

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

Introduction

As announced in the 2018 Policy Address, the Government would reserve recurrent funding in support of the Research Grants Council (RGC) to introduce three new regular fellowship schemes in 2019/20 academic year for open nominations, namely RGC Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme (PDFS), RGC Research Fellow Scheme (RFS) and RGC Senior Research Fellow Scheme (SRFS), which will benefit post-doctoral fellows as well as researchers at associate professor and professor ranks respectively. 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 support and relief from teaching and administrative duties for exceptionally outstanding academics at their mid-career at UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong, with a view to facilitating their full dedication to research and development (R&D).

3. To build up a pool of local research talent to sustain Hong Kong's competitiveness and propel the development of our higher education sector, it is desirable that local promising researchers are well covered and can benefit from the RFS and SRFS. While the two new schemes will remain competitive in nature, it is proposed that a quota of half of the awardees for each scheme will be reserved for 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 respective scheme not being 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 of the same scheme in the exercise concerned. This arrangement will be subject to review as and when required.

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. In each round of the yearly exercise, both RFS and SRFS will provide 10 places encompassing all academic disciplines grouped into two broad academic streams as follows:

- (i) Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); and
- (ii) Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies (HSSB)

5. RFS will, in each round of the yearly exercise, provide sustained support to 10 awardees at Associate Professor rank/level at a UGC-funded university for a period of 60 months in the manner of relief from teaching and administrative duties, and research funding support covering salary costs for relief teachers and support for research project including staff, equipment, travel, subsistence and dissemination costs. SRFS will, in each round of the yearly exercise, provide sustained support to 10 awardees at full Professor rank/level at a UGC-funded university for a period of 60 months in the manner of relief from teaching and administrative duties, and research funding support covering salary costs for relief teachers and support for research project including 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 Professor rank) for SRFS. 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) obtain a legal right to work and reside in Hong Kong during the fellowship period;

- (b) be having a full-time² academic appointment at a UGC-funded university proper³;
- (c) have been serving the supporting UGC-funded university proper³ on a full-time² basis for not less than three years continuously;
- (d) be a tenured/substantiated Associate Professor (or equivalent) and at Staff Grade from “C” to “G”;
- (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.

Subject to exceptional consideration on a case-by-case basis, the requirement of (c) above 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 (calendar) year following the (calendar) year in which the nomination period closes.

² not including visiting or honorary appointment

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

⁴ The percentage concerned may be subject to review and revise to tally with other RGC research funding schemes.

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

8. To qualify for the fellowship, the SRFS candidate must:
- (a) obtain a legal right to work and reside in Hong Kong during the fellowship period;
 - (b) be having a full-time² academic appointment at a UGC-funded university proper³;
 - (c) have been serving the supporting UGC-funded university proper³ on a full-time² basis for not less than three years continuously;
 - (d) be a tenured/substantiated full Professor (or equivalent) and at Staff Grade from “A” to “D”;
 - (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.

Subject to exceptional consideration on a case-by-case basis, the requirement of (c) above 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 (calendar) year following the (calendar) year in which the nomination period closes.

9. In case the research project proposed in the nomination is receiving research funding support by other local public funding under the UGC, RGC, ITF, etc., as the RGC does not provide duplicate funding for activities funded, only funding which complements the research support obtained by the awardee from other local public funding sources will be provided under RFS/SRFS. An awardee can only benefit from either RFS or SRFS at any one time. Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme (HSSPFS) 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

10. 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)), around \$5.2 million per award in the debut exercise (a uniform rate is applied for both non-clinical and clinical academics), over a period of 60 months⁶. The fellowship grant can be used to cover salary costs for relief teachers, and support for research project including staff, equipment, travel, subsistence and dissemination costs, not including “on-costs”. 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)).

11. 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), around \$7.8 million per award in the debut exercise (a uniform rate is applied for both non-clinical and clinical academics), over a period of 60 months. The fellowship grant can be used to cover salary costs for relief teachers, and support for research project including staff, equipment, travel, subsistence and dissemination costs, not including “on-costs”. The amount of the fellowship grant may be reviewed in future exercises with reference to the adjustment of basic salary of academic staff at

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.

Staff Grade “B” (i.e. Reader).

12. 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 full-time research during the 60-month fellowship period, with the actual duration of relief subject to mutual agreement between the awardee and the supporting university. Salaries for relief teachers taking up purely teaching duties should not exceed the salary of Staff Grade “G” (i.e. Lecturer (U)) of the supporting university concerned.

13. 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. Moreover, awardees are allowed to hold concurrent grant(s) (except grant(s) in the form of fellowship) awarded by the UGC/RGC or other funding agencies, during the fellowship period, on research project(s) other than that under RFS/SRFS. Awardees accepting the fellowship shall not compete again in future exercises. Universities may make repeated nominations for non-selected candidates.

Selection Criteria

14. 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;
- (d) the merit of the research proposal, including methodology, scope, theoretical framework, etc.;
- (e) feasibility of the proposed research project including planning, management and resources;
- (f) contribution and potential impact of the proposed research project, including knowledge transfer and research impact; and
- (g) university support.

Selection Panel

15. For assessment of nominations and selection of awardees, two selection panels shall be formed to serve the two broad academic streams (STEM and HSSB) separately. RFS and SRFS will share the same panels. Non-local members will be invited to ensure impartiality and minimise conflicts of interest during the selection process.

