

Operation Guide for the RGC Research Fellow Scheme (RFS)
and RGC Senior Research Fellow Scheme (SRFS)

This Operation Guide sets out the implementation principles and detailed guidelines of the RFS and SRFS.

Objectives

2. The RFS and SRFS aim at providing sustained research support integrated with relief from teaching and administrative duties for outstanding mid-career and senior academics respectively at University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities in Hong Kong. The Fellowships aim to facilitate academics to dedicate their career to research and development (R&D) over a period of 60 months. One important focus of both Fellowship schemes is to give the awardee the time and resources to nurture and train the next generation of postgraduate, doctoral and postdoctoral researchers for Hong Kong through the delivery of a programme of world-leading research.

3. In order to build up a pool of local research talent to sustain Hong Kong's international competitiveness and drive the development of our higher education sector, the schemes are primarily directed at local researchers who can benefit from the RFS and SRFS. Whilst RFS candidates might be expected to demonstrate exceptional promise and potential to be international leaders, SRFS candidates should demonstrate metrics and characteristics consistent with being an internationally leading researcher. The two schemes are competitive in nature, and a quota of at least half of the awardees for each scheme is reserved for the most promising local candidates in each exercise, i.e. for candidates who are, at the time of nomination, Hong Kong permanent residents with the right of abode in Hong Kong as defined under the Immigration Ordinance¹. Under the principle of merit-based selection, should the quota for local candidates of either scheme not be fully utilised in a particular exercise, after exhausting every effort in selecting local candidates, consideration will be given to release the quota for suitable non-local candidates. This arrangement will be subject to review.

¹ For definition of Hong Kong permanent residents under the Immigration Ordinance, please refer to <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/services/roa/eligible.html>

4. Both RFS and SRFS will provide awards encompassing all academic disciplines grouped into two broad academic streams as follows:

- (i) Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies (H disciplines); and
- (ii) Sciences, Medicine, Engineering and Technology (S disciplines)

5. In each round of the yearly exercise, sustained support will be provided to ten RFS awardees at Associate Professor rank/ level and ten SRFS awardees at full Professor rank/ level for a period of 60 months at UGC-funded universities. The resource may be used for relief from teaching and administrative duties, as well as for research funding support covering salary costs for relief teachers and support for the research project including resources for staff, equipment, travel, subsistence and dissemination costs.

Coverage and Eligibility

Supporting University

6. All eight UGC-funded universities are eligible to nominate up to six candidates (at Associate Professor rank) for RFS and six candidates (at full Professor rank) for SRFS in each exercise. Each nomination should include the research proposal of the project to be undertaken by the nominated candidate during the fellowship period.

RGC Research Fellow Candidate

7. To qualify for the fellowship, the RFS candidate must:
- (a) have a legal right to work and reside in Hong Kong during the fellowship period;
 - (b) have a full-time² academic appointment at a UGC-funded university proper³ at the time of nomination and during the fellowship period;

² not including visiting or honorary appointment

³ excluding schools/ arms of continuing education and professional training and other analogous outfits

- (c) have been serving the supporting UGC-funded university proper³ on a full-time² basis for not less than three years continuously, at the time of nomination;
- (d) be a tenured/ substantiated Associate Professor (or equivalent) and at Staff Grade from “C” to “G” at the time of nomination;
- (e) be primarily engaged in and spending at least 80%⁴ of time in degree or higher degree work at the supporting UGC-funded university proper³; and
- (f) have his/ her salary wholly funded by the supporting UGC-funded university proper³.

8. Whilst no restriction/ limit on age is imposed, the candidate’s remaining years of tenured/ substantiated service should be sufficient to complete a full course of the fellowship before attaining the official normal retirement age under the supporting university’s prevailing policies.

9. Subject to exceptional consideration on a case-by-case basis, the requirements above (detailed in paragraphs 7 and 8) may be relaxed for Hong Kong talent working overseas so that they are incentivised to return to Hong Kong and take up the fellowship. In this connection, an RFS overseas candidate nominated by a UGC-funded university would be eligible for consideration if he/ she:

- (a) is a Hong Kong permanent resident with the right of abode in Hong Kong as defined under the Immigration Ordinance¹;
- (b) is a researcher at a university/ institute outside Hong Kong at the time of nomination with academic/ research profile equivalent to Associate Professor; and
- (c) has warranted support by a UGC-funded university proper³ at which he/ she will hold the fellowship, with a tenured/ substantiated full-time² appointment⁵ at Staff Grade from “C” to “G” commencing within the following year after the close of nomination.

