RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL

CLINICAL RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP SCHEME

Notes for Applicants

These notes describe the Clinical Research Fellowship Scheme (the Scheme) operated by the Research Grants Council (RGC), in close collaboration with the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the University of Hong Kong (HKU) on a cost-sharing basis.

Objective of the Scheme

2. The objective of the Scheme is to provide outstanding young medical doctors with opportunities to receive further medical training in clinical research at the two sponsoring universities (i.e. either CUHK or HKU).

General Framework

3. The fellowship is intended to enable young clinicians of promising potential to devote themselves to a period of up to three years in clinical research at the two sponsoring universities. The award will enable the fellow to be relieved of teaching, clinical and administrative duties as far as possible, and to concentrate on full-time clinical research work. Fellows are expected to spend at least 80% of his / her time on their research during the period of fellowship. It can be used to support the maintenance costs of a fellow or to meet the salary costs of the replacement academic staff who have to be employed by the sponsoring university to take over the fellow's duties for the period of the fellowship.

4. The Scheme is operated on an annual basis, and is tied to the annual RGC General Research Fund (GRF) funding exercise. Each fellowship application must be accompanied by a GRF research proposal and the award of a fellowship is conditional on the GRF proposal being supported, using the normal GRF standard and criteria of scientific excellence. The award is intended as a research training fellowship, and the RGC will therefore give due weight to the excellence of the candidate. However, in order to enable grant holders to benefit fully from the fellowship, it is also of paramount importance that the research proposal meets a high standard of scientific excellence. In this regard, the RGC expects that both the nominated mentor and the sponsoring university will give sufficient guidance to the fellowship applicant in drawing up an effective research plan and writing up a robust proposal. It is also important that the mentor will devote a significant fraction of his/her time to the guiding of the fellow and the supervision of the research.

5. Subject to the outcome of the selection process, one award will be made for each sponsoring university (i.e. one for HKU and one for CUHK) in each exercise. Each sponsoring university is invited to make up to three nominations in each exercise.

6. Each fellowship award is pitched at $0.8 million per year for a maximum period of three consecutive years. But a higher amount capped at $1.2 million per year is allowed if the fellow is more senior. The actual duration of the award will depend on the duration of the GRF research project supported. The actual fellowship to be funded per year will be the sum of the annual salary and annual cash allowance of the applicant or a maximum of $1.2 million, whichever is the less.

7. The fellowship is to be held at the successful applicant's sponsoring university and is not transferable throughout the course of the fellowship.

8. The sponsoring universities and the Hospital Authority (HA) have agreed to put in place suitable in-house arrangements both within the universities and at their teaching hospitals to ensure that routine administrative, teaching and clinical duties required of the clinicians of the universities under fellowship, which are un-related to the project, will be limited to a maximum of one day per week. Such an arrangement is necessary to enable the clinicians to spend at least 80% of their time in clinical research. Also, the universities will provide all necessary ancillary support such as laboratory service and access to equipment to facilitate the undertaking of the fellows' research projects.

Funding Arrangements

9. The Scheme is operated on a cost-sharing basis, with the RGC providing a matching grant equivalent to 50% of the funding for each fellowship. Each sponsoring university undertakes to provide the remaining 50% of the required funding for each fellowship awarded to the university. Since the research project linked to the fellowship is to be funded by the RGC separately through GRF, both the RGC and the sponsoring university are not responsible for any cost, direct or indirect, incurred for the conduct of research in the context of the Scheme.

10. Upon the award of a fellowship, the RGC will arrange to allocate to the sponsoring university its matching fund in respect of the fellowship on a yearly basis, and it is normally released after the announcement of the results of the GRF and the Scheme. The recipient university is responsible for the creation of a fellowship account for the management of the necessary funds, and is required to report on the disbursements and the account balance at the end of each fellowship year.

11. The fellowship fund is intended to support a fellow financially, while he or she is engaged in full-time clinical research during the period of fellowship. It can be used to support the maintenance costs of the fellow or to meet the salary costs of the replacement academic staff who have to be employed by the sponsoring university to take over the fellow's duties. The actual administrative and operational arrangement will have to be worked out between the sponsoring university and the fellow applicants at the time of application. The fellowship fund cannot however be used to defray any research expenses which should instead be covered by the GRF grant awarded to the relevant research proposal.

12. The fellowship award is non-transferable. As and when a fellow departs from his or her sponsoring university or no longer becomes eligible for the award, the fellowship must be terminated immediately and the remaining funds in the fellowship account will be returned to the RGC and the university on an equal basis. Regarding the continuation of the GRF project concerned, it will be dealt with separately in accordance with the prevailing RGC policy on GRF projects.

Eligibility

13. Fellowship applicants must be either full time clinical academic staff member of a sponsoring university or full-time clinicians working in the HA.

14. Applicants are normally expected to have completed their specialty training already. Clinicians who are in the final year of their specialty training, and have started their 'higher' specialty training may also apply.

