Research Grants Council

Assessment Guidelines for Collaborative Research Fund

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Outline of Collaborative Research Fund

1. The Collaborative Research Fund (CRF) supports multi-investigators, multi-disciplinary projects in order to encourage more research groups to engage in creative and high-quality cross-disciplinary/cross-institutional projects. The project teams are expected to pursue interdisciplinary, collaborative goals which would not be possible by working on the project's individual components in isolation of each other.

- Grant size per project:

  (i) Collaborative Research Project Grant and Collaborative Research Equipment Grant

  range from HK$2 million to HK$10 million

  (ii) Young Collaborative Research Grant

  range from HK$2 million to HK$5 million

- Project duration: normally last for no more than three years

2. There are three types of grants under the Scheme, including Collaborative Research Project Grant, Collaborative Research Equipment Grant and Young Collaborative Research Grant:

Collaborative Research Project Grant (CRPG)

The main objective of CRPG is to encourage research groups in University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities to engage in collaborative research across disciplines and across universities with a view to enhancing the research output of universities in terms of level of attainment, quantity, dimensions and/or impact. It provides funding for staff, equipment and general expenses related to the supported projects. In assessing proposals, the RGC puts emphasis on capacity building and the potential of a proposal to develop into an area of research strength. On approval, the project teams should not break the award down into individual components. They should pursue genuine collaborative research.

There are mainly two types of applications under the CRPG:

- New or re-submitted application for CRPG (proposal reference with suffix – GF)

- "Renewal" application for CRPG
  (proposal reference with suffix – WF)

Project Coordinators (PCs) of funded group research projects can apply for "renewal" funding. To qualify for "renewal" funding, the research teams must demonstrate that remarkable results have been achieved in their current research and there is a good argument and prospect for further research work to continue in the relevant area. A "renewal" proposal should be an extension of the current project led by the same PC and should not constitute any major overlap with research work supported by other UGC/RGC or government grants. A "renewal" proposal should have its own goal and a new or extended research objective. Applicants for "renewal" funding are required to submit, alongside the application, a report showing the progress of the current research projects. The "renewal" proposal will be assessed together with other group research proposals in the same exercise.

Collaborative Research Equipment Grant (CREG)

The main objectives of CREG (proposal reference with suffix – EF) are to:

(i) enable the acquisition of major research facilities or equipment, including major library acquisitions for research, which cannot otherwise be afforded by one university and which can be used for collaborative research;

(ii) assist universities in "leveraging" support from equipment suppliers with a view to stretching the value of the Research Grants Council (RGC)'s funds further than could normally be possible by making small allocation with individual projects; and

(iii) provide funding for group user fee (for users from the RGC funded collaborative research projects) to access major user facilities[1] (e.g. to pay for the access/use of some existing core facilities/equipment instead of procuring new ones)[2].

[1] Definition of CREG has been broadened since 2019/20 exercise to include funding for group user fee to access major user facilities.

[2] The requirement of 50% matching funding from participating universities still applies.

Young Collaborative Research Grant (YCRG)

The YCRG aims to support early-stage academic staff members in gaining first-hand experience in leading and managing collaborative research, so that they will be better prepared in competing for larger collaborative research funding in the next stage of their career. Only group research proposals can apply for YCRG. Equipment proposals should be submitted to CREG. While this YCRG is exclusive for greener researcher to apply, the selection criteria are the same as those of CRPG.

Similar to CRPG, YCRG has two main types of applications –

- New or re-submitted application for YCRG (proposal reference with suffix – YF)

- "Continual" application for YCRG (proposal reference with suffix – CF)

PC and/or Co-Principal Investigator(s) (Co-PI(s)) of group research projects may submit "continual" application under YCRG. "Continuation" refers to the application on research topic which the PC and/or Co-PI(s) extending work previously funded by the UGC/RGC. To qualify for "continual" funding, the research team must demonstrate that remarkable results have been achieved in their current research and there is a good argument and prospect for further research work to continue in the relevant area. A "continual" proposal should not constitute any major overlap with research supported by other UGC/RGC or government grants and should have its own goal and a new or extended research objective.

The selection criteria adopted by the RGC for evaluating the three types of grants are at paragraph 7 of the guidelines.

Funding

3. The Research Endowment Fund (REF) was first established in January 2009 with an original endowment of $18 billion with a view to providing greater stability of funding to support UGC-funded universities' research projects. The Government further injected $5 billion into the REF in 2012, $3 billion in 2018 and $20 billion in 2019, increasing the total amount to $46 billion. Part of the REF investment income is used for supporting the various research funding schemes for the UGC-funded universities including the CRF.

