Evaluation of the Academy of Medical Sciences Starter Grant for Clinical Lecturers (2016-2023)

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Executive summary

Background – The Academy of Medical Sciences, the independent, expert voice of biomedical and health research in the UK, introduced the Starter Grants for Clinical Lecturers (SGCL) scheme in 2008. This scheme supports research-active clinical lecturers to gather data to strengthen their bids for longer-term fellowships and funding, helping to foster the next generation of leaders in clinical biomedical research. The SGCL provides clinical lecturers with funding of up to £30,000 over two years, helping them to balance their clinical and research commitments[1].

Method – Powellite Impact was commissioned to assess the impact of the SGCL scheme for rounds 15 (2016) to 30 (2023). Evidence of the impact of the grants and efficiency of the scheme and further programme support was collected by conducting 15 interviews with awardees, 12 interviews with unsuccessful applicants and analysing 54 survey responses from awardees, 12 survey responses from unsuccessful applicants, ResearchFish outcome data for rounds 15-28 and monitoring and diversity data for rounds 16-30.

Demographics – A total of £10.6 million was awarded to 373 applicants from 36 institutions in rounds 15-30 of the SGCL scheme. A total of 884 SGCL applications were submitted. The average success rate was 42% (373 awards out of 884 applications). During rounds 15-30, the largest number of grants were awarded to organisations in London (n=123), South East England (n=51) and East of England (n=43). The scheme would benefit from a further discussion on how the regional spread across the UK could be improved. Analysis of diversity data provided insights into the range of groups the Academy is reaching with the SGCL scheme. Continued monitoring of diversity data and transparent reporting will help to evidence the reach of the scheme and inform areas for future improvement.

Impact on data and publications – The findings in this report clearly evidence the positive impact of the scheme on the work and career trajectories of research-active clinical lecturers. The SGCL enabled the collection and analysis of data and contributed to academic outputs by the awardees. A total of 1330 publications were reported on ResearchFish by 170 of the 327 awardees (rounds 15-28). The impact of the grant on research, data and publications was also captured in the survey responses (n=54): 81% of awardees agreed the SGCL supported the delivery of innovative biomedical research; 89% of awardees agreed the SGCL had helped to improve their research portfolios and publication records; 100% of awardees agreed the SGCL provided significant support to gather data to strengthen their bids for longer-term funding.

> *'It's helped me get the data I needed to publish. I've been able to produce a lot of papers and was invited to join committees. That's a consequence of having the time and funding behind me to pursue academic activities in this area, to identify*

[1] The scheme is currently supported by Wellcome, the UKRI Medical Research Council, British Heart Foundation, Versus Arthritis, Diabetes UK, Prostate Cancer UK, The Association of Physicians of Great Britain & Ireland, The Dunhill Medical Trust, and Kidney Research UK (the latter two joined the consortium in July and August 2024). The Royal College of Physicians (2014-2017) and the British Thoracic Society (2018-2022) were previous consortium funders.

> *research priorities and think about how we can better care for patients with osteoporosis in the UK'* – awardee

Impact on further funding – Awardees described how the SGCL helped them to secure further funding by including pilot data from their SGCL research work in applications for fellowships and further research grants.

Based on the information provided in ResearchFish, it was estimated the 151 awardees from rounds 15-28 had secured an estimated total of £114 million funding by the time the data was exported from ResearchFish in July 2024. This included £61.1 million in awardee-specific funding in research grants, £51.4 million in fellowship funding, £1.2 million in studentships, £209k in travel and small personal grants and £320k in awardee-specific capital grants.

These 151 SGCL awardees, who reported further funding data on ResearchFish, received £9.3 million in SGCL funding from the Academy of Medical Sciences. If the reported funding was secured as a direct or indirect result of the awardee receiving a SGCL, the overall return on investment for the 151 SGCL awardees would be estimated at £12.3 for each £1 invested.

> *'You don't go from no grant to £1,000,000. You go from £30,000 to £300,000 and then a million. So that first stepping stone is absolutely vital. I'd imagine without that; I would have probably struggled.'* – awardee

Impact on careers – Overall, 76% of awardees (n=54) reported a clear or significant impact of the grant on their career. Of the 327 SGCL awardees (rounds 15-28), 259 reported on ResearchFish about their career. 59% (152 out of 259) of awardees reported receiving a promotion, compared to 41% (107 out of 259) of awardees who reported not being promoted at the time of the data analysis. Promotions were reported to the position of consultant (n=34), clinical research fellow (n=30), senior clinical lecturer (n=26) and associate professor (n=23). Three awardees highlighted their promotion to professor.

Five awardees reported they had developed 11 innovative technologies. Furthermore, awardees described three spin-out companies which were developing further innovations. Further achievements by 17 awardees included 22 medical products such as support tools (medical intervention); diagnostic tools and therapeutic interventions (drugs).