⁴ The percentage concerned may be subject to review and revision as and when required.

⁵ The full-time appointment concerned shall be primarily engaged in and spending at least 80%⁴ of time in degree or higher degree work at the supporting UGC-funded university proper, with salary wholly funded by the supporting UGC-funded university proper.

RGC Senior Research Fellow Candidate

10. To qualify for the fellowship, the SRFS candidate must:
- (a) have a legal right to work and reside in Hong Kong during the fellowship period;
 - (b) have a full-time² academic appointment at a UGC-funded university proper³ at the time of nomination and during the fellowship period;
 - (c) have been serving the supporting UGC-funded university proper³ on a full-time² basis for not less than three years continuously at the time of nomination;
 - (d) be a tenured/ substantiated full Professor (or equivalent) and at Staff Grade from “A” to “D” at the time of nomination;
 - (e) be primarily engaged in and spending at least 80%⁴ of time in degree or higher degree work at the supporting UGC-funded university proper³; and
 - (f) have his/ her salary wholly funded by the supporting UGC-funded university proper³.

11. Whilst no restriction/ limit on age is imposed, the candidate’s remaining years of tenured/ substantiated service should be sufficient to complete a full course of the fellowship before attaining the official normal retirement age under the supporting university’s prevailing policies.

12. Subject to exceptional consideration on a case-by-case basis, the requirements above (detailed in paragraphs 10 and 11) may be relaxed for Hong Kong talent working overseas so that they are incentivised to return to Hong Kong and take up the fellowship. In this connection, an SRFS overseas candidate nominated by a UGC-funded university would be eligible for consideration if he/ she:

- (a) is a Hong Kong permanent resident with the right of abode in Hong Kong as defined under the Immigration Ordinance¹;
- (b) is a researcher at a university/ institute outside Hong Kong at the time of nomination with academic/ research profile equivalent to full Professor; and

- (c) has warranted support by a UGC-funded university proper³ at which he/ she will hold the fellowship, with a tenured/ substantiated full-time² appointment⁵ at Staff Grade from “A” to “D” commencing within the following year after the close of nomination.

13. An awardee can only benefit from either RFS or SRFS at any one time. Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme (HSSPFS) award holders may be nominated for RFS/ SRFS, provided that the awardees concerned are not holding the two types of fellowship concurrently (i.e. HSSPFS holders can sequentially be awarded RFS/ SRFS).

Fellowship Award

14. Each RFS awardee will be conferred the title “RGC Research Fellow (研資局研究學者)”, and the supporting university will receive a fellowship grant equivalent to 60-month aggregate total of basic salary at mid-point of Staff Grade “G” (i.e. Lecturer (U)), over a period of 60 months⁶, where a uniform rate⁷ is applied for both non-clinical and clinical academics. As stated, the fellowship grant can be used to cover salary costs for relief teachers, and support for the research project including resources for staff, equipment, travel, subsistence and dissemination costs, etc. Candidates should however note that the award does not cover “on-costs”⁸. The amount of the fellowship grant may be reviewed in future exercises with reference to the adjustment of basic salary of academic staff at Staff Grade “G” (i.e. Lecturer (U)).

15. Each SRFS awardee will be conferred the title “RGC Senior Research Fellow (研資局高級研究學者)”, and the supporting university will receive a fellowship grant equivalent to 60-month aggregate total of basic salary at mid-point of Staff Grade “B” (i.e. Reader), over a period of 60 months, where a uniform rate⁷ is applied for both non-clinical and clinical academics. As stated, the fellowship grant can be used to cover salary costs for relief teachers, and support for research project including resources for staff, equipment, travel,

⁶ In case an RFS awardee is promoted to full Professor rank during the fellowship period, there will be no change in the rate/ amount of grant disbursed to him/ her, since the fellowship is awarded in accordance with his/ her profile (and academic rank) at the time of nomination. RFS awardees who are promoted to full Professor rank are welcome to be nominated for SRFS upon completion of his/ her RFS fellowship.

⁷ Please refer to the Guidance Notes (RFS-SRFS-2) for the amount of fellowship grant to be received by the supporting university for each RFS/ SRFS awardee.

