

Operation Guide for the RGC Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme (PDFS)

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

Objectives

2. The PDFS aims at providing promising local and non-local postdoctoral researchers at UGC-funded universities with support at a pivotal time in their very early career, so as to incentivise young research talent to build up a career in the field of research and development (R&D) in Hong Kong.

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 doctoral graduates are well supported and benefit from the PDFS. While the PDFS will remain competitive in nature, it is proposed that a quota of half of the awardees will be reserved for local candidates in each exercise, i.e. for candidates who are, at the time of nomination, Hong Kong permanent residents enjoying 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 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 in the exercise concerned. This arrangement will be subject to review as and when required.

4. The PDFS will provide support to 50 awardees in each round of the yearly exercise (encompassing all academic disciplines grouped into two broad academic streams) for a period of 36 months in terms of full-time appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow (PdF) at a University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded university. The two broad academic streams are as follows:

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

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>

Coverage and Eligibility

Supporting University

5. All eight UGC-funded universities are eligible to make nomination for the fellowship in support of full-time employment of PdF for research project(s)/ activities. Each university may nominate up to 12 PdF candidates (PDFS nominees) and is required to specify in the nomination the research project(s)/ activities to be assigned to the PDFS nominee during the fellowship period.

PDFS Nominee

6. To qualify for the fellowship, the PDFS nominee must:
- (a) obtain a legal right to work and reside in Hong Kong during the fellowship period;
 - (b) have obtained/ been conferred a PhD degree or an equivalent qualification not more than three years before the year of nomination², or will complete the requirement of a PhD degree or an equivalent qualification by 31 August of the following year of nomination; and
 - (c) be supported by a UGC-funded university at which he/ she wishes to hold the fellowship.

The PDFS nominee should be a graduate in the relevant field of the research project(s)/ activities to which he/ she is to be assigned.

Fellowship Award

7. For each PDFS awardee, the supporting university will receive an annual stipend³ to cover the awardee's basic salary as well as a conference and research-related travel allowance throughout the 36-month fellowship period. Supporting universities are welcome to supplement the fellowship with other fringe benefits on par with ordinary employment of a PdF, on top of the stipend to attract outstanding candidates.

² For instance, for nomination exercise to close by October 2023, the nominee must have obtained/ been conferred a PhD degree or an equivalent qualification on or after 1 January 2020.

³ The first annual stipend for 2024/25 exercise is HK\$420,090 (inclusive of the travel allowance at HK\$13,350). The amount of the annual stipend will be adjusted after every 12 months during the fellowship period with reference to the Composite Consumer Price Index (CCPI) and related factors, and supporting universities will be informed of the updated rate in April/ May every year.

8. Each awardee will be allowed to take up a full-time appointment as PdF at the supporting university. For awardees applying for/ currently receiving other employment subsidy via the same research project(s) supported by other local public funding under the UGC, RGC, Innovation and Technology Fund (ITF), etc., they shall decide to receive either the fellowship for full-time employment under the PDFS or other employment subsidy to avoid "double funding".

9. Awardees are allowed, during the fellowship period, to hold concurrent grant(s) awarded by the UGC/ RGC or other funding agencies on research project(s) other than that under the PDFS. Awardees are not allowed to hold concurrent fellowship(s), unless it is/ they are internal fellowship offered by the supporting university to top up the stipend.

10. Awardees accepting the fellowship shall not compete again in future exercises. Universities may make repeated nominations for non-selected candidates.

Selection Criteria

11. Selection is based on:
- (a) the candidate's academic record of excellence;
 - (b) the candidate's research ability and track record to date;
 - (c) the candidate's leadership experience;
 - (d) the merit of the proposed research project(s)/ activities;
 - (e) potential impact of the proposed research project(s)/ activities;
and
 - (f) university support.

Selection Panel

12. The two selection panels formed under the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme, i.e. Humanities, Social Sciences and Business Studies Selection Panel (H-Panel) and Sciences, Medicine, Engineering and Technology Selection Panel (S-Panel), will undertake assessment of nominations and selection of awardees under the PDFS with respect to the two broad academic streams (H disciplines and S disciplines) respectively.