Formation of CRF Selection Panel

4. The CRF Selection Panel gives advice to the RGC on the CRF, including selection of proposals for funding support and monitoring of the funded projects. The Selection Panel is specially-constituted each year to ensure that it has the right balance, breadth and level of expertise for evaluation of proposals in each year. The CRF Selection Panel comprises:

(i) Chair of the CRF Selection Panel: appointed by the RGC Chairman, is a renowned non-local academic and is delegated with authority by the RGC with regard to matters relating to scheme administration and operation of the CRF. The CRF Selection Panel Chair also serves as a member of the RGC concurrently;

(ii) Deputy Chair of the CRF Selection Panel: to assist the Chair in management of the CRF Selection Panel;

(iii) Convenors of the five subject panels[3] (Subject Panel Convenors);

(iv) Panel Members under the five subject panels; and

(v) experts outside the RGC: where necessary, recommendations will be made to co-opt experts outside the RGC to review the proposals. The authority for appointing a non-RGC/Committee/Panel Member to the CRF Selection Panel rests with the RGC Chairman.

5. All RGC appointments are made on an "ad personam" basis and members are in no way representative of a university.

Proposal processing cycle

6. CRF adopts a two-stage application process, comprising submission of preliminary and full proposals. The proposal processing cycle for CRF is generally described with indicative timeline as follows:

(I) <u>Preliminary Proposal Stage</u>

(i) <u>Initial Processing by the Secretariat</u>

Mid – end February	After the submission of preliminary proposals, the Secretariat will check the proposals and seek clarifications from universities, as necessary.

[3] At present, there are five subject panels, namely Biology and Medicine, Business Studies, Engineering, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Physical Sciences.

(ii) Assignment and Assessment of Preliminary Proposals

March	CRF Selection Panel Chair (and Deputy Chair) and Subject Panel Convenors will assign the proposals to Members having regard to (a) the matching expertise of the Members to the proposals; (b) any conflicts of interest as declared by the Members; and (c) the number of proposals received in the exercise. Each proposal will be read by three Members. Members will check whether there are any conflicts of interest on the proposals assigned. CRF Selection Panel Chair (and Deputy Chair) and Subject Panel Convenors will arrange re-assignment, if required.
April –May	Members will assess the preliminary proposals.

(iii) Shortlisting of Preliminary Proposals

Early June	A shortlist of preliminary proposals for submission of full proposals will be drawn up basing on Members' assessment. Universities will be informed of the shortlisting results and provided with comments of the CRF Selection Panel on the submitted proposals. Shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit full proposals to the RGC through universities.

(II) Full Proposal Stage

(i) Submission and Processing of Full Proposals

By mid/end July	After the submission of full proposals, the Secretariat will check and seek clarifications from universities on the proposals, as necessary.

(ii) Review Process and Proposal Update

By end July/ early August	Members will be invited to nominate external reviewers to assess the proposals. A minimum of three independent external reviews would be obtained for each proposal. To avoid conflicts of interest, only non-local external reviewers should be nominated. Where a proposal is of local relevance, at least one of the external reviewers should have some local knowledge, as far as possible. External reviewer who has a major conflict of interest[4] would not be invited to review the proposal.
By end August	External reviewers will be invited to submit reviews. On receipt of the proposals, external reviewers should declare their expertise level ("expert" or "somewhat familiar with the topic" or "not knowledgeable") in reviewing the proposals. To ensure fairness of the peer-review mechanism, external reviewers who declare "not knowledgeable" in the concerned proposal cannot proceed with the assessment.
By end September	Universities will submit proposal update, if any. Update should include any significant changes, e.g. changes in the eligibility of the PC, alternative funding obtained, declarations of related proposals/projects/research work, investigator(s)'s CVs, grant records, etc.

[4] See Appendix C.

	Universities are required to confirm that they have obtained all the required approval(s), such as research ethics/safety approval, except ethics approval for research involving clinical trials, where applicable.
By early October	Members will, based on their own reading of the proposals and the external reviews, evaluate the proposals in accordance with the respective evaluation criteria and having regard to the overall limit on funding.

(iii) Shortlisting of Full Proposals for Selection Interviews

Mid October – mid November	A shortlist of full proposals for selection interviews will be drawn up based on Members' assessment. Universities will be informed of the shortlisting results and project teams of shortlisted proposals be invited to selection interviews. Comments/questions from Members will be provided to the project teams of shortlisted full proposals prior to the presentations/interviews.

(iv) CRF Selection Panel Meeting cum Interviews

Second week of December	CRF Selection Panel meeting cum interviews will be held in Hong Kong[5] for Members to interview the project teams of shortlisted full proposals and consider the proposals in details. Rating and funding recommendation on each proposal will be concluded at the meeting.

[5] Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the selection interviews were changed to virtual settings in 2020/21 and 2021/22. For 2022/23, the selection interviews were conducted in hybrid mode.

	CRF Selection Panel Chair will report funding recommendations to the Collaborative Research Projects Steering Committee and the RGC. The RGC will consider and approve the funding recommendations.
(v) Announcement of Results	
By end December/ early January of next year	The Secretariat will announce the results to the universities and on the RGC website[6]. Feedback from CRF Selection Panel Members and external reviewers will be provided anonymously to the applicants for improvement.

Basis of evaluating research proposals

7. The criteria adopted by the RGC in assessing the fundability of a proposal for the three types of grants are as follows:

Group Research Proposals under CRPG and YCRG[7]

(i) the academic merits;

(ii) the long-term goal of the proposal and its potential to develop into an area of research strength;

(iii) the opportunities for effective synergism among the participating researchers, research groups and universities/institutions; and

(iv) 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.

