Evaluation of the Academy of Medical Sciences Springboard Scheme (2019-2023)

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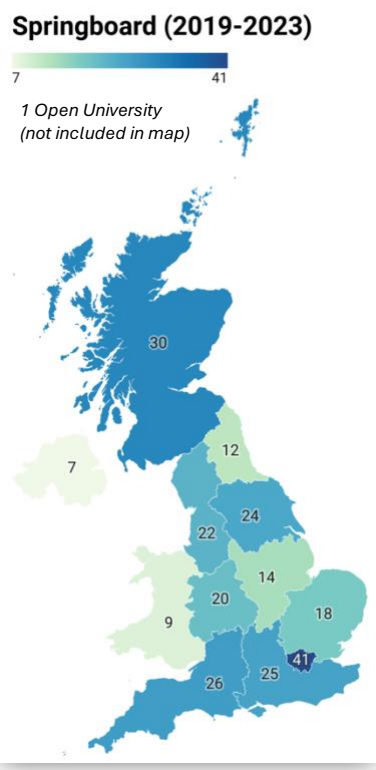
Executive Summary

Background – The Academy of Medical Sciences are the independent, expert voice of biomedical and health research in the UK. In 2015, the Academy launched the Springboard grant scheme to support early-career researchers in the biomedical and health sciences, helping them establish themselves as future leaders in medical research and innovation[1]. The focus of this evaluation report is Springboard rounds 5 (2019) to 9 (2023). For rounds 5-8 the funding available was up to £100,000, this was uplifted to £125,000 from round 9 onwards. The Springboard funding can be used over a period of two years to cover research staff costs, consumables, PhD stipends and personal development, however funds cannot be used to cover the applicant's personal salary. Springboard Champions, based at each of the eligible institutions, play a key role in supporting the scheme from the institution's side.

Method – Powellite Impact was commissioned to assess the impact of the Springboard scheme. Evidence of the impact and efficiency of the scheme and further programme support was collected by conducting 17 interviews with awardees, 16 interviews with unsuccessful applicants and analysing 76 survey responses from awardees, 57 survey responses from unsuccessful applicants, ResearchFish outcome data for rounds 5-8, monitoring and diversity data for rounds 5-9.



Demographics – 249 Springboard grants were awarded during rounds 5-9 to applicants from 62 institutions for a total value of £25,975,739. The overall success rate for the Springboard scheme for rounds 5-9 was 30% (249 out of 841). The awards were made to institutions in all regions of the UK, with the largest number of grants awarded to applicants in institutions in London (n=41) and Scotland (n=30). Analysis of diversity data provided insights into the range of groups the Academy is reaching with the Springboard 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 Springboard scheme on the awardees' research capacity and number of publications. A total of 515 publications were reported on ResearchFish by 103 out of 195 awardees. The impact was also reported in the survey responses (n=76): 88% of awardees agreed the Springboard grant had helped to improve their research

[1] Launched in partnership with Wellcome in 2015, the Springboard scheme has since expanded, with additional funding partners such as the British Heart Foundation, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and Diabetes UK.

portfolios and publication records and 93% agreed it helped in the delivery of innovative biomedical research.

Impact on further funding – Awardees described how the Springboard grant helped them to build research capacity in their lab and how they used the collected research data to support applications for further research grants and fellowships.

A total of 103 awardees from rounds 5-8 reported they had secured 256 further grants with an estimated value of £53.6 million of funding (data exported from ResearchFish in July 2024). This included £21.8 million awardee-specific research funding, £25.9 million in fellowship funding, £4.6 million in studentships, £1 million in awardee-specific capital grants, £135,669 in travel and small personal grants and £160,000 in 'other' funding.

These 103 Springboard awardees, who reported further funding data on ResearchFish, received £10.2 million in initial Springboard funding from the Academy of Medical Sciences. If the reported funding was secured as a direct or indirect result of the awardee receiving a Springboard grant, the overall return on investment for the 103 Springboard awardees is £5.3 for each £1 invested.

Overall, 53% of awardees had reported on ResearchFish that they secured further funding. The percentage of awardees who secured further funding was the highest for round 5 (awards made in 2019): 65%. This is the earliest cohort reviewed in this evaluation and therefore the awardees in this cohort had more time to secure further funding compared to awardees in the later cohorts.

> '*The work that we did for the Springboard grant, the preliminary data helped us get a BBSRC grant and an 8-year Wellcome Trust Discovery Award.' - awardee*

Impact on careers – Out of 76 awardees who responded to the survey, 95% of awardees agreed the Springboard grant provided significant support in their first independent post and 91% agreed the grant had strengthened their leadership and grant writing skills.

