INTRODUCTION

Ageing and disability-related research in UK universities has enjoyed considerable recent success. This has been especially true of work supported by the EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) EQUAL (Extending Quality Life) Initiative which commenced in 1998. This was designed to encourage research which emphasises multidisciplinarity, collaboration with the many organisations which work with older and disabled people and recognition of the expertise which older and disabled people can contribute to research. EQUAL has focused on issues arising from the design and operation of the built environment (homes, public buildings, streets, and transport systems), product design and technology-assisted rehabilitation, as well as the challenges for those with physical, sensory and cognitive impairments. It has funded as many social, medical and health scientists as it has designers, engineers and physical scientists through over 40 projects, from modest to large.

Many projects have had a significant impact on policy, practice and professional education. Significantly that success has led to social inclusion, with its attendant concern for older and disabled people, to be incorporated into many other EPSRC programmes. This is now an expected consideration for many new national research programmes.

EXTENDING BOUNDARIES

One of the reasons for the success of EQUAL was the attention given to keeping the research community close to end users, even after their projects had been completed. Between 2001 and 2004 the EQUAL Research Network organised frequent public research workshops involving all stakeholders, showcasing the latest research and discussing pressing issues facing older and disabled people and those who care for them. In addition, it lobbied policy makers and the media about the value of ageing and disability-related research.

SPARC (Strategic Promotion of Ageing Research) is a new programme which is encouraging newcomers, both young and established academics, into the field of ageing from across the full range of design, engineering and biological fields, and to a limited extent from the social sciences and medicine. It offers pump-priming awards and supports award holders with mentoring, editorial assistance and access to national and international platforms. It organises national workshops to showcase the latest research to all stakeholders and it lobbies policy makers and the media. The modest funding for SPARC is more than compensated by the interest and goodwill it receives from both researchers and users of research.

CREATING BARRIERS

In parallel with EQUAL were ageing-related research programmes established by two other research councils, ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council), but these operated within traditional disciplinary boundaries. As a result, the experience of multidisciplinary working enjoyed by the design
and engineering communities was not reflected in the work of the hard core of research council funded social scientists and biological scientists operating in the ageing area, and they had less opportunity for close collaboration with intermediaries and with users of research. For most of the biologists this was understandable but for the social scientists this was through choice. Finally, the Medical Research Council (MRC) did not have a research programme concerned specifically with ageing.

POLICY CHANGE

The three programmes were largely the result of strong direction from the UK Government Office of Science and Technology that the Research Councils should take ageing research seriously. At the time many felt that these programmes were the result of political pressure rather than a reflection of prevailing science policy. So it may not be surprising, especially given the absence of a specific MRC programme, that a parliamentary review in 2001 considered ageing research to be poorly funded and badly co-ordinated. This resulted in an attempt by the research councils to establish a more co-ordinated approach to ageing research, and the creation of a forum to coordinate the efforts of the major funders of ageing research (charities, government departments and research councils).

For the five years which followed, little was achieved. NCAR (National Collaboration on Ageing Research) set up in 2001 to develop a co-ordinated national research agenda for the research councils and the resulting NDA (New Dynamics of Ageing) Programme established to pursue that agenda have been disappointing, as have the activities of the Funders Forum for Research on Ageing and Older People. Some suggest the root cause of this poor progress to be the differences in the traditional perspectives, objectives and processes of different research disciplines. However, EQUAL has shown that by challenging traditional approaches it is possible to establish exciting and rewarding programmes for researchers in diverse disciplines.

A more serious issue has been the failure of science policy makers to understand the embryonic nature of most areas of ageing research, and the applied nature of much of the work which is required. As a result they have developed expectations and requirements as if ageing research was a mature field. They have not created an environment where innovatory approaches are understood or welcome.

A RESPONSE

By early 2003 it was clear that government’s desire to for a co-ordinated ageing research effort was not being met. The previous investment of the research councils in ageing research was being compromised, as was the personal investment and careers of those who had entered the field. Similarly the commitment and goodwill of a wide range of private and public organisations, charities and voluntary organisations which had enthusiastically supported EQUAL were in danger of being lost. The latter shared the research community’s concern about the need to provide career development opportunities for newcomers to ageing research, especially those at an early stage in their careers, and those who had been involved with the recent programmes as research assistants or research students.

As a result of the concern being expressed by researchers, and their supporters outside of the academic community, an alternative model emerged. This proposed that ageing research should be managed and coordinated by the ageing research community itself. Drawing on the experience of the EQUAL Research Network, three activities, to be pursued across the four research councils with an ageing remit, were proposed. The first two activities were already well-established through the EQUAL Network: public research workshops involving all stakeholders, and advocacy to policy makers and the media. The third activity was new: the provision of pump-priming awards to newcomers to ageing research, including both those at an early stage in their careers and established researchers in other fields, supplemented by
mentoring, assistance with dissemination and an introduction to both national and international platforms.