⁸ Supporting universities are required to make their own provision for “on-costs”.

subsistence and dissemination costs, etc. Candidates should however note that the award does not cover “on-costs”⁸. The amount of the fellowship grant may be reviewed in future exercises with reference to the adjustment of basic salary of academic staff at Staff Grade “B” (i.e. Reader).

16. For both RFS and SRFS, awardees shall be allowed to be relieved from teaching and administration duties (not including supervision of research postgraduate students) to conduct research during the 60-month fellowship period, with the actual duration of relief subject to mutual agreement between the awardee and the supporting university. In this context it should be noted that UGC and RGC place great importance on the nurturing of young researchers and educating university students, and this should *not be compromised in any way* by taking-up an award. Salaries for relief teachers who are taking up purely teaching duties should not exceed the salary of Staff Grade “G” (i.e. Lecturer (U)) of the supporting university concerned.

17. There should not be duplicated funding (expenditure) on *the same research work* undertaken for the RFS/ SRFS research proposal/ project and for research proposals/ projects or funded awards under another RGC research funding scheme. However, if the awardees are successful in securing teaching relief for an activity of different scope under another RGC research funding scheme (e.g. General Research Fund (GRF)) during the same funding cycle, they can begin the teaching relief under RFS/ SRFS after the expiration of teaching relief under the other RGC research funding scheme. Awardees are allowed to hold concurrent grant(s) awarded by the UGC/ RGC or other funding agencies during the fellowship period. However, if an awardee, as declared on the nomination form, has secured or will secure other funds for research work *that are related* to the RFS/ SRFS research proposal/ project, then the other funds should only be spent to complement or supplement the research work related to the RFS/ SRFS research proposal/ project.

18. Awardees will be allowed to hold other fellowship(s) concurrently (not applicable to HSSPFS) during the RFS/ SRFS fellowship period only if prior approval of the UGC Secretariat, on a case-by-case basis, has been obtained (see paragraph 19 below). Specifically, there must not be any overlapping of teaching relief under any approved concurrent fellowship(s) within the RFS/ SRFS fellowship period. If the awardee is in receipt of funding under approved concurrent fellowship(s), and it is supporting a different research project or on a project that can be said to complement or supplement the research work related to the RFS/ SRFS research proposal/ project, this should be declared/ clarified in writing to the UGC Secretariat (see paragraph 19 below).

19. An awardee may submit request for prior approval to hold a concurrent fellowship during the RFS/ SRFS fellowship period only if:

- (a) the other fellowship(s) is/ are only honorary in nature, and awardees are retaining only the title of the other fellowship(s) but not receiving financial consideration of the other fellowship(s) during the RFS/ SRFS fellowship period; **or**
- (b) the funding under the other fellowship(s) is supporting a different research project or is spent on a project that can complement or supplement the research work related to the RFS/ SRFS research proposal/ project, and there must be no overlapping of teaching relief under the other fellowship(s).

Such requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis in consultation with the selection panel chair concerned. Any request should reach the UGC Secretariat at least four weeks in advance of the commencement date of the other fellowship(s). Cases seeking retrospective approval will not be considered.

20. Awardees accepting the RFS/ SRFS fellowship shall not compete again in future exercises. Universities may, however, make repeated nominations for non-selected candidates.

Selection Criteria

21. Selection is based on:

- (a) the candidate's qualifications and research capability;
- (b) the candidate's proven research track record to date;
- (c) the candidate's leadership quality and vision in the chosen area of research (including his/ her track record and future plans in supporting the training and progression of early career researchers (see paragraph 22 below));
- (d) the merit of the research proposal, including methodology, scope, theoretical framework, etc.;
- (e) the feasibility of the proposed research project including planning, management and resources;

- (f) the contribution and potential impact of the proposed research project, including knowledge transfer and research impact; and
- (g) the nature of any university support offered.

22. In the course of assessing a candidate's leadership quality and vision, particular regard will be given to a candidate's mentoring success and past experience in developing Research Postgraduate (RPg) students and junior researchers (including Post-doctoral Fellows, if any), as well as the candidate's engagement plan to train/ nurture the next generation of research talent/ young researchers via the proposed research project under the fellowship. As senior academics should have more experience in nurturing and mentoring young researchers, the weighting accorded in the assessment metrics on leadership will be more for SRFS candidates than that for RFS candidates.