Nomination Process

13. PDFS nominations should be made by universities via their Research Office using the PDFS nomination form, on which universities should indicate the institutional support with detailed comments, and PDFS nominees should include their research plan, if applicable, detailing the research project(s)/ activities to be undertaken within the fellowship period. Prior to submitting a PDFS nomination to the UGC Secretariat, the supporting university should conduct interview assessment with the potential nominee on his/ her academic strength, research ability and potential, degree of fitness, leadership, etc., and provide the assessment results and related information in the nomination form for the selection panel’s information/ reference. Further details and guidance notes of the nomination process are provided on the RGC website at https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/pdfs/. A call letter will be issued to Heads of Universities by August for nominations to reach the UGC Secretariat by the end of October. Candidates submitting application direct to the UGC Secretariat will not be considered. In case more than one nomination of the same candidate are received by the UGC Secretariat, the candidate concerned would be requested to indicate his/ her preferred supporting university before the assessment stage commences. Only the nomination by the candidate’s preferred supporting university will be processed further.

14. Candidates applying for the “Jockey Club Global STEM Postdoctoral Fellowship for Translational Research and Application” will not be considered for the PDFS fellowship in the same year. Universities are advised to avoid nominating such candidates for PDFS in the same year, as their nominations will be deemed as withdrawn from the supporting university in the exercise concerned.

Assessment Process by the RGC

15. The UGC Secretariat will vet the nominations received and seek clarifications from universities as necessary. Vetted nominations will then be forwarded to the relevant panel chair who will, for each nomination, assign at least two reviewers (the first reviewer and second reviewer) among the panel members, taking into account their expertise. To ensure all nominations are competing on a level playing field, a blind review process is adopted for local reviewers to avoid possible conflicts of interest. The reviewers are required to complete the preliminary assessment of nominations independently.

16. The UGC Secretariat will then consolidate all the assessments received and prepare relevant information to facilitate panel discussion on each nomination in detail. The panel discussion will be steered by the panel chair at the selection panel meetings to be held in Hong Kong (or via other means of exchanging views⁴ as appropriate under special circumstances) in the following March after the close of nomination. Announcement of results will be made to the universities in the ensuing month.

Time Table/ Processing Cycle (for reference only)

Timeline	Milestone
August (Year <i>n</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcement of the launch of PDFS with call for nominations
end-October (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 (following the arrangement of the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme)
January (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignment of nominations to panel members (reviewers) by panel chair
January to February (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preliminary assessment of nominations by panel members (reviewers)
March (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final assessment of nominations at selection panel meetings (or via other means of exchanging views⁴ as appropriate under special circumstances)
April (Year <i>n+1</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcement and notification of PDFS results PDFS awardees to start the 36-month fellowship with a full-time PdF appointment at the supporting university within year <i>n+1</i> (to start earliest on 1 May and latest by 31 December)

⁴ For instance, video conferencing.

Disbursement Arrangements

17. By accepting the fellowship, the PDFS awardee will undertake and start the 36-month fellowship, with a full-time PdF appointment at the supporting university within the year of result announcement (to start earliest on 1 May and latest by 31 December). The annual stipend will be allocated to the supporting university annually via a designated bank account. The supporting university will sign grant undertaking and agree to abide by all the relevant UGC/ RGC guidelines, and is thereby responsible to offer basic salary and the conference and research-related travel allowance, as well as other fringe benefits as deemed appropriate, to the awardee throughout the 36-month fellowship period.

18. The conference and research-related travel allowance, as inclusive in the annual stipend, is an earmarked item which should only be used to meet the expenses of the designated purpose, i.e. to attend recognised international academic conferences. Paper presentation in an academic conference is not an eligibility criterion required by the RGC. While the allowance is accounted for separately, it can be carried forward within the fellowship period.

