

**Research Grants Council
General Research Fund, Early Career Scheme and
Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme**

General Panel Guidelines

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Outline of General Research Fund, Early Career Scheme and Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme

General Research Fund (GRF)

1. The objective of the GRF is to supplement universities' own research support to those who have achieved or have the potential to achieve excellence.

- Grant size per project: normally up to \$2 million
- Project duration: 2-3 years

Early Career Scheme (ECS)

2. The ECS, introduced in 2012/13, is intended to nurture junior academics and to prepare them for a successful career in education and research. In addition to funding independent research work, two levels of awards are provided under the ECS: (i) Early Career Awards - an honorary title will be awarded plus \$100,000 per project; and (ii) Early Career Grants - an additional amount of \$50,000 per project will be provided to those awardees who have submitted a satisfactory education plan for undertaking educational activities.

- Grant size per project: normally up to \$2 million
- Project duration: 2-3 years

Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme (HSSPFS)

3. The HSSPFS, introduced in 2012/13, aims at granting extended time-off and supporting funds to the outstanding investigators with proven track record of research and publication under the HSS disciplines to enable them to focus on research work and writing. The fellowship provides resources for employment of relief teachers to relieve all or part of the awardees' teaching duties and all of the administrative duties, and the costs of travel, subsistence and dissemination of outputs. No more than ten awards will be granted each year.

- Grant size per project: a maximum of \$1 million
- Project duration: 1 year

Funding

4. 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 University Grants Committee (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.

Formation of subject panels

5. The Research Grants Council (RGC) subject panels play a central role in assisting the RGC to assess applications for research grants. At present, there are five subject panels namely Biology and Medicine, Business Studies, Engineering, Humanities and Social Sciences and Physical Sciences. Chairmen of these five subject panels are non-local renowned academics in relevant research fields of the panels and are appointed by the RGC Chairman. Panel Chairmen also serve as members of the RGC concurrently.

6. The Panel Chairmen are responsible for, among other things, presiding at the June panel meetings and participating in various RGC activities as convenor.

7. The RGC Chairman may, depending on practical needs of respective panels and views of Panel Chairmen, appoint a Panel Member as Deputy Panel Chairman for each subject panel. In the event of temporary absence of the Panel Chairman, the Deputy Panel Chairman will preside at panel meetings; and attend other meetings and events on behalf of the Panel Chairman. The Deputy Panel Chairman may also assist the Panel Chairman in scheme administration work and in dealing with operational matters of the panel where necessary.”

8. Each year, panel membership is carefully reviewed to ensure that the panels have the right balance, breadth and level of expertise.

9. With an exceptional pool of talent that exists within our own universities, the RGC invites all UGC-funded universities to nominate persons who, in their judgement, possess the right qualities to merit appointment every year. Other than local talents, the RGC also welcome nominations of experts from overseas if the universities know of suitable candidates.

10. Subject panel chairmen would take into account the expertise required by the respective panels as well as the membership profile before making recommendations to the Chairman of the RGC for approval.

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

Application processing cycle

12. The application processing cycle for GRF, ECS and HSSPFS is generally described in the stages as follows:

Stage 1 – Initial Processing by the Secretariat

Late November (for GRF and ECS) After the application deadline, the Secretariat will check the applications and seek clarifications from universities as necessary.
Early February (for HSSPFS)

Stage 2 - Selection of Proposals by Panel Members and Declaration of Conflicts of Interest (for GRF and ECS only)

Late December – Early January Panel members will be invited to preview the list of proposals and indicate the proposals they wish to be assigned for evaluation or be excused from due to conflicts of interest. The list will be made available for consideration by the concerned panel chair in the next stage.

Stage 3 - Assignment by Panel Chair

Mid – Late January The concerned panel chair will determine the distribution of responsibilities among the panel members having regard to the number and subject areas of applications received in the exercise as well as panel members' expertise, selection of proposals and declared conflicts of interest.

Each proposal will be read by two panel members, namely first reader and second reader. As a rule of thumb, panel members should not be the first readers of applications with which they are in any way associated. In addition, panel members who have submitted applications should not be the readers of applications submitted by other panel member(s) to avoid conflicts of interest.

HSSPFS proposals will be read by non-local panel members only.

Stage 4 – Review Process and Proposal Update

Early February

Panel members will be invited to check whether there are any conflicts of interests on the proposals assigned. Panel members should not assess applications with which they are in any way associated, e.g. applications from themselves / colleagues in their departments, or applications from universities that they have been invited for pre-review.