6 https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/crf/funded_research.html.

7 While YCRG are exclusive for greener researcher to apply, the selection criteria to be adopted by the RGC for evaluation of YCRG proposals are the same as those of CRPG.

Equipment Proposals under CREG

(i) the merits of the proposal, its contribution to academic/professional development and potential for application, and benefit to the tertiary institutions in particular and Hong Kong in general;

(ii) the scope for collaborative research/joint use, and the degree of such usage;

(iii) feasibility in implementation;

(iv) any university's support, including that of the sponsoring/collaborating universities/institutions;

(v) the prospect of external funding;

(vi) maximum value of money; and

(vii) the availability of similar facilities/library acquisitions elsewhere in Hong Kong.

8. Academic merit is the overriding criterion in evaluating research projects when others are accorded equal weight.

9. Members will comment on the potential research impact of the proposal. The project team shall demonstrate how the team will realise the "impact" beyond the academia by the findings/outcome of the research proposal and by addressing any associated risks. For the purpose of assessment, impact is defined as the demonstrable contributions, beneficial effects, valuable changes or advantages that research qualitatively brings to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally; and that are beyond academia.

10. The proposal is rated using the following 7-point scale:

Point	Detailed Description
5	Outstanding and internationally excellent. Provides full and strong evidence and justification for the proposal. **Should be accorded the highest priority for shortlisting and [submission of full proposal[8]/selection interview[9]].**
4.5	Demonstrates very high international standards. Provides strong evidence and justification for the proposal. **Should be shortlisted for [submission of full proposal[8]/selection interview[9]] as a matter of priority.**
4	Demonstrates high international standards and provides good evidence and justification for the proposal. **Worthy of consideration of shortlisting and [submission of full proposal[8]/ selection interview[9]].**
3.5	Demonstrates good international standards but **in a competitive context, it is not of sufficient priority to recommend for shortlisting and [submission of full proposal[8]/selection interview[9]].**
3	Has adequate qualities but is not internationally competitive. **Not recommended for shortlisting and [submission of full proposal[8] /selection interview[9]].**
2	Has some strengths and innovative ideas but also has major weaknesses and flaws. **Not recommended for shortlisting and [submission of full proposal[8]/selection interview[9]].**
1	Has numerous and significant weaknesses and flaws. **Not recommended for shortlisting and [submission of full proposal[8]/selection interview[9]].**

Reflective report

11. The CRF Selection Panel will summarise the points discussed during its meeting. A reflective report will be uploaded to the RGC website[10] for general information.

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8 For preliminary proposals.

9 For full proposals.

10 https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/crf/funded_research.html.

General evaluation criteria for assessing progress/completion/concluding reports

12. Monitoring of on-going projects and assessment of completed/terminated projects are necessary for reasons of public accountability. Objective of the monitoring of on-going projects is to ensure that the projects are proceeding on schedule and that any problems identified are followed up by the PCs. PCs of approved CRF projects are required to submit annual/mid-term progress report(s)[11] and a completion report[12] on the projects for monitoring and scrutiny by the CRF Selection Panel. Project teams of on-going group research projects are also required to present the progress and achievements at the CRF Symposium/RGC event around mid-way of the projects. In case of project termination, PCs are required to submit a concluding report[13] on the project. To conclude the monitoring process, upon satisfactory rating of completion report, PCs of CRPG projects funded in 2016/17 onwards are also required to provide a video clip on the research project and achievements for publication purposes. Details of the monitoring and assessment arrangements are set out in the Disbursement, Accounting and Monitoring Arrangements for Funding Schemes Administered by the RGC (DAMA)[14].

13. Project teams should pursue genuine collaborative research and should not break the award down into individual components. The general evaluation criteria for assessing progress/completion/concluding reports are at **Appendix A**.

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[11] PCs are required to submit annual/mid-term progress reports according to the arrangements below:

Project Duration*	Report type	Report end date	Report due date
12 months	No progress report is required	-	-
13-23 months	Mid-term progress report	Ten months after project start date	Two months after the report end dates
24-35 months	Mid-term progress report	Three months before the mid-point of the project duration#	Three months after the report end date
36 months	Mid-term progress report	The immediate 31 August after the completion of the first 12-month of the project	Two months after the report end date, i.e. 31 October
More than 36 months	Annual progress report	The immediate 30 June on or after the completion of every 12-month of the project	Two months after the report end date, i.e. 31 August

* *As originally approved by the RGC at announcement of funding results. Subsequent project duration changes approved by the university and the RGC will not change the report submission schedule.*

\# *rounded down to the nearest whole month*

[12] Completion reports should be submitted not later than 12 months after the approved completion date of the project.

[13] Concluding reports should be submitted within six months of project termination.

[14] https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/guidelines/Governing/dama.html.

CRF Symposium/RGC Event

14. An annual CRF Symposium/RGC event for on-going funded group projects will be held every year, usually in December, to facilitate exchange of views among the CRF Selection Panel Members, research teams and researchers from various universities. Each project team of the group research projects has to report their progress and achievements at the Symposium/event [15] in accordance with the arrangements promulgated by the Secretariat.