> '*This grant has been the most important of my career - it was my first and it really gave me a solid foundation to attract other grants.'* – awardee

Impact on research standing – The competitive nature of the scheme meant that receiving a grant from the Academy of Medical Sciences was seen by awardees as a confirmation that their research was relevant and of a high quality. Interviewees emphasised that the SGCL is highly regarded, and the Academy of Medical Sciences is

seen as a prestigious funder. Having the SGCL on their CV made a significant difference when applying for fellowships, research grants and promotions. 95 awardees reported a total of 90 research prizes, 62 invitations as keynote speaker and 19 had been asked to become a member of a guidance/advisory committee. 42 awardees recorded 95 instances where they influenced policy and practice.

> *'It has been hugely important in raising my profile, collaborations and invitations to speak. Because of this I am now in a position where I have more impact on policy development.'* – awardee

Impact on collaborations – Awardees described how the SGCL funding helped them to start new collaborations and strengthen existing collaborations. Bringing funding to the table and having gained the seal of approval from the Academy of Medical Sciences opened doors to new opportunities. Of the 54 awardees who completed the survey, 57% of awardees reported the SGCL had helped to increase their specialty network and collaborations. 140 out of 327 awardees (rounds 15-28) reported a total of 456 collaborations on ResearchFish.

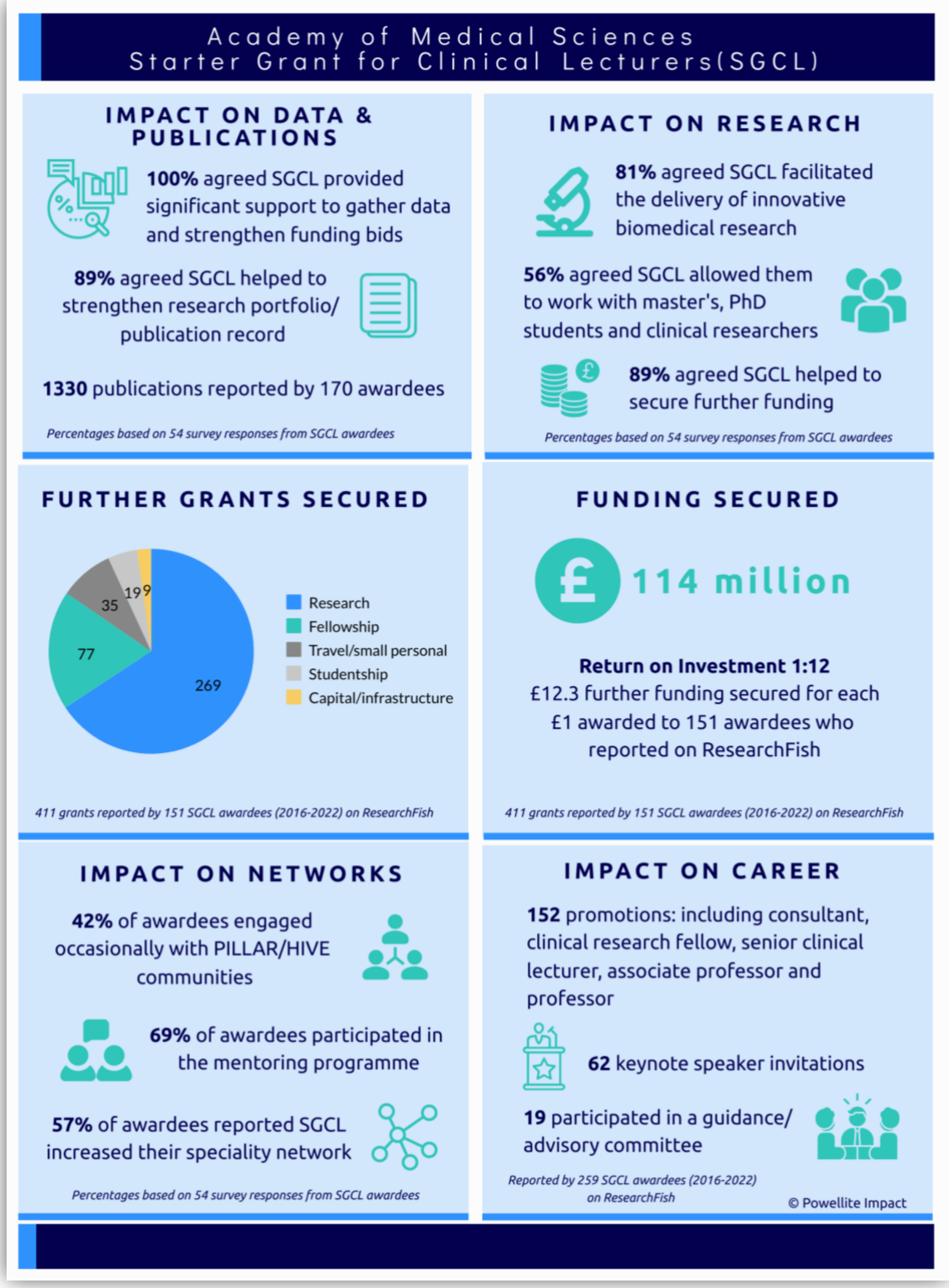
> '*We had to collaborate with other centres. If you're coming to the table with some funding that means that people take you a bit more seriously.'* – awardee