First reader of the proposals will be invited to nominate External reviewers to assess the proposals.

February to April

External reviewers will be invited to submit reviews. External reviewer who has a major conflicts of interest¹ is not allowed to submit a review.

External reviewers should declare their expertise level (“expert” or “somewhat familiar with the topic” or “not knowledgeable”) in reviewing the applications. To ensure fairness of the peer-review mechanism, external reviewers who declare “not knowledgeable” in the concerned application cannot proceed with the assessment.

Each proposal will be reviewed by at least two external reviewers.

Mid March to mid April

Principal Investigator of the proposal will be invited to submit proposal update, if any. Update should include data collection, working papers, publications, presentations, media interviews and other submitted proposals, etc. of both the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigators.

By late April

The first and the second readers will be required to give independent assessments of the applications.

¹ See Appendix C.

Stage 5 - Further Processing by the Secretariat

By mid May

The Secretariat will start consolidating all the assessments received and prepare relevant information to facilitate panel discussion.

Stage 6 - Deliberation of Applications in Details by all Panel Members during Panel Meetings

Second week of June

Panel meetings will be held in Hong Kong for panel members to meet and consider all applications in details. Rating and funding recommendation on each proposal will be concluded at the meeting.

Panel chairs will report funding recommendations to the RGC.

The RGC will consider and approve funding recommendations.

By end June

Announcement of results to the universities and on RGC website².

Feedback from panel members and reviewers will be provided anonymously to the applicants for improvement.

Basis of evaluating research proposals

13. The RGC's main objective is to fund as many worthy projects as possible across a broad front within the funds available. Nevertheless, projects of exceptional merit will be funded more fully than other projects. The following criteria should be used in considering competitive bids:

(a) academic quality / merit;

- scientific and scholarly merit of the proposal
- qualifications and track record of the principal investigator(s)
- originality
- feasibility within the time-scale of the proposal

² <https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/>

- (b) institutional commitment;
- (c) contribution to academic / professional development (where applicable);
- (d) research impact and potential for social, cultural or economic application; and
- (e) availability of, and potential for, non-RGC funding.

14. Academic quality / merit is the overriding criterion in evaluating research projects when others are accorded equal weight. In considering grant applications, the RGC will also take cognizance of alternative sources of funding available because some subject areas will attract more private funding than others.

15. The subject panels will give a score for each proposal 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 funding.
4.5	Demonstrates very high international standards. Provides strong evidence and justification for the proposal. Should be funded as a matter of priority.
4	Demonstrates high international standards and provides good evidence and justification for the proposal. Worthy of consideration of funding.
3.5	Demonstrates good international standards but in a competitive context, it is not of sufficient priority to recommend for funding.
3	Has adequate qualities but is not internationally competitive. Not recommended for funding.
2	Has some strengths and innovative ideas but also has major weaknesses and flaws. Not recommended for funding.
1	Has numerous and significant weaknesses and flaws. Not recommended for funding.

Reflective reports of panels

16. The subject panels will summarise the points discussed during panel meetings and convey to local academics at the annual RGC Forum in June. A reflective report will also be uploaded to the RGC website³ for general information.

General evaluation criteria for assessing progress / completion / concluding reports

17. The general evaluation criteria, at **Appendix A**, are adopted for panel members to assess progress reports for on-going projects, concluding reports for terminated projects and completion reports for completed projects. Panels may have their own specific evaluation criteria.

Declaration of interests

18. There is a two-tiered reporting system for declaration of interest. At the first tier, on first appointment or subsequent re-appointment, panel 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 panel member to declare interest whenever he / she sees a reason to, on a case by case basis.

19. 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.

20. 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. Members of the subject panels are normally appointed in November and would submit their Register of Interests forms one month from the appointment date. The annual updating should be performed in

³ https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/grf/funded_research.html

November of the year.

21. In examining and assessing the research applications, and in participating in the deliberations of the panel, panel members should not represent the interests of their university. To avoid any potential conflicts of interest, panel member should advise the panel chairman or the UGC Secretariat of any applications with which they are in any way connected, and they will not be expected to assess them under normal circumstances. The RGC Code of Conduct and the Guidelines on Handling Conflicts of Interest. During Proposal Evaluation Process are at **Appendices B and C** respectively.