Declaration of interest

15. A two-tiered reporting system is adopted for declaration of interest. At the first tier, on first appointment or subsequent re-appointment, Members are required to declare fully their direct personal interest in the Register of Interests Form and thereafter, update the relevant record on annual basis or make fresh declarations on significant change of circumstances. At the second tier, it will be incumbent upon the Member to declare interest whenever he/she sees a reason to, on a case by case basis.

16. A register of declared interests of members involved in the RGC business will be maintained by the Secretariat. Individual members are required to update the Secretariat when there is any change in their declared interests at the earliest opportunities.

17. The Rules of Procedures approved by the UGC stipulate that a member should register his/her interests with the Secretariat within 30 days of his/her appointment/re-appointment.

18. In examining and assessing the research proposals, and in participating in the deliberations of the Selection Panel, Members should not represent the interests of their universities. To avoid any conflicts of interest, Members should advise the CRF Selection Panel Chair, Deputy Chair, Subject Panel Convenors or the UGC Secretariat of any proposals with which they are in any way connected, and they will not be expected to assess them under normal circumstances. In case of doubt, Members should declare the full circumstances and notify the Secretariat, who will consult the CRF Selection Panel Chair/Deputy Chair/Subject Panel Convenors on the need of re-assignment. The RGC Code of Conduct and the Guidelines on Handling Conflicts of Interest During Proposal Evaluation Process are at **Appendices B and C** respectively.

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[15] Physical symposium in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were cancelled due to Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic impact. Mid-term review of on-going group research projects were conducted off-meeting accordingly.

Confidentiality of proposals and reports

19. All proposals and reports should be assessed in confidence. Selection Panel Members should not reveal or divulge the contents to any third party during or after the assessment. In case a Member would like to refer a proposal to a colleague for review, he/she should ensure that the latter also abides by this rule of confidentiality. Members should destroy all related documents after completion of the assessment. To ensure fairness and consistency, Members should not contact the applicants by any means for clarification/additional information relating to their proposals or disclose information relating to the assessment. The communication with applicants, if required, must be done by the Secretariat.

Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance

20. Under the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance, written comments about a researcher or his/her research proposal(s) may be regarded as personal data and will be released to the data subject upon request under the Laws of Hong Kong. However, the identity of external reviewers and Members will be protected and masked before releasing the information to the concerned researcher. It is also the RGC policy to provide comments from all external reviewers and Members anonymously to applicants with a view to helping them improve and refine their research proposals and methodology.

Contingency arrangements in case of inclement weather/pandemic condition

21. The CRF Selection Panel meeting cum interviews are usually held in December. It is unlikely that Hong Kong is affected by typhoons or rainstorms in December. That said, contingency arrangements would be adopted if the meeting/interviews are required to be cancelled due to inclement weather/pandemic condition and the Secretariat will separately announce the details.

Appendix A

Evaluation Criteria for Assessing Progress/Completion/Concluding Reports

Assessment of Progress Reports for On-going Projects

1. Progress reports are submitted after the completion of the first 12-month or every 12-month of the project depending on the project duration. Members will assess the reports based on the following principles:

    a. whether the original objectives and the approved revised objectives, if any, are compatible;
    b. whether research activities carried out during this reporting period, with reference to the proposed objectives, showed satisfactory progress;
    c. whether there has been relevant research output(s) that arise directly from the funded project; publication(s) published at the beginning of the project may be included if the work forms an early but integral part of the investigation, and Members are advised to review the report holistically.

2. In Part One of the evaluation form, Members are requested to provide written comments and advice as regards the development of the project. The comments should be sufficiently detailed to justify the overall rating in Part Two.

3. In Part Two of the form, Members will assign an overall rating by checking the appropriate box. If further clarification or follow-up action is required of the Project Coordinator (PC), Members are requested to specify in writing.

Assessment of Concluding Reports for Terminated Projects

1. Concluding reports are submitted within six months of project termination. Members will evaluate the concluding reports and assess the project in a holistic perspective, **in the light of the time and amount spent of the terminated project**, with reference to the following broad principles:

    a. whether the reason for termination of project is reasonable;
    b. to what extent have the proposed objectives been achieved;
    c. whether the research results have been disseminated and consider the means of dissemination;
    d. whether any postgraduate research students have been trained;
    e. whether the research project has been well-managed, in terms of time management and usage of funds;
    f. whether the project has significant research impact (for projects since 2018/19);
    g. whether there is any potential to develop or stimulate further research;
    h. whether there is any research collaboration achieved (for group research); and
    i. whether the project addresses the needs of the local community.

2. In Part One of the evaluation form, Members are requested to provide written comments on the performance of the project. The comments should be sufficiently detailed to justify the rating in Part Two. Members' insights will be fed back to the PC concerned for information and/or follow up purpose.

3. In Part Two of the form, Members will consider and assign a rating to each and every key assessment by checking the appropriate boxes. "Satisfactory", "Barely Satisfactory" or "Unsatisfactory" must be determined on the basis of the overall performance of the project.

