

Chapter 9 - Research

Funding for Research

9.1 There are two main sources of funding for research in the UGC-funded institutions, viz -

- (a) the UGC and RGC funds via block grants or earmarked/indicated grants; and
- (b) other Government and private funds.

Some 20% of the Block Grants are to provide the key staffing and infrastructure for research. This is the largest element of funding for research which the institutions have access to.

Earmarked Research Grant

9.2 Funding for the RGC is provided by the Government through the UGC in the form of Earmarked Research Grant (ERG), and if necessary, supplemented from the UGC Central Allocation Vote. The ERG is currently disbursed in four main segments -

- (a) Direct Allocation

A certain percentage of the ERG is set aside for allocating directly to the institutions to support projects costing less than \$200,000.

- (b) Competitive Earmarked Research Grant

The major proportion of the ERG is disbursed in response to competitive bids submitted by the institutions for academic research projects. The grants are awarded via a process of external peer review.

- (c) Central Allocation Scheme

The main objectives of this funding are -

For Equipment Proposals

- (i) to enable the acquisition of major research facilities or equipment, and major library materials which could not otherwise be afforded by one institution and which can be used for collaborative research;
- (ii) to assist institutions in “leveraging” support from equipment suppliers on a matching fund basis with a view to stretching the

value of the RGC's funds further than could normally be possible by making small allocations in connection with individual projects; and

For Group Research

(iii) to encourage research groups to engage in collaborative research across disciplines and/or across institutions with a view to enhancing the research output of institutions in terms of its level of attainment, quantity, dimensions, and/or speed.

(d) Joint Research Schemes

Joint research schemes are established in collaboration with research bodies in the Mainland and overseas and are meant to promote and further encourage research co-operation and exchanges.

Direct Allocation

9.3 It is intended that this funding can support small-scale research projects costing less than HK\$200,000; for field trips and other travel requirements, and to provide initial funding for research for junior faculty and newly recruited staff in research. The distribution of Direct Allocation grants among institutions is determined primarily with regard to the numbers of academic staff.

9.4 Institutions are responsible for disbursing the Direct Allocation grants. No specific condition is set for the institutions and they have the discretion in the use of such grants. However, institutions are expected to demonstrate fairness and discrimination in their internal policies for the allocation of these grants and other internal research resources, channelling them to those individual staff/departments that will put them to best use. Institutions are also required to report generally the usage of these grants to the RGC in their annual reports on research activities.

Competitive Earmarked Research Grant

Funding Principles

9.5 The RGC has formulated the following principles on the funding of research projects -

- (a) the Council fully supports the educational and institutional objectives of increased funding for academic research;
- (b) emphasis should be given equally to both basic and applied research. In the allocation of research funding, the Council aims to ensure a proper balance between basic and applied projects;

- (c) contract research should be funded by the body commissioning the research, in proportion to the benefit derived. Resources allocated to the institutions for academic research should not generally be diverted towards contract research; and
- (d) for proposals involving an interface with the private sector or which are industry-related, consideration should be given as to whether the projects have a significant academic content or would also serve the purposes of academic development. The potential for collaborative research/joint funding with industry is a relevant factor and should also be taken into account.

9.6 The RGC's main objective is to fund as many worthy projects as possible across a broad front within the funds available. Nevertheless, projects of exceptional merit will be funded more fully than other projects. When considering the applications, the following criteria are adopted by the RGC for the allocation of ERG competitive bids -

- (a) Academic quality/merit
 - scientific and scholarly merit of the proposal
 - qualifications and track record of the (principal) investigator(s)
 - originality
 - feasibility within the time-scale of the proposal;
- (b) institutional commitment;
- (c) contribution to academic/professional development (where applicable);
- (d) potential for social, cultural or economic application; and
- (e) availability of, and potential for, non-RGC funding.

9.7 Academic quality/merit is the overriding criterion in evaluating research projects while others accorded equal weight. In considering grant applications, the RGC will also take cognizance of alternative sources of funding available because some subject area will attract more private funding than others.