16. For the STEM selection panel, there will be six representatives (non-local members) from each of the respective RGC subject panels [or three representatives (non-local members) from each of the subject's sub-panels], making up a total of 18 representatives (non-local members) from the Biology and Medicine, Engineering and Physical Sciences disciplines. The proposed composition for the STEM selection panel is as follows:

(a) Chairman

a non-local RGC Member from the STEM stream

(b) Members

18 non-local representatives from respective RGC subject panels (or sub-panels)

- Biology and Medicine (six representatives)
- Engineering (six representatives, three from each of the two sub-panels)
 - (i) Computing Science/Information Technology/Electrical /Electronic Engineering sub-panel
 - (ii) Civil Engineering/Surveying/Building & Construction and Mechanical/Production/Industrial Engineering sub-panel
- Physical Sciences (six representatives)

17. For the HSSB selection panel, there will be eight representatives (non-local members) from each of the respective RGC subject panels [or two representatives (non-local members) from each of the subject's sub-panels], making up a total of 16 representatives (non-local members) from the Business Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. The proposed

composition for the HSSB selection panel is as follows:

(a) Chairman

a non-local RGC Member from the HSSB stream

(b) Members

16 non-local representatives from respective RGC subject panels (or sub-panels)

- Business Studies (eight representatives)
- Humanities and Social Sciences (eight representatives, two from each of the four sub-panels)
 - (i) Education sub-panel
 - (ii) Humanities and Arts sub-panel
 - (iii) Psychology and Linguistics sub-panel
 - (iv) Social and Behavioural Sciences sub-panel

Nomination Process

18. Nominations of RFS/SRFS candidates should be made by universities via their Research Office using the RFS/SRFS nomination form, on which universities should indicate the institutional support with detailed comments, and RFS/SRFS candidates should include their research proposal detailing the research project with proposed budget to be undertaken within the fellowship period.

19. Normally it is expected that the scope of a proposal submitted under RFS/SRFS should be larger than a similar proposal submitted under GRF. Having said that, re-submission of a proposal not supported by UGC/RGC/other research funding agency previously is allowed. Moreover, RFS/SRFS is not only intended to develop a new research project. A research proposal building on existing research initiative that is already well defined and developed may also be considered. For the same research proposal receiving research funding support by other local public funding under the UGC, RGC, ITF, etc., as the RGC does not provide duplicate funding for activities funded, only funding which complements the research support obtained from other local public funding sources will be provided under RFS/SRFS.

20. Further details and explanatory notes of the nomination process are

provided on the UGC website. Call letter will be issued to Heads of Universities by September and nominations should reach the UGC Secretariat by November. Candidates submitting application direct to the UGC Secretariat will not be considered.

Assessment Process

21. The UGC Secretariat will vet the nominations received and seek clarifications from universities as necessary by the following January. After that, the panel chair concerned will assign the first reader and second reader for each nomination/proposal among the panel members, taking into account their expertise. The first reader will then be invited to nominate several external reviewers to conduct the preliminary assessment of nominations. For each nomination/proposal, at least two external reviewers shall provide preliminary assessment independently by the following April. Having received the review from external reviewers, the first and second readers will be required to give independent assessments of the nominations/proposals.

22. In the following May, the UGC Secretariat will consolidate all the assessments received from external reviewers and (the first and second) readers, and prepare relevant information to facilitate panel discussion to consider each nomination/proposal in detail. Panel discussion will be steered by the panel chair at the selection panel meetings to be held in Hong Kong in the following June. Announcement of results will be made to the universities and on the UGC website earliest by the end of June.

Implementation Schedule/Processing Cycle

Timeline	Milestone
September (Year <i>n</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcement of the launch of RFS and SRFS with call for nomination
November (Year <i>n</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Close of nominations from universities
December (Year <i>n</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of selection panels (one panel for each broad academic stream) for RFS and SRFS

January (Year $n+1$)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment of nominations to the first and second readers (who are panel members) by panel chair
February (Year $n+1$)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first reader to nominate external reviewers
March – April (Year $n+1$)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminary assessment of nominations for RFS and SRFS by at least two external reviewers
May (Year $n+1$)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of nominations for RFS and SRFS by the first and second readers
June (Year $n+1$)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final assessment of nominations at selection panel meetings • Approval of RFS and SRFS results by RGC • Announcement and notification of RFS and SRFS results
1 January (Year $n+2$)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RFS and SRFS awardees to start research project (and teaching relief/research leave if applicable)

Disbursement Arrangements

23. 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 awardee and the supporting university concerned will sign grant undertakings and agree to abide by all relevant UGC/RGC guidelines.

24. Any unspent balance including interest income generated of the fellowship grant (such as the cases as per paragraphs 27 and 28 below) should be returned to the UGC Secretariat within six months from the date of completion of fellowship.

Monitoring/Reporting Requirements

25. 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 earlier 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.

26. 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.

27. In case the assessment of annual progress report(s) submitted by the awardee is unsatisfactory, the fellowship may be terminated before the end of the fellowship period. The supporting university concerned shall return the unspent balance (including interest income generated) of the fellowship grant to the UGC Secretariat within six months from the termination of fellowship. 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.

28. In case 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 (including interest income generated) of the fellowship grant to the UGC Secretariat within six months from the termination of fellowship. 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.

29. If an awardee changes his/her appointment from the supporting university concerned to another UGC-funded university, normally the fellowship cannot be transferred. Nevertheless, provided that the current university has reached a mutual consent 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, the current university should report the change in appointment status of the awardee and submit the request for transfer to the UGC Secretariat for prior approval. Subject to approval, the fellowship will then be allowed to transfer with the awardee to the receiving university.