Assessment of Completion Reports

1. Completion reports are submitted not later than 12 months after the approved completion date of the project. The approach of Members in assessing the project should be holistic with reference to the following broad principles:

    a. whether the proposed objectives have been met;
    b. whether the research results have been disseminated and consider the means of dissemination;
    c. whether any postgraduate research students have been trained;
    d. whether the research project has been well-managed, in terms of time management and usage of funds;
    e. whether the project has significant research impact (for projects since 2018/19);
    f. whether there is any potential to develop or stimulate further research;
    g. whether there is any research collaboration achieved (for group research);
    h. whether the project addresses the needs of the local community; and
    i. whether it will attract the interest of the public.

2. In Part One of the assessment form, Members are requested to provide written comments on the achievement of the project. The comments should be sufficiently detailed to justify the rating in Part Two. Members' insights will be fed back to the PC concerned for information and/or follow up purpose.

3. In Part Two of the form, Members will consider and assign a rating to each and every key assessment by checking the appropriate boxes. "Satisfactory", "Barely Satisfactory" or "Unsatisfactory" must be determined on the basis of the overall performance of the project.

Appendix B

Research Grants Council

Code of Conduct

I. Preamble

The Research Grants Council (RGC) is fully committed to the principle of honesty, integrity and fair play in the conduct of its business. RGC, operating through Subject Panels and Committees, invites, receives and approves applications for research grants and fellowships. To uphold public trust and protect public interest, it is important for all RGC / Panel / Committee Members to handle RGC's business in a just and impartial manner so that RGC's reputation will not be tarnished by dishonesty, impropriety or corruption. To this end, this Code of Conduct sets out the standard of behaviour expected of the (i) RGC / Panel / Committee Members in handling RGC's business (the Members), (ii) Reviewers in conducting peer-review for RGC (the Reviewers); and (iii) applicants who apply for RGC's funds (the applicants).

II. General Standards

2. An RGC / Panel / Committee Member and a Reviewer shall :

(a) ensure that his / her conduct would not bring the RGC into disrepute;

(b) avoid at any time or in any respect doing anything which may compromise or impair his / her integrity, impartiality, objectivity or ability to perform RGC's duties. For instance, he / she should not contact the applicants directly for clarification / additional information relating to their applications or disclose information relating to the assessment; and

(c) adhere to the spirit and the letter of any rules or orders made for RGC's practices and procedures in relation to the business of RGC.

3. An applicant shall :

(a) ensure that his / her conduct would not bring RGC into disrepute;

(b) restrain from communicating with the Members and Reviewers on the application submitted with a view to influencing the Members and / or Reviewers in assessing the application; and

(c) observe the prevailing guidelines and procedures relating to application for and implementation of RGC grants issued by RGC.

III. Specific Standards

4. The following specific standards of this Section shall apply in addition to the General Standards detailed above:

(A) Offer and Acceptance of Bribes or Advantages

(1) Provisions of the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance (Cap 201)

Members and Reviewers are governed by Section 9 of the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance (Cap 201) (POBO) (and other provisions where appropriate). A Member or Reviewer commits an offence under POBO if he / she, without RGC's permission, solicits or accepts any advantage in connection with RGC's business. Members and Reviewers shall not misuse their official capacity as such to gain benefit for themselves or others, or render favour to any person / organization. On the other hand, applicants should not offer gifts and advantages or intimidate the Members and Reviewers with a view to influencing the assessment of application for RGC grants. Attachment I provides the full text of Section 9 of the POBO and the legal definition of an advantage.

(2) Acceptance of Advantages

(a) Gift / souvenir presented to a Member or Reviewer in his / her capacity as such

(i) A gift / souvenir presented to a Member or Reviewer in his / her capacity as such should be regarded as a gift / souvenir to RGC (e.g. a gift / souvenir presented by an applicant to a Member or Reviewer invited in his / her capacity as such or representing RGC to officiate at a ceremony).

(ii) A Member or Reviewer should as far as possible decline to accept advantages offered / presented to him / her in his / her capacity as such. Where this cannot be done (e.g. owing to protocol reasons or the need to avoid causing offence or embarrassment), he / she shall report to the Secretariat for the disposal of gifts / souvenirs received in the above

circumstances.

(b) Advantage offered to a Member or Reviewer in his / her private capacity

(i) Where a Member or Reviewer is offered an advantage in his / her private capacity, he / she may accept it if –

- the acceptance will not affect the performance of his / her duties as a Member or Reviewer; and
- he / she will not feel obliged to do something in return in connection with RGC's business for the offeror.

(ii) If a Member or Reviewer feels that he / she would be obliged to reciprocate an advantage by returning to the offeror a favour connected with any RGC's business, he / she should decline the offer.

(iii) When a Member or Reviewer is in doubt as to whether he / she should accept an offer of advantage, it is advisable for him / her to apply the "sunshine test" *(In the sunshine test, the person concerned should ask himself / herself if he / she would be happy to openly discuss with the general public what he / she is doing. If he / she feels uncomfortable about that, what he / she is doing is probably conflicting with the ethical standard generally accepted)* and consult RGC Chair or the Secretariat.