Confidentiality of applications

22. All applications and reports should be assessed in confidence. Panel members should not reveal or divulge the contents to any third party during or after the assessment. In case a panel member wishes to refer a proposal to a colleague for review, he / she may do so in the electronic system and follow the prevailing mechanism in the assignment of external reviewers and ensure that the latter also abides by this rule of confidentiality. Panel members should destroy all related documents after completion of the assessment. To ensure fairness and consistency, Panel members should not contact the Principal Investigators directly for clarification / additional information relating to their applications or disclose information relating to the assessment. The communication with Principal Investigators must be done by the Secretariat.

Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance

23. 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 panel 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 panel members anonymously to applicants with a view to helping them improve and refine their research applications.

Contingency arrangements in case of inclement weather

24. The subject panels meet in June every year to assess research grant applications. The month of June is part of the rainy and typhoon season in Hong Kong. To cater for possible situations of inclement weather during the meeting period, a contingency plan has been prepared and approved by the RGC at **Appendix D**.

UGC Secretariat
August 2022

Evaluation Criteria for Assessing Progress/Completion/Concluding Reports

Assessment of Progress Reports for On-going Projects

1. Please 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 panel members are advised to review the report holistically.
2. In Part One of the Evaluation form, you are requested to provide written comments and advice as regards the development of the project. The comments should be sufficiently detailed to justify your overall rating in Part Two.
3. In Part Two of the form, please assign an overall rating by checking the appropriate box. If further clarification or follow-up action is required of the PI, please specify in writing.
4. Please submit the completed evaluation form to the Secretariat within one month by clicking “**Submit**” in the “Input Annual Progress Report Review” interface.

Assessment of Concluding Reports for Terminated Projects

1. Please evaluate the concluding reports and assess the project in a holistic perspective, **in the light of the time and amount spent**, 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 2018/19 and after projects only);
 - g. whether there is any potential to develop or stimulate further research; and
 - h. whether the project addresses the needs of the local community.

2. In Part One of the evaluation form, you are requested to provide written comments on the performance of the project. The comments should be sufficiently detailed to justify your rating in Part Two. Your insights will be fed back to the principal investigator concerned for information and/or follow up purpose.
3. In Part Two of the form, please consider and assign a rating to each and every key assessment by checking the appropriate boxes. “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” must be determined on the basis of the overall performance of the project.
4. Please submit the completed evaluation form to the Secretariat within one month by clicking “**Submit**” in the “Input Concluding Report Assessment” interface.

Assessment of Completion Reports

1. The approach to assess 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 2018/19 and after projects only);
 - f. whether there is any potential to develop or stimulate further research;
 - g. whether the project addresses the needs of the local community; and
 - h. whether it will attract the interest of the public.
2. In Part One of the assessment form, you are requested to provide written comments on the achievement of the project. The comments should be sufficiently detailed to justify your rating in Part Two. Your insights will be fed back to the principal investigator concerned for information and/or follow up purpose.
3. In Part Two of the form, please 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.
4. If the report contains insufficient information for assessment, please notify the Secretariat immediately (Fax no.: (852) 2845 1183, email address: rgc1@ugc.edu.hk).

Completed Projects with Provisional Unsatisfactory Rating

5. Completed projects that are provisionally rated as “Barely Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” would be circulated to the respective panel chairman and other members of the relevant subject panel through electronic means for comments. In the light of members' comments, you and the chairman will review the case and the PI's response will be sought. The PI's response together with your final recommendation will be presented at the June panel meetings for consideration in the following year.

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 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

**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.

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 applicant¹;
- (b) holding emeritus, honorary, adjunct or visiting position(s) in the institution of the applicant¹ 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 /

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).

Committees receiving remuneration occasionally will be required to specify their involvement in the business and operation of the institution 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 applicant¹;

Application-related Conflicts

- (d) submitting applications as Project Coordinator (PC), Principal Investigator (PI), Co-PI, Co-Investigator (Co-I) or Collaborator 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 applicant¹;
- (g) having / having had co-authorship of patents with the applicant¹;
- (h) having close personal relationship (e.g. partner, spouse, immediate family Member, long-term close friend) with the applicant¹;
- (i) having / having had co-authorship of paper or publications with the applicant¹ 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 applicant¹ within three years;
- (k) being / having been appointed to serve in the same editorial board by the applicant¹ (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 applicant¹ 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 applicant¹ 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 applicant¹ from three to seven years;
- (d) partnership / co-organisers of major events with the