9.8 Projects which are inter-disciplinary and/or which provide opportunity for inter-institutional collaboration are to be encouraged. However, this does not imply that such projects have a higher priority. Academic quality/merit remains the main consideration. It is important to ensure that collaborative projects are not carried out just for the sake of collaboration.

Allocation of Grants

9.9 (a) Application

Call circulars with application form and detailed explanatory notes are issued to all UGC-funded institutions in end June inviting applications for allocations from the Competitive Earmarked Research Grant (CERG). Deadline of submission is around end of October.

Full-time academic staff of UGC-funded institution proper in Staff Grades A to I as defined in the Common Data Collection Format (CDCF) who are primarily engaged in and spending at least 80% of time in degree or higher degree work at the institution proper and whose salaries are wholly funded by the institution proper are eligible to apply for allocations from the CERG. Staff members engaged in non-degree programmes which are still funded by the UGC and whose salaries are wholly funded from the General Funds of the institution concerned may also apply. For newly appointed staff members, to be eligible for allocations from the CERG, they should have formally entered into a contract of service with the concluded institution on or before 31 October when the applications are submitted and their appointments should take effect on or before 1 May in the following year. As regards staff members employed on a fixed term contract, they are only eligible to apply for allocations from the CERG if they remain in service at the time of funding award being made in June and for at least the first year of the projects' planned duration. Visiting scholars should have full-time employment at the institution proper covering at least one year or the duration of the project whichever is the longer.

Each application should be submitted with only one applicant nominated as Principal Investigator and no applicant should submit more than one application in this capacity each year. Other joint applicants, if any, will be regarded as Co-investigators.

(b) Indicative Distribution of Grants among Subject Panels

The total funding available for competitive bids will be distributed among the four subject panels according to a formula which is based on the distribution of applications, normative unit cost for proposals in each panel, and the results of preliminary assessment where available.

(c) Initial Examination by Subject Panels

Each panel will be responsible for the initial examination of applications falling within its purview. The Panel Chairmen will determine the distribution of responsibilities among their panel members by subject disciplines. In assessing the applications, panel members will be

requested to invite assessments from at least five external reviewers, local or overseas, for each proposal. The general procedural rules for panel members/assessors are given in [Annex 9A](#). For grading purposes, at least two external reviews must be obtained. Taking into account the ratings and comments returned by external reviewers and in accordance with the approved criteria, the panel members have to give a preliminary grading to each proposal using the following 7-point scale and complete the preliminary assessment forms -

| | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----|-----------|-----|------|------|------|
| 5 | 4.5 | 4 | 3.5 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Excellent | | Very good | | Good | Fair | Poor |

(d) Meetings of Subject Panels

Subject panels will meet in June before the RGC meeting to consider the proposals further and to select proposals to be supported and the amount recommended according to the guidelines for adjusting the budgets for research projects (see [Annex 9B](#)), following which Panel Chairmen will submit recommendations to the RGC. The Secretariat will tabulate the funding recommendations by panels and draw up a summary for discussion by the RGC at its meeting.

(e) Meeting of RGC

The RGC will consider the Panel Chairmen's recommendations and make the awards at the June meeting.

(f) Allocation Letter and Assessments Feedback

Institutions will be informed of the results via allocation letters in end June. The Council will feedback to both unsuccessful and successful applicants the final rating of each proposal as assigned by the relevant subject panel and all open comments made by the external assessors and the responsible panel members.

9.10 The timetable for allocations from the CERG are outlined in [Annex 9C](#).

Monitoring of On-going Projects

9.11 Principal Investigators are required to submit annual progress reports on all on-going projects through their institutions to the RGC for monitoring. These reports are required to be submitted by 31 March each year. However, progress reports for newly funded projects are not required to be submitted for the first year. Each RGC-funded project is assigned to one subject panel member who is responsible for monitoring, by reviewing the annual progress reports to ensure that the project is proceeding on schedule and that any problems identified are followed up. While the

Principal Investigators are held responsible for the overall management, implementation and completion of research projects, the sponsoring institutions are also required to assume the important role of putting in place a due internal monitoring system to ensure proper management and satisfactory completion of projects, appropriate and reasonable usage of RGC grants within the approved scope and timeframe, as well as compliance with all monitoring rules laid down by the RGC.