(3) Acceptance of Entertainment

A Member or Reviewer should not accept entertainment from persons / organizations who / which have an interest in any matters under consideration by RGC or with whom / which he / she has official dealings, in order to avoid embarrassment or give the perception of the loss of objectivity when considering or giving his / her views on matters concerning these persons / organizations.

(B) Conflict of Interest

(1) Definition

A conflict of interest situation arises when the private interest of a Member or Reviewer competes or conflicts with the interest of RGC.

"Private interest" includes both the financial and other interests of Members or Reviewers and those of their connections, including family members, relatives, friends, clubs and societies to which they belong, as well as people to whom they owe a favour or are obligated in any way.

(2) Managing Conflict of Interest

(a) The reporting of conflict of interest should be two-tiered. Full declaration according to standard format should be made on first appointment, re-appointment or significant change of circumstances. Members should update or complete and return the "Register of Interests" to the Secretariat on an annual basis. At the second tier, it will be incumbent upon the Member to declare interest whenever he / she sees a reason to, on a case by case basis (e.g. when particular issues are to be addressed).

(b) Members or Reviewers should avoid any conflict of interest situation (i.e. situation where their private interest conflicts with the interest of RGC) or the perception of such conflicts. They should not use their official position or any information made available to them in the course of their duties to benefit themselves, their relations or any other persons with whom they have personal or social ties. They should avoid putting themselves in a position that may lead to an actual or perceived conflict of interest. Failure to avoid, declare, disclose or report such conflict in particular with the applicants or comment on proposals from applicants with affiliation without permission may give rise to criticisms of favouritism, abuse of authority or even allegations of corruption. In this connection, Members or Reviewers should declare upfront any conflict of interest situation to the Secretariat where appropriate.

(c) When a conflict of interest is declared and in case there is a meeting to be convened to discuss the matter, the respective Chair shall decide on whether the Member may speak or vote on the matter, remain in the meeting as an observer or withdraw from the meeting altogether. The Secretariat can provide advice according to general government practices and regulations.

(3) Members' / Reviewers' Assessment of Applications

(a) Members or Reviewers are appointed in their personal capacity and should in no way represent their own or any institutions. It is important that the assessment given is independent and impartial.

(b) Members or Reviewers should not assess applications in which they are in any way associated, such as applications from (i) themselves / colleagues in their departments / institutions or (ii) institutions that they have served within two years or (iii) applications that have been pre-reviewed by the concerned Members or Reviewers before submission to RGC. In case of doubt, Members or Reviewers should declare upfront the full circumstances to the Secretariat who will seek agreement from the appropriate authority in deciding whether the applications in question should be re-assigned to other Members or Reviewers.

(c) Member who is from the same institution of the applicant may participate in the Panel discussions when they are invited to do so and should not take part in the decision-making on the applications concerned.

(d) Members or Reviewers should read this Code in conjunction with the "Guidelines on Handling Conflicts of Interest".

(4) Members Applying for RGC Grants

Under the existing mode of operation of RGC, Members may apply for RGC's funding in their own personal capacity. In order to prevent the public perception of the Members using their capacity to obtain financial gains from RGC, the concerned Member will be requested to be excused from the discussion when his / her application is considered. Members are reminded to strictly adhere to the guidelines on managing possible conflict of interest in applying for the funds.

(C) Observe Confidentiality and Use of Confidential and Privileged Information

(1) A Member or Reviewer shall not take advantage of, or let any person or organization benefit from, the confidential or privileged information obtained in his / her capacity as a Member or Reviewer.

All meeting papers, including the worksheets, have to be returned to the Secretariat for disposal at the end of the meeting. Soft copies in System and downloadable files such as PDF should only be used during meeting and should not be taken away in any way. A Member or Reviewer shall not divulge any confidential or privileged information of RGC to any party or contact the applicants directly unless he / she is authorized to do so. Communications, including documentary information and deliberations at meetings and discussions, concerning business of RGC, which will come into the Member's or Reviewer's knowledge / possession as a result of his / her service for and appointment with RGC, must be held in confidence.

(2) An applicant should not contact the Members or the Reviewers to discuss issues relating to the proposals submitted. Likewise, a Member / Reviewer should not contact the investigators directly for clarification / additional information relating to their applications or disclose information relating to the assessment. This should be handled by the UGC Secretariat.

(D) Breach of Ordinance and Laws

Members, Reviewers and applicants should avoid any unethical action which may be illegal especially when it is in breach of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance or other relevant laws of Hong Kong.

(E) Allocation of Funds

Members shall ensure that all the funds are allocated in a prudent and responsible manner to safeguard public interest. They should only approve fund applications which fall within the objective of the fund, and meet the eligibility and assessment criteria. Members shall particularly ensure that an open, fair and competitive mechanism is adopted for the assessment of fund applications and selection of applicants.

UGC Secretariat
June 2022

Attachment I to
Code of Conduct

Extracts from the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance (Cap 201, Laws of Hong Kong)

A. Section 9 - Corrupt transaction with agents

(1) Any agent who, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, solicits or accepts any advantage as an inducement to or reward for or otherwise on account of his:

(a) doing or forbearing to do, or having done or forborne to do, any act in relation to his principal's affairs or business; or

(b) showing or forbearing to show, or having shown or forborne to show, favour or disfavour to any person in relation to his principal's affairs or business, shall be guilty of an offence.