Selection Panel

23. For assessment of nominations and selection of awardees, two selection panels (H-Panel and S-Panel, as described above) will be formed, comprising a panel chair and academic experts. The two Panels will evaluate the merit of the candidates in the two broad academic streams (disciplines), separately. RFS and SRFS will be assessed concurrently in the same discipline panel. Non-local expert panel members will be invited to ensure impartiality and minimise conflicts of interest during the selection process.

24. The H-Panel is formed by non-local members from each of the relevant RGC subject panels/ sub-panels, i.e. from the Business Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. The proposed composition for the H-Panel is as follows:

- (a) Chairman
preferably a non-local RGC Member from the H disciplines
- (b) Members
non-local representatives from respective RGC subject panels (or sub-panels)
 - Business Studies
 - Humanities and Social Sciences (comprising four sub-panels):

- (i) Psychology and Linguistics
- (ii) Social and Behavioural Sciences
- (iii) Humanities and Arts
- (iv) Education

25. The S-Panel is formed by non-local members from each of the relevant RGC subject panels/ sub-panels, i.e. from the Biology, Medicine, Engineering and Physical Sciences disciplines. The proposed composition for the S-Panel is as follows:

- (a) Chairman
preferably a non-local RGC Member from the S disciplines
- (b) Members
non-local representatives from respective RGC subject panels (or sub-panels)
 - Biology and Medicine
 - Engineering (comprising two sub-panels):
 - (i) Computing Science/ Information Technology and Electrical/ Electronic Engineering
 - (ii) Civil Engineering/ Surveying/ Building & Construction and Mechanical/ Production/ Industrial Engineering
 - Physical Sciences

Nomination Process

26. Nominations of RFS/ SRFS candidates should be made by supporting universities via their Research Office using the RFS/ SRFS nomination form, and RFS/ SRFS candidates should include their research proposal detailing the research project with proposed budget to be undertaken within the fellowship period.

27. Normally it is expected that the scope of a proposal submitted under the RFS/ SRFS should be larger than a similar proposal submitted under GRF. Candidates are reminded that the research project must have sufficient depth and breadth to justify a period of five years of fellowship. Re-submission of aspects of a proposal not supported by UGC/ RGC/ other research funding agency, as part

of the Fellowship programme, is allowed. The RFS and SRFS schemes are not only intended to solely develop a new research project, and a proposal that builds on an existing research initiative, that is already defined and developed, and takes it in distinctly new directions or markedly expands its scope, may also be considered, although the candidate should ensure that the novelty in integrating these activities is clearly defined.

28. Further details and guidance notes of the nomination process are provided on the RGC website. A call letter will be issued to Heads of Universities by September and nominations as supported and submitted by the nominating university should reach the UGC Secretariat by the end of November. Candidates submitting application directly to the UGC Secretariat will not be considered.

Assessment Process

29. The UGC Secretariat will vet the nominations received and seek clarifications from universities as necessary. After that, the panel chair concerned will assign the first reader and second reader for each nomination/ proposal from amongst the panel members, taking into account their expertise. The first reader will subsequently be invited to nominate several external reviewers to conduct the preliminary assessment of nominations. For each nomination/ proposal, at least three external reviewers shall provide a preliminary assessment, independently of each other. Having received the reviews from external reviewers, the first and second readers will be required to give independent assessments of the nominations/ proposals.

30. The UGC Secretariat will consolidate all the assessments received from external reviewers and (the first and second) readers. The panel chair will shortlist nominees as finalists to be interviewed by the selection panel concerned for further consideration for awarding the RFS/ SRFS fellowship. The Secretariat will invite shortlisted finalists to attend interview accordingly in late May/ early June. In-person interviews will be arranged, and only in exceptional circumstances may remote arrangements for interviews be considered. Panel discussion after the interview, if applicable, will be moderated by the panel chair at the selection panel meeting to be held in Hong Kong. During the assessment period (i.e. after nominations close and before the announcement of results), any request for transferring a nomination from the supporting university to another UGC-funded university will not be considered. Announcement of results will be made to the universities following the approval by RGC.