Assessment of Completed Projects

9.12 Within nine months (18 months for projects funded before the 2004/05 exercise) after the scheduled completion date for a project, the Principal Investigator is required to submit a completion report detailing the outcome of the research project, the results achieved, students trained and publications produced, as well as reporting on the use and application of the grant awarded. These completion reports are passed to the responsible panel members for final evaluation. The comments in the final evaluation will be fed back to the Principal Investigators concerned. Completed projects that have been rated “Unsatisfactory” and “Barely Satisfactory” are required to be endorsed by the relevant Panels. Results of such assessments may also be taken into account when assessing new grant applications from the same Principal Investigators.

9.13 The Council will, from time to time, review the principles and guidelines for the allocation and monitoring of the CERG and detailed procedures for the operation of the Council and its panels so as to ensure that project grants are spent properly, the allocations are administered efficiently and effectively, and on-going and completed projects are assessed fairly and equitably.

Public Policy Research (PPR)

9.14 For promoting public policy research in higher education institutions, the Government has earmarked an annual allocation of \$20 million to the RGC for three consecutive financial years from 2005-06 to 2007-08 for this purpose. With this funding, the RGC launched a new Public Policy Research (PPR) funding scheme starting from December 2005.

9.15 (a) Application

The PPR Scheme is held twice a year. Call circulars with application forms and detailed explanatory notes are issued to all UGC-funded institutions in March and September inviting applications. Deadlines of submissions are end May and end November respectively.

(b) Initial Examination by the Public Policy Research Sub-Panel (PPR Sub-Panel) under the Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies Panel

The PPR Sub-Panel will be responsible for the initial examination of the PPR applications. The Panel Chairman will determine the distribution of responsibilities among their panel members by subject disciplines. In assessing the applications, panel members will be requested to invite assessments from at least five external reviewers, local or overseas, for each proposal. For grading purposes, at least two external reviews must be obtained. The general procedural rules for panel members/assessors and the priority ratings are similar to that for CERG.

(c) Meeting of the PPR Sub-Panel

The PPR Sub-Panel will meet in June and December before the respective RGC meeting to select proposals to be supported and the amount recommended according to the guidelines for adjusting the budgets for research projects (see Annex 9B), following which the Panel Chairman will submit recommendations to the RGC. The Secretariat will tabulate the funding recommendations by the Sub-Panel and draw up a summary for discussion by the RGC at its meeting.

(d) Meeting of RGC

The RGC will consider the Panel Chairman's recommendations and make the awards at the RGC meeting.

(e) Allocation Letter and Assessments Feedback

Institutions will be informed of the results via allocation letters in late June. The Council will feedback to both unsuccessful and successful applicants the final rating of each proposal as assigned by the PPR Sub-Panel and all open comments made by the external assessors and the responsible panel members.

Monitoring of On-going Projects

9.16 The monitoring mechanism is similar to that for CERG as stated in paragraph 9.11. Principal Investigators are required to submit annual progress reports on all on-going projects through their institutions to the RGC for monitoring. These reports are required to be submitted by 15 May or 15 November respectively. However, progress reports for newly funded projects are not required to be submitted for the first year. Each RGC-funded project is assigned to one subject panel member who is responsible for monitoring, by reviewing the annual progress reports to ensure that the project is proceeding on schedule and that any problems identified are followed up.

Assessment of Completed Projects

9.17 Within three months after the scheduled completion date for a project, the Principal Investigator is required to submit a completion report detailing the outcome of the research project, the results achieved, students trained and publications produced, as well as reporting on the use and application of the grant awarded. These completion reports are passed to the responsible panel members for final evaluation. The comments in the final evaluation will be fed back to the Principal Investigators concerned. Completed projects that have been rated “Unsatisfactory” and “Barely Satisfactory” are required to be endorsed by the relevant PPR Sub-Panel. Results of such assessments may also be taken into account when assessing new grant applications from the same Principal Investigators.