Impact on personal development – Awardees described that the SGCL helped them to develop their grant writing skills and gave them the confidence to be able to submit larger research proposals and secure further funding. Reflecting on the SGCL, they also recognised the grant had enabled them to enhance their project and budget management skills as well as line-management and supervision skills.

69% of awardees engaged in the Academy's mentoring programme, which created protected time to reflect on their career trajectory and plan for fellowship and research grant applications.

'*As well as the research skills, I'm also developing supervisory skills and mentoring skills.'*– awardee

Impact on supervision of early career researchers – Analysis of the data relating to the time spent on supervision of master's and PhD students showed a notable shift: awardees reported spending more time on supervision during the SGCL compared to the six months before. This suggests the grant enabled awardees to take on additional leadership and supervision roles. Awardees described how the mentoring programme and mentoring workshop by the Academy helped them to become better mentors themselves. Awardees aim to support the next generation of clinical lecturers with guidance and advice on how to balance clinical requirements and academic research.



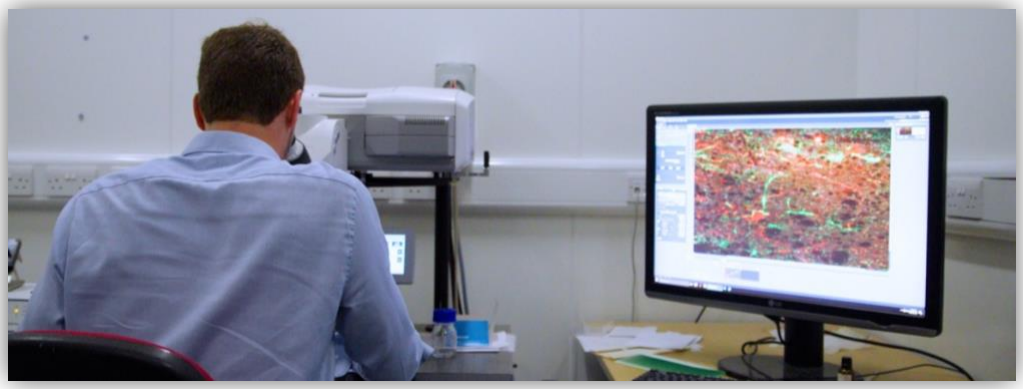
Recommendations for improvements – Discussions during the interviews with awardees highlighted that it would be very helpful if the value of the grant could be increased to £50,000 to reflect the increased cost of research. However, awardees recommended the amount of funding per individual grant should only be increased if the total number of awards available would not be affected, as they felt strongly that the

unique career-changing opportunity provided by the SGCL scheme should be available to as many clinical lecturers as possible.

The Evaluations Advisory Group[2] suggested exploring a peer support approach which would involve pairing awardees from institutions in London, South East England and East of England who were highly successful at securing SGCL funding with prospective applicants from institutions in other areas. It would be extremely valuable if awardees could review and discuss draft applications with prospective applicants, allowing applicants to strengthen their application before submitting it to the Academy. This peer support approach might help to encourage further regional spread of the SGCL scheme.

The evaluation of the processes involved in the delivery of the scheme suggested applicants would benefit from further detailed information on the Academy website about the assessment process and assessment rubric used for scoring applications, mentoring opportunities for both successful and unsuccessful applicants, and guidance including examples on how the SGCL can be used to fund research support.

Awardees recommended efficiency improvements to the process of no-cost extensions to ensure a timely response, as this would enable them to continue their research without delay.



In summary, research-active clinical lecturers who were awarded a SGCL recognised the transformational impact of the prestigious grant and how it opened doors to fellowship applications, new collaborations and career advancements, allowing them to successfully complete the journey from early- to mid-career researcher.

The grant had a significant impact on the reputations and track records of the awardees. Awardees emphasised the competitive nature of the grant provided additional credibility and recognition of the importance and relevance of their research.

The Starter Grants for Clinical Lecturers scheme contributes to the maintenance of capacity across medical, veterinary and dental clinical academic research and plays a pivotal role in developing research leaders for the future.

[2] The Academy convened an Evaluations Advisory Group. The group was composed of key stakeholders including panel members and SGCL awardees and its role was to provide advice to the Academy on developing the scope of the evaluation, reviewing the findings and recommendations and the future direction of the scheme.