(2) Any person who, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, offers any advantage to any agent as an inducement to or reward for or otherwise on account of the agent's:

(a) doing or forbearing to do, or having done or forborne to do, any act in relation to his principal's affairs or business; or

(b) showing or forbearing to show, or having shown or forborne to show, favour or disfavour to any person in relation to his principal's affairs or business, shall be guilty of an offence.

(3) Any agent who, with intent to deceive his principal, uses any receipt, account or other document:

(a) in respect of which the principal is interested; and

(b) which contains any statement which is false or erroneous or defective in any material particular; and

(c) which to his knowledge is intended to mislead the principal, shall be guilty of an offence.

(4) If an agent solicits or accepts an advantage with the permission of his principal, being permission which complies with subsection (5), neither he nor the person who offered the advantage shall be guilty of an offence under subsection (1) or (2).

(5) For the purposes of subsection (4) permission shall:

(a) be given before the advantage is offered, solicited or accepted; or

(b) in any case where an advantage has been offered or accepted without prior permission, be applied for and given as soon as reasonably possible after such offer or acceptance, and for such permission to be effective for the purposes of subsection (4), the principal shall, before giving such permission, have regard to the circumstances in which it is sought.

B. Definition of an Advantage (Section 2)

"Advantage" means :

(1) any gift, loan, fee, reward or commission consisting of money or of any valuable security or of other property or interest in property of any description;
(2) any office, employment or contract;
(3) any payment, release, discharge or liquidation of any loan, obligation or other liability, whether in whole or in part;
(4) any other service, or favour (other than entertainment), including protection from any penalty or disability incurred or apprehended or from any action or proceedings of a disciplinary, civil or criminal nature, whether or not already instituted;
(5) the exercise or forbearance from the exercise of any right or any power or duty; and
(6) any offer, undertaking or promise, whether conditional or unconditional, of any advantage within the meaning of any of the preceding paragraphs (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e);

but does not include an election donation within the meaning of the Elections (Corrupt and Illegal Conduct) Ordinance (Cap 554), particulars of which are included in an election return in accordance with that Ordinance.

C. Definition of Entertainment (Section 2)

The provision of food or drink, for consumption on the occasion when it is provided, and of any other entertainment connected with, or provided at the same time as, such provisions.

Appendix C

Research Grants Council

Guidelines on Handling Conflicts of Interest

INTRODUCTION

This set of guidelines elaborates on the detailed actions to be taken by External Reviewers, Members and Chairs of Panels / Committees during the handling of the Research Grants Council (RGC)'s business (including the proposal evaluation process and the monitoring and assessment process of funded projects). It should be read in conjunction with the Code of Conduct of RGC.

TYPES OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Major Conflicts of Interest

2. For the purpose of this guideline, the following situations are categorized as **major** conflicts of interest:

Institution-related Conflicts

(a) currently employed / having been employed in the past two years by the institution of the applicant[1];

(b) holding emeritus, honorary, adjunct or visiting position(s) in the institution of the applicant[1] and receiving recurrent remuneration directly arising from the holding of such position(s);

[Note: Receiving remuneration occasionally from the institution of the applicant for presenting a talk in a seminar or teaching a short course, etc. will not automatically fall into the category of major conflict of interest. However, External Reviewers, Members and Chairs of Panels / Committees receiving remuneration occasionally will be required to specify their involvement in the business and operation of the institution

[1] For individual research projects, applicant refers to the PI. For group research projects, applicant refers to all key team players (i.e. PC and Co-PIs).

concerned and to disclose the range of remuneration received and the occasions for receiving such remuneration in the past two years when they declare the interest at the first and / or second tier of the reporting mechanism.]

(c) serving as consultant / advisor to a committee or department of the institution of the applicant[1];

Application-related Conflicts

(d) submitting applications as Project Coordinator (PC), Principal Investigator (PI), Co-PI, Co-Investigator (Co-I) or Collaborator(s) in the same funding exercise;

(e) having pre-reviewed the application;

(f) having / having had advisor / advisee relationship (such as tutor and PhD student relationship) with the applicant[1];

(g) having / having had co-authorship of patents with the applicant[1];

(h) having close personal relationship (e.g. partner, spouse, immediate family member, long-term close friend) with the applicant[1];

(i) having / having had co-authorship of paper or publications with the applicant[1] within three years;

(j) being / having been collaborator (in the capacity of Co-PI or Co-I) in research projects or programmes held by the applicant[1] within three years;

(k) being / having been appointed to serve in the same editorial board by the applicant[1] (i.e. an appointer-appointee relationship); and

(l) any other interest(s) ruled by RGC / Panel / Committee Chair to be treated as a major conflict of interest.