19. Any unspent balance of and interest income from the fellowship stipends 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

20. Awardees will be required to submit annual progress reports on all on-going research project(s)/ activities through the supporting university to the UGC Secretariat for monitoring. The reporting period of each annual progress report should end at 30 June, with the first one ending at the immediate 30 June after completion of the first 12 months of the fellowship. Annual progress reports should reach the UGC Secretariat within three months from the end of the reporting period (i.e. 30 September). An awardee's eligibility for the fellowship may be reviewed during the fellowship period with reference to the annual progress report(s).

21. Upon completion of the 36-month fellowship period, awardees should submit a completion report through the supporting university to the UGC Secretariat not later than six months from the end of the fellowship.

22. If an awardee resigns from his/ her full-time PdF appointment and accepts a full-time appointment at another post (for instance, as Assistant Professor) in the supporting university before the end of the fellowship period, the fellowship shall prematurely terminate as it is only designated for PdF appointment. The supporting university shall return the unspent balance of the fellowship stipends to the UGC Secretariat in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the DAMA. The awardee shall submit a concluding report through the supporting university to the UGC Secretariat not later than six months from the termination of fellowship.

23. In the event that an awardee's employment at the supporting university is terminated of his/ her own accord (i.e. resignation) or by the supporting university before the end of the fellowship period, the fellowship shall prematurely terminate. As it is offered on personal basis, the fellowship cannot be transferred between persons. The supporting university shall return the unspent balance of the fellowship stipends to the UGC Secretariat in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the DAMA. The awardee shall submit a concluding report through the supporting university to the UGC Secretariat not later than six months from the termination of fellowship.

24. Request for transferring the fellowship from the supporting university to another UGC-funded university during the fellowship period will only be considered if the supporting university consents to the transfer, reaches 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(s)/ activities. For such a transfer request, the supporting university should submit the case to the UGC Secretariat for consideration. Subject to approval, the awardee will then be allowed to transfer to the receiving university with a new PdF appointment covering the remainder of the fellowship period. Cases seeking retrospective approval for transfer will not be considered. The above conditions also apply to requests for transfer prior to commencement of the fellowship. However, the fellowship cannot be transferred if an awardee changes his/ her PdF appointment from the supporting UGC-funded university to a local self-financing degree-awarding institution.

25. Should an awardee request a change of supporting university prior to commencement of the fellowship while consent from the original supporting university for the change is not available, the request will only be further processed if the awardee has not yet entered into a PdF appointment contract with the original supporting university and he/ she has secured agreement from another UGC-funded university to be his/ her new supporting university. In such case, the eligibility of the awardee concerned will be subject to critical review again on the basis of an assessment submitted by the new supporting university, and on the

condition that regardless of the review outcome, (i) the new supporting university will have one less nomination quota in the following PDFS exercise, and (ii) the awardee will not be eligible for nomination in any future PDFS exercise. The case will be reviewed by the selection panel chair concerned, who will advise whether the awardee's eligibility for the fellowship is to be maintained and the request for commencing the fellowship at the new supporting university is to be permitted. The advice by the selection panel chair will be final.

26. Request for extension of the fellowship period will be considered on a case-by-case basis to cater for exceptional circumstances, for instance, if an awardee is accorded overseas scholarship or offer as visiting scholar/ researcher overseas during the fellowship period, or on leave for a continuous or cumulative period exceeding 183 days (on prolonged leave) within the fellowship period. The supporting university should submit the request for extension with supporting documents to the UGC Secretariat for consideration and approval. Following the approval for extension, the disbursement of fellowship stipend will be suspended until the awardee resumes the fellowship after the overseas tour/ prolonged leave. Cases seeking retrospective approval for extension will not be considered.

27. In the event that any misrepresentation, fraudulent, and non-disclosure of information during the nomination stage/ fellowship period is detected, the fellowship shall be terminated immediately and the awardee concerned is liable to refund in full the fellowship stipends paid under the PDFS.

28. The supporting university and the awardee shall bear the responsibility to ensure that the research project(s)/ activities is/ are carefully monitored for its/ their compliance with applicable laws, health and safety guidelines and ethical standards.

29. This Operation Guide may be updated/ revised from time to time by the RGC. In the event that changes are made, the updated Operation Guide will always supersede earlier versions.

UGC Secretariat
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