Time Table/ Processing Cycle of RFS and SRFS (for reference only)

Timeline	Milestone
September (Year <i>n</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for nominations
November (Year <i>n</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close of nominations from universities
November (Year <i>n</i>) – January (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of H and S selection panels
February (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment of nominations to the first and second readers (who are panel members) by panel chair • The first reader to nominate external reviewers
March – April (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminary assessment of nominations by at least three external reviewers
April – May (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of nominations by the first and second readers • The panel chair to shortlist nominees as finalists for interview and further consideration
late May – early June (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview of shortlisted finalists by the selection panel
June (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final discussion of shortlisted nominations, if applicable, at selection panel meetings • Consideration and approval of selection results by RGC
July (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announcement and notification of results to universities
1 January (Year <i>n+2</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RFS and SRFS awardees to start their research projects (and teaching relief/ research leave if applicable)

Disbursement Arrangements

31. By accepting the fellowship, the fellowship grant will be allocated to the supporting university concerned via a designated bank account by two instalments, with issuance of the first instalment within the year of award and the second instalment subject to satisfactory assessment of the second annual progress report submitted by the awardee. The supporting university concerned shall also continue the awardee's substantive academic appointment with salary, fringe benefits and other terms and conditions throughout the 60-month fellowship period. The supporting university concerned will sign grant undertakings and agree to abide by all relevant UGC/ RGC guidelines.

32. Any unspent balance of and interest income from the fellowship grant should be returned to the UGC Secretariat in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the Disbursement, Accounting and Monitoring Arrangements for Funding Schemes Administered by the Research Grants Council (DAMA).

Monitoring/ Reporting Requirements

33. By accepting the fellowship, an awardee shall start the research project (and teaching relief/ research leave if applicable), on which the award is conferred, on 1 January of the next year, unless the awardee advises an alternative date to commence, with approval by the UGC Secretariat. An awardee will be required to submit annual progress reports on the on-going research project through the supporting university concerned to the UGC Secretariat for monitoring. The reporting period should end every 12 months after the start of the fellowship. Annual progress reports should reach the UGC Secretariat within three months from the end of the reporting period.

34. Each annual progress report will be assessed by members of the appropriate discipline panel (with outcomes moderated by the panel chair).

35. Upon completion of the 60-month fellowship period, awardees should submit a completion report through the supporting university concerned to the UGC Secretariat not later than 12 months from the end of the fellowship.

36. In cases where the assessment of annual progress report(s) submitted by the awardee is deemed unsatisfactory, the fellowship may be terminated before the end of the fellowship period. The supporting university concerned shall return the unspent balance of the fellowship grant together with the Statement of

Accounts to the UGC Secretariat within six months from the termination of fellowship, in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the DAMA. The awardee shall submit a concluding report through the supporting university concerned to the UGC Secretariat not later than six months from the termination of fellowship.

37. In cases where an awardee resigns from his/ her academic appointment or it is terminated by the supporting university concerned before the end of the fellowship period, the fellowship shall terminate as it is only designated for related academic appointment and cannot be transferred between persons. The supporting university concerned shall return the unspent balance of the fellowship grant together with the Statement of Accounts to the UGC Secretariat within six months from the termination of fellowship, in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the DAMA. The awardee shall submit a concluding report through the supporting university concerned to the UGC Secretariat not later than six months from the termination of fellowship.

38. If an awardee changes his/ her appointment from the supporting university concerned to another UGC-funded university, the fellowship cannot be transferred unless prior approval of the UGC Secretariat has been obtained. Such requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis, provided that the supporting university has reached a mutual consensus with the receiving university, and an undertaking has been made by the receiving university to confirm that it will manage the fellowship based on the same research project. To facilitate the UGC Secretariat's consideration, the undertaking made by the receiving university will preferably also mention the following:

- (a) that arrangements for auxillary staff, post-graduate students and other personnel associated with the original proposal have been duly made by the receiving and supporting universities;
- (b) that the resourcing of changes in the teaching arrangements within the supporting university are considered, and the employment of the relief teacher concerned, if any, will not be affected by the transfer when the awardee's support/ resource moves to the receiving university; and
- (c) that the awardee will continue to meet all eligibility requirements of the RFS/ SRFS.

When such a consensus/ agreement has been reached, the supporting university should report the change in appointment status of the awardee and submit the request for transfer to the UGC Secretariat for consideration and approval at least

two months prior to the effective date of the change. Subject to approval, the fellowship will then be allowed to transfer with the awardee to the receiving university. However, the fellowship cannot be transferred if an awardee changes his/ her appointment from the supporting UGC-funded university to a self-financing local degree-awarding institution.