SPARC

Although invited by a committee comprising all the relevant research councils the proposals did not find favour with ESRC and MRC, but after negotiation BBSRC joined EPSRC and agreed to fund what was to become known as SPARC. An initial grant of £1.2m was later supplemented to give a total of £1.6m, of which £1.2m was earmarked for pump-priming awards, and the rest for workshops and administration. This funding is one tenth of that provided to the national programme NDA. SPARC is a three and a half year activity. It commenced in early 2005 and will be completed in late 2008.

AWARDS

Whilst official confirmation of funding for SPARC was awaited, briefings on its proposed activities were made across the UK and advertisements sent to all universities. As a result, in response to its first call for proposals for small pump-priming awards, 84 proposals were received by 1st May 2005, and 100 proposals in response to the second call which closed on 1st March 2006. This response compares very favourably with major research council programmes. A system to handle the peer review of proposals, adhering to research council standards, was set up from scratch, and because of both its appeal as a community managed activity and a “personal touch” in chasing reviews, there was a better response from reviewers than is usually achieved by research councils. The awards panel identified 56 proposals suitable for funding of which the highest ranked 34 were selected for support. The projects range in value from £17,000 to £60,000 and from six months to 18 months duration. They are split approximately equally between: design and engineering; biology; and, the middle ground between the remits of EPSRC and BBSRC, especially in areas allied to ergonomics, bioengineering, and neurobiology. All projects with a design and engineering rationale are multidisciplinary, collaborative and user-focused, as are most of those in the middle ground and a good number of the biological projects. The broad areas covered are: life in the home, care systems, the older worker, product design, urban design, interface design, transport & driving, cognition & communication, vision, activity, oxidative stress & ageing, fundamental mechanisms of normal ageing, and chemical biology of ageing.

WORKSHOPS

Twenty-three workshops were held in the first 26 months (four of which were international, two in the UK and one each in USA and Germany), across a variety of design, engineering and biological areas. Some workshops have had a strong disciplinary focus and others have been specifically to develop the survival skills of members of the research community, such as writing research proposals and obtaining research funding. However, mostly they have focussed on issues and problems faced in old age. These have provided a unique opportunity to explore research findings from diverse fields and different professional perspectives. The popularity of these workshops, with professionals from many different backgrounds and with older people, has been surprisingly strong. As a result of their appeal, increasingly, professional bodies and business organisations have been keen to host events. This has enabled an even closer relationship with not just charities and the social, health and housing sectors, which have well-established links with the research community, but also with the pharmaceutical, consumer products, healthcare and engineering industries, where in many cases there are rather weak links as far as ageing issues are concerned.

ADVOCACY

Ageing research does not enjoy a strong or positive reputation in science policy circles.
However, as EQUAL, and now SPARC, have demonstrated, in the past eight years ageing research has been productive in developing findings of value to policy makers in a range of fields and it has enjoyed a fruitful relationship at grass roots level, with professionals and older people.

Recognition that EQUAL and SPARC have supported ageing and disability research at a time when other initiatives have been failing, has led to an increasing number of opportunities to meet those who influence and make national policy for science and for the care of older and disabled people. These have taken many forms, from one-to-one meetings with politicians and senior civil servants, attendance at round table meetings, and providing contacts and route maps to the world of research. It would be wrong to believe that SPARC has a great deal of influence, but it uses its opportunities well and is consulted frequently. Significantly, discussions often lead to those issues where EQUAL has excelled, especially inclusive design and rehabilitation of those suffering from dementia or the effects of stroke.

DISCUSSION

The genesis of SPARC lies with the success of an approach to research which has emphasised multi-disciplinarity, collaboration and user engagement. In so doing it has helped to set new standards and expectations of ageing and disability-related research. Whilst these are in danger of being compromised by new national initiatives which defer to traditional disciplinary boundaries, the progress achieved by EQUAL and SPARC provides confidence in an alternative approach, one which goes much further in incorporating the immediate concerns of users of research, older and disabled people, intermediaries and, of course, researchers. In so doing it might be argued that these programmes have provided the leadership which is desperately needed by ageing and disability-related research in the UK.

Given that NDA is the current main research funding vehicle for ageing and disability research, these important ingredients of successful research may be difficult to promote to a wider community. However, SPARC is providing opportunities for continuing to build the research base by attracting newcomers and, through various means, keeping these close to research users of all types.

A further challenge is not that newcomers will be put off, but that many will not be integrated into the larger ageing research community. The success of EQUAL has highlighted the pervasive appeal of the theme of social inclusion, which incorporates consideration of many of the everyday issues faced by older and disabled people. This theme and the related opportunities for ageing and disability-related research have been incorporated into other major national research programmes, such as sustainability, urban design, and many aspects of safety and security. Because these programmes present more attractive opportunities than the mainstream ageing research programme, there is a danger that those ageing researchers who are involved with them will not fully interact with those others who are engaged with the mainstream. This will hinder the fruitful development of ageing and disability-related research in the UK and, hence, do a great disservice to older and disabled people.

Thus, it is important that initiatives like SPARC provide the integration between sub-communities and demonstrate the tangible contribution to independence and quality of life being made by those who work from the “bottom-up”.

REFERENCES