Minor Conflicts of Interest

3. Other than major conflicts of interest, any interest that could lead any reasonable observer to doubt the impartiality of a Reviewer's or Member's assessment is treated as a **minor** conflict of interest. Examples of minor conflicts of interests are as follows:

Institution-related Conflicts

(a) holding emeritus, honorary, adjunct or visiting position(s) in the institution of the applicant[1] without receiving recurrent remuneration directly arising from the holding of such position(s);

[Note: External Reviewers, Members and Chairs of Panels / Committees should specify their involvement in the business and operation of the institution concerned when they declare the interest at the first and / or second tier of the reporting mechanism. Those receiving remuneration occasionally will also be required to disclose the range of remuneration received and the occasions for receiving such remuneration in the past two years.]

Application-related Conflicts

(b) having / having had co-authorship of paper or publications with the applicant[1] from three to seven years;

(c) being / having been collaborator (in the capacity of Co-PI or Co-I) in research projects or programmes held by the applicant[1] from three to seven years;

(d) partnership / co-organisers of major events with the applicant[1] within seven years;

(e) teacher at undergraduate studies;

(f) fellow members of the same editorial board; and

(g) any other interest(s) ruled by RGC / Panel / Committee Chair to be treated as a minor conflict of interest.

ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

External Reviewers

4. External Reviewers should not take part in the assessment of any applications from the institution(s) (for institution-related conflicts) or the concerned applicant(s) (for application-related conflicts) in which they have declared a **major** conflict of interest.

5. It shall be for the nominating Member to decide what material effect the existence of a **minor** conflict of interest (including both institution-related and application-related conflicts) shall have on a Reviewer's assessment. Depending on the nature of the minor conflict of interest, the nominating Member may decide that:

(a) the Reviewer concerned should refrain from assessing the particular application(s) that is / are affected by the minor conflict of interest;

(b) the minor conflict of interest should be noted by the Panel / Committee, but it should not affect the Reviewer's participation in the assessment of the application(s); or

(c) the Reviewer's comments on the application(s) that is / are affected by the minor conflict of interest should be disregarded if the review(s) has / have already been completed.

Members of Panels / Committees

6. Individual Members should not take part in the nomination of Reviewers, assessment, comment and grading of any applications from the institution(s) (for institution-related conflicts) or the concerned applicant(s) (for application-related conflicts) after they have declared a **major** conflict of interest. In addition, they are required to be abstained or excused from Panel / Committee meetings and interview sessions when applications in which they have declared a major conflict of interest are being discussed unless they are invited to provide opinions or stay by the Chair of Panel / Committee. In case applications submitted by Members themselves (in capacities listed under paragraph 2(d)) are discussed, the concerned Members are required to excuse themselves from Panel / Committee meetings and interview sessions.

7. For cases of **major** conflicts of interest involving Members who are serving as Subject Chairs / Sub-group Convenors / Theme Convenors in group research schemes, their role in assignment of proposals will be taken up by the Chair of Committee.

8. It shall be for the Chair of Panel / Committee to decide what effect the existence of a **minor** conflict of interest (including both institution-related and application-related conflicts) shall have on a Member's participation in the assessment. Depending on the nature of the minor conflict of interest, the Chair of Panel / Committee may decide that:

(a) the application(s) in question need(s) to be re-assigned to another Member for assessment and the Member concerned should refrain from assessing the particular application(s) that is / are affected by the minor conflict of interest;

(b) the minor conflict of interest should be noted by the Panel / Committee, but it should not affect the Member's participation in the assessment of the application(s); or

(c) the minor conflict of interest or a group of minor conflicts of interest declared by a Member shall be treated as a major conflict of interest and actions stated under paragraph 6 will be taken.

9. For Members serving as Subject Chairs / Sub-group Convenors / Theme Convenors in group research schemes, the decision on cases of **minor** conflict of interest declared by them rests with the Chair of Committee.

Chairs of Panels / Committees

10. For cases of **major** conflicts of interest involving the Chair of Panel / Committee, the Chair of Panel / Committee should not take part in the assignment, assessment, comment and grading of any applications from the institution(s) in which they have declared a major conflict of interest. He / She will assign one Panel / Committee Member to take up his / her role. He / She will be abstained from Panel / Committee deliberation when the concerned application(s) in which they have declared a major conflict of interest are being discussed.

11. In the cases of the Chair of Panel / Committee having a **minor** institution-related or application-related conflict of interest, the decision on what effect a declared minor conflict of interest would have upon his / her role in the assignment, assessment and grading of applications shall rest on the Chair of RGC.

REGISTER OF INTEREST

12. A register of declared interests of Members involved in RGC business will be maintained by the Secretariat. Individual Members are required to update the Secretariat when there is any change in their declared interests at the earliest opportunities. The declared conflicts of interest and potential conflicts of interest may be made known to the public.

APPLICABILITY

13. For the sake of clarity, the handling of conflicts of interest as stipulated in paragraphs 6 to 11 above shall apply to Members / Heads / Chairs of Panels / Committees involved in the monitoring and assessment process of RGC's funded projects, and also Members involved in the discussion at RGC and its Panel / Committee meetings.

14. The situations described above and the examples cited are by no means exhaustive. It is not possible to cover every situation where a conflict of interest may arise. In circumstances not specifically covered, External Reviewers, Members and Chairs of Panels / Committees should seek advice from the Secretariat if in doubt.

UGC Secretariat
June 2022