Central Allocation

Application Procedures

9.18 Every year, RGC will issue letters to all UGC-funded institutions in February/March inviting bids for the Central Allocation Fund. The deadline of submission is usually set for June. All proposals must be submitted on the application form for Central Allocation Fund.

Criteria for Allocation

9.19 The proposals seeking funding from Central Allocation are examined on the basis of the following criteria -

For Equipment Proposal

Proposals will be reviewed by external reviewers and selection interviews will be held with the research teams of short-listed proposals. In making the selection, the RGC will take into account the following factors -

- (a) the merit of the proposals, their contribution to academic/professional development and potential for application and benefit to tertiary institutions in particular and Hong Kong in general;
- (b) the scope for collaborative research/joint use, and degree of such usage;
- (c) feasibility in implementation;
- (d) institutional support, including that of the sponsoring / collaborating institutions;

- (e) the availability of similar facilities/library acquisitions elsewhere in Hong Kong;
- (f) the prospects of external funding.

For Group Research

Proposals will be reviewed by external reviewers and selection interviews will be held with the research teams of shortlisted proposals. In making the selection, the RGC will take into account the following factors -

- (a) the academic merits and science content of the proposal;
- (b) the long term goal of the proposal and its potential to develop into an area of strength;
- (c) the opportunities for effective synergism among the participating researchers, research groups and institutions; and
- (d) the viability of the proposal, particularly in terms of its project management. The project team's ability to put in place an effective governance structure to monitor collaborating work and to ensure prudent deployment of resources would be important considerations.

Allocation of Grants

9.20 Selection of proposals for funding is carried out at the RGC's December meeting. The institutions will be notified of the result in end January and the grant will be disbursed in the form of an earmarked grant to the institutions. Payment of the full amount will be effected by end February.

Monitoring of Progress

9.21 Annual progress reports are required to be submitted, for consideration by the RGC, on the progress made and the use of the grants. These reports will be passed to the Central Allocation Sub-Committee for consideration and members' comments will be fed back to the Principal Investigators for reference. Periodic site visits and / or interviews with the researchers will also be conducted by the Central Allocation Sub-Committee as part of the monitoring of group research projects. The visits will normally be conducted in mid December.

Joint Research Schemes

9.22 The RGC will consider the establishment of joint research schemes with other bodies if such schemes are beneficial to Hong Kong. The following joint research schemes have been established under the RGC -

(a) Germany/Hong Kong Joint Research Scheme

The scheme, established in collaboration with the Germany Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), provides travel grants to support and facilitate collaborative research between scholars in Germany and Hong Kong. The grants are to meet the travel, accommodation and subsistence costs.

(b) PROCORE-France/Hong Kong Joint Research Scheme

The scheme is established jointly with the French Consulate in Hong Kong to support collaborative research between the two places. In addition to the provision of travel grants, the Scheme also sponsors travel, accommodation and subsistence costs of guest speakers and direct organizing costs of conferences/workshops held in Hong Kong.

(c) NSFC/RGC Joint Research Scheme

Jointly established with the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC), the scheme aims to promote collaboration in research between researchers in Hong Kong and their counterparts in the Mainland. It provides funding to support actual research expenses in addition to travel and subsistence.

9.23 The RGC issues letters to all UGC-funded institutions in the first quarter of each year inviting bids under the Germany/Hong Kong Joint Research schemes and the *PROCORE*-France/Hong Kong Joint Research Schemes. The call circular for NSFC/RGC Joint Research Scheme is issued in November each year.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

9.24 As a matter of policy, the UGC and RGC, will not claim copyright or other intellectual property rights in products developed as a result of UGC or RGC grants. Staff should, however, check with their institution's own rules and make arrangements appropriately to protect such rights as between the institution and the individual. Data generated by UGC-funded grants should be regarded as public property. Data sets or survey results produced with a UGC grant should be made available to others after a reasonable lapse of time.

Acknowledgements

9.25 Staff should acknowledge UGC or RGC funding support or any specially UGC/RGC-funded equipment/facilities used in publications or publicity. Where appropriate, royalty-free licences for the use of the products should be offered to all UGC-funded institutions.