79% of awardees reported a clear or significant impact of the Springboard grant on their career and 42% of awardees reported they had received a promotion.

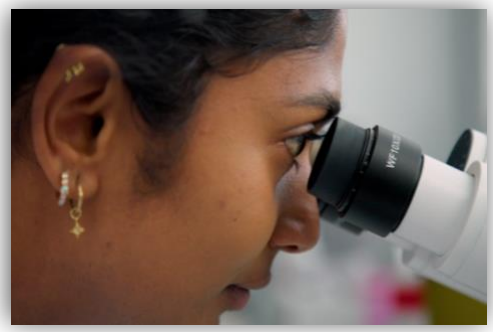
92% (179 out of 195) of awardees reported on ResearchFish about their career. Of the awardees who provided information, 49% (87 out of 179) reported receiving promotions at the time of the data analysis to roles including: senior lecturer (n=29), associate professor (n=16), lecturer (n=15), professor (n=5) and assistant professor (n=2).

> *'I am very grateful for the impact of Springboard. It was transformative for my career in research.'* – awardee

In the group of 57 unsuccessful applicants who completed the survey, 33% reported a promotion, which is lower than the 42% reported by 76 awardees who completed the survey, suggesting a key role of the Springboard grant in enabling career progression.

This was confirmed in the qualitative data, many awardees described how the Springboard grant was key to their career progression:

> *'I have been promoted to Senior Lecturer and a big factor contributing to the promotion has been the Springboard grant.'* - awardee



Impact on innovative research resources – Awardees reported on ResearchFish that they developed research resources which are shared across the research community. 21 awardees reported developing 25 research materials including databases, computer models and data analysis techniques. 29 awardees reported the development of 34 research tools including technology assays, reagents, biological samples and cell lines that have advanced disease diagnosis, drug development, and basic science research.

Four awardees reported impact of the grant on intellectual property and patent applications, which included a sensing device, protein isolation technique, an enzyme and a high-speed imaging method. One spin-out company emerged from the work of an awardee from round 6, which provides stem cell-generated beta cells for UK researchers.

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 of a high quality and relevant for biomedical research in the UK. Interviewees emphasised that the Academy of Medical Sciences is seen as a prestigious funder. Awardees reported that having the Springboard grant on their CV helped to improve their research standing.

79 awardees reported a total of 190 awards on ResearchFish, this included 88 invitations as keynote speaker and 33 were appointed as the editor/advisor to a journal or book series. 18 awardees had been invited to become a member of a guidance/advisory committee.

Impact on collaborations – Awardees described how the Springboard funding helped them to start new collaborations and strengthen existing collaborations. The funding allowed several awardees to travel to collaborators and learn new techniques.

