. Proposals and final reports were refereed to the same standards as mainstream research council projects. The outcomes of half of the projects were judged by independent assessors to be either 'Outstanding' or 'Tending to Outstanding' and a further third were judged as 'Good'. Nearly 60% were judged 'Extremely' or 'Very' worthwhile. By the end of the Initiative (December 2008), most award holders had secured follow-on funding, in total valued at £10m, of which half was clearly attributable to the activities of SPARC, which also facilitated a much higher publication rate and frequency of presentations, especially to non-academic audiences, and involvement with international activities and the media, than would be expected. Forty-eight workshops were organised, the majority for all-comers, showcasing the work of over 230 scientists and professionals and over 70 professionals and older people, and attended by over 3,200 individuals. Discussions were held with many government ministers. Two parliamentary questions were prompted by SPARC's activities. Further details are given in the final report<sup>2</sup>.

## References

1. [www.sparc.ac.uk](http://www.sparc.ac.uk); retrieved January 2010
2. SPARC Final Report: Organisation and Outcomes. Reading: University of Reading; 2009

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**Address:** The University of Reading, UK; E: [p.r.lansley@reading.ac.uk](mailto:p.r.lansley@reading.ac.uk)