15. Since the purpose of the Scheme is to involve a fellow in research by requiring him or her to undertake a research project, the fellowship applicant must be the Principal Investigator (PI) of the GRF project to which his or her application is tied. If granted the fellowship, he or she, like other GRF grant holders, is accountable for the progress and completion of the research.

16. Apart from university's endorsement, a fellowship applicant must secure the support of a mentor, who is a full-time academic staff member of the sponsoring university and is expected to guide the fellow in research work throughout the course of the fellowship. The mentor may or may not be part of the research team for the GRF research proposal but is expected to play an active and significant role in helping the fellow manage and steer the proposed research. The nominated mentor is required to explain in the fellowship application his or her involvement as the supervisor of the fellow applicant in research and to endorse the fellowship application.

17. For applicants who are full-time clinicians employed by the HA, they need to join their respective sponsoring universities as full-time researchers for a maximum period of 3 years on contract terms, if they are granted the fellowship. In accordance with the internal requirements of the HA, they are required to obtain approval for taking up paid employment while on leave at least 2 weeks before the work commences. Their applications are required to be endorsed by the relevant sponsoring universities and the HA to the effect that satisfactory arrangements have been made for the applicants concerned to join the universities as full-time research staff if granted the fellowship award.

18. For the purpose of the Scheme, the HA has undertaken, subject to the approval from the Chief Executive of the HA or the relevant Hospital Chief Executive as appropriate, to grant no-pay leave and approval for paid outside work for its clinicians who have been awarded the fellowship to join their sponsoring universities to undertake research on a full-time basis. The no-pay leave granted in the

circumstances will not earn employment benefits and leave. It will however count for increments and be recognized as accredited service for the HA Provident Fund and Mandatory Provident Fund purpose. Prospective HA applicants should check with the HA on the specific terms and conditions associated with the leave arrangements before making an application. On completion of the clinical research fellowship, the HA staff will return to his / her parent hospital for duty.

Conditions of Award

19. Recipients of fellowship awards must begin the fellowship term no later than 1 January of the following year in which the award is made. After an award is made, all major changes to the course of research work require the endorsement of the sponsoring university and the eventual approval of the RGC.

20. Fellows are expected to conduct their research according to the highest scientific and ethical standards, in compliance with the prevailing regulatory requirements of their respective sponsoring universities. They are responsible for the conduct of research (including disbursement of fellowship funds) and the preparation of research results for publication within the established guidelines of the universities. The RGC assumes no responsibility for research findings or their interpretation.

21. To ensure that a fellow can concentrate as fully as possible on research, the fellow is not allowed to take up any other position of emolument during fellowship.

Fellowship Application

22. Fellowship applications must be made on the application form prescribed by the RGC.

23. The RGC will not accept any direct applications from individual fellowship applicants. All fellowship applications should be endorsed by and submitted through a sponsoring university.

24. All fellowship applications, together with the GRF research proposals to which the fellowship applications are linked, should be submitted in accordance with the normal GRF application procedures. Fellowship applicants, especially those who are clinicians employed by the HA, should check with the sponsoring universities on their respective internal deadlines for receipt of fellowship applications and GRF proposals and the corresponding procedures. For applicants in the HA, both the sponsoring universities and the HA would need time to work out jointly the arrangements for supporting the applicants.

Evaluation of Applications

25. All fellowship applications, together with the associated GRF research proposals, will be evaluated by the RGC and its Biology & Medicine Panel in the

context of the annual GRF peer-review exercise.

26. Each fellowship application will be judged on:

(a) the quality of the candidate;
(b) the strength of the mentor's endorsement of the application;
(c) the quality of the GRF research proposal to which the fellowship application is tied, and
(d) the university's priority / support, i.e. longer term commitment to the candidate and the corresponding field of research, as well as the chance of the candidate to secure more permanent employment at the university.

27. To facilitate evaluation, fellowship applications should be accompanied by official transcripts of the applicants' graduate academic records. The RGC will not provide critiques for unsuccessful fellowship applications. Comments in respect of the relevant GRF proposals will however be provided to the PIs for reference in accordance with the RGC's usual policy.

28. Successful fellowship applicants are encouraged to register for a research degree (PhD or MD) with their respective sponsoring universities. Applicants are required to state in the application their plan in this regard, and the information will be taken into consideration in the course of evaluation.

29. The GRF research proposal will be evaluated in accordance with the current GRF assessment criteria. But, in recognition of the original objective of the Scheme to support promising young clinicians to undertake research, the RGC will take into account the background as well as the profile of research experience of the clinicians in applying the threshold standard and make reasonable adjustments where warranted.

30. The award of a fellowship is conditional upon the GRF proposal to which the fellowship is linked being supported and funded by the RGC. On the other hand, the funding of the GRF proposal does not necessarily depend on the success of the fellowship application. Where the fellowship application fails, the RGC would assess the relevant GRF proposal in its own right and consider funding the proposal if it meets the established GRF quality standard and the PI is a full-time academic staff member of the sponsoring university. The GRF proposal so supported will not however be considered as a project funded under the Scheme.

UGC Secretariat
August 2023