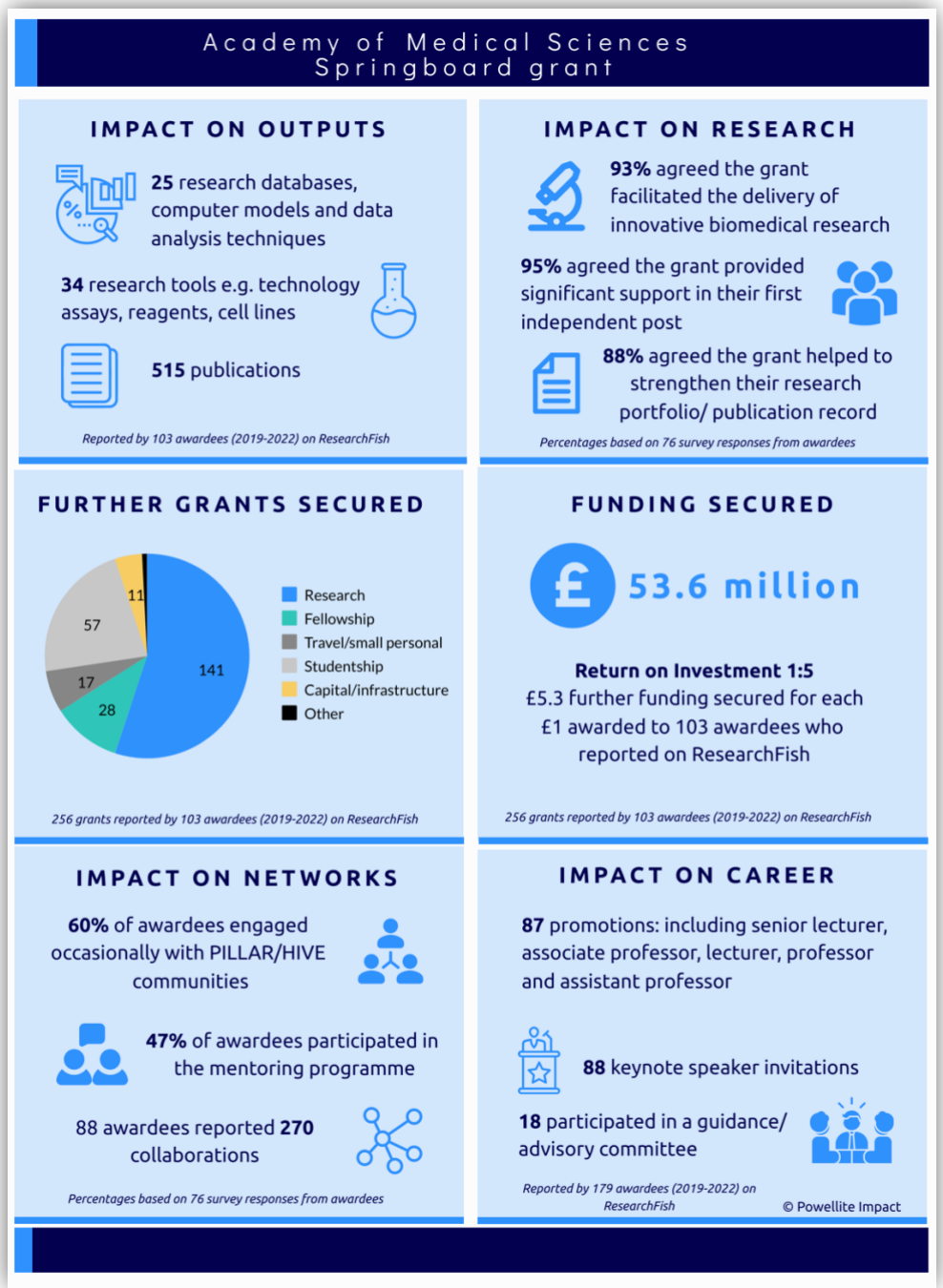
88 awardees reported 270 collaborations and partnerships on ResearchFish, 73% of these collaborations were with other academic institutions. Awardees reported that successful collaborations with industry partners led to additional funding and opened possibilities for future commercial ventures.

Impact on personal development – Awardees described the Springboard grant helped them to develop their grant writing skills and gave them the confidence to submit further research proposals for larger grants. They recognised the grant had enabled them to develop their project and budget management skills, line management and supervision skills. 47% 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.

> *'These early grants are the most important ones; the grant gives you confidence and a track record. You have your own funding, line-management responsibilities and you are the principal investigator on your own grant. This grant definitely helped me to get the bigger one.'* - awardee

Impact on supervision of early career researchers – Awardees described how the mentoring programme and mentoring workshop hosted by the Academy helped them to become better mentors themselves. Awardees aim to support the next generation of biomedical researchers with advice and support to enable them to apply for funding.



Recommendations for improvements – Awardees made a few recommendations for improvement of the scheme. One recommendation was to increase the length of the grant to three years. Awardees would also welcome an increase in the value of the grant, 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 Springboard scheme should be available to as many researchers as possible.

Applicants and Springboard Champions indicated during the interviews that they would find it beneficial if further detailed information could be provided on the Academy website about: the assessment process and assessment rubric used for scoring applications, guidance on the resubmission process and information about the availability of the mentoring scheme for awardees and unsuccessful applicants.

Finally, awardees recommended the no-cost extension process should be made more efficient, a timely response would enable them to continue their research without delay.

In summary, feedback from awardees suggested the Springboard scheme is achieving its aims, it provides a unique grant which has a significant impact on awardees' careers, publication records and their ability to establish their research group.

Awardees highlighted the transformational impact of the prestigious grant, how it helped them to secure further fellowships and research grants, allowed for new collaborations and career advancements, and supported them to successfully complete the journey from early career researcher to a leadership role in their own lab.

The award had a significant impact on awardees' reputations and track records, awardees discussed that the competitive nature of the award provided additional credibility and recognition of the importance of their research. The Springboard scheme is essential for capacity building in innovative biomedical research and plays a pivotal role in developing research leaders for the future.