- applicant¹ 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

RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL

Contingency Arrangements in Case of Inclement Weather

BACKGROUND

The RGC holds meetings two times every year (June and December). The June meeting mainly involves the allocation of research grants submitted under research funding schemes such as the General Research Fund (GRF), the Early Career Scheme (ECS), the Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme (HSSPFS), the Theme-based Research Scheme (TRS); and a preliminary consideration of new applications under the Areas of Excellence Scheme (AoE), if applicable. The December meeting is usually devoted to examining resource allocation among various established and new funding initiatives for the following year; the allocation of research grants submitted under the Collaborative Research Fund, the Research Impact Fund and the AoE; and a preliminary consideration of new applications under the TRS.

2. The month of June is part of the rainy and typhoon season in Hong Kong. To cater for possible situations of inclement weather, the Secretariat has prepared a contingency plan in case of Rainstorm Warning Signal or Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal being hoisted during the meeting period. It is unlikely that Hong Kong is affected by typhoons or rainstorms in December. Nevertheless, similar contingency arrangements would be adopted if the meetings are required to be cancelled due to inclement weather in December.

3. The RGC week in June is packed with meetings and activities and scope for rescheduling is limited. All five GRF/ECS subject panels and the HSSPFS selection committee would have meetings in the first three days to deliberate the research proposals and prepare a list of proposals recommended for funding approval by the RGC. On the 4th day, the RGC and its sub-committee¹ members would visit one of the University Grants Committee-funded universities and a cocktail reception and dinner would be organized for all RGC and its sub-committee members. Members of the TRS Selection Panel will conduct interview with the project teams of the shortlisted proposals and have a central board meeting to recommend proposals for funding on the 4th and 5th days. If there is a funding exercise for the AoE Scheme in that year, the AoE Selection Panel will meet on the 5th day to consider the new applications. The Major

¹ “Sub-committee” means any sub-committees/groups/panels/task forces/working groups formed under the RGC.

Projects Steering Committee (MPStC) will meet in the afternoon of the 5th day or in the morning of the 6th day before the RGC meeting. The RGC meeting would be held in the morning or afternoon on the 6th day. The Secretariat is required to announce the GRF/ECS funding results by the end of June. The TRS funding results will be announced by mid-July.

CONTINGENCY ARRANGEMENTS DURING TROPICAL CYCLONES AND RAINSTORMS

4. As a general rule, RGC and its sub-committee meetings would be held as scheduled when Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 1 or No. 3 is hoisted or Amber or Red Rainstorm Warning Signal is issued. RGC and its sub-committee meetings will be cancelled if, within two hours before the appointed time of the meeting, Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is hoisted or remains in force or Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is issued or remains in force. If Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is hoisted or Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is issued while a meeting of the RGC or its sub-committee is in progress, the meeting chairman shall decide whether to adjourn or continue with the meeting.

GRF/ECS/HSSPFS Meetings

5. Given the large number of GRF/ECS research proposals and the need to complete the assessments before the RGC meeting, GRF/ECS subject panel meetings and HSSPFS selection committee meeting will resume within two hours after the No. 8 or higher Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal is cancelled or lowered to No. 3 or below, or after the Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is cancelled or replaced by a lower level alert at or before 5:00 pm. Nevertheless, no meetings will be held if the weather warning is cancelled or replaced by a lower level alert after 5:00 pm. In this regard, there is a possibility that the meetings will be held in late evenings or may have to be compressed. In the event that sub-committee meetings cannot be arranged before the RGC meeting, Members' views or endorsement would be sought by means of circulation of papers.

TRS/AoE/MPStC Meetings

6. Similar arrangement will be made for the TRS Selection Panel meeting cum interview. The interview session (one session for each Theme Group) will be cancelled if, within two hours before the appointed time of the meeting, Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is hoisted or remains in force or Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is issued or remains in force. If

Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is hoisted or Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is issued while the interview is in progress, the meeting chairman shall decide whether to adjourn or continue with the interview. For cancelled interview session, a replacement session will be arranged on the same day (if the warning signal is cancelled or replaced by a lower level alert on or before 5:00 pm) or the following day. In the event that replacement interview session(s) cannot be arranged before the RGC meeting, the Secretariat will arrange tele-conference for the Panel Members to “interview” the project teams after the RGC week.

7. The TRS central board meeting and the MPStC meeting will resume within two hours after the No. 8 or higher Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal is cancelled or is lowered to No. 3 or below, or after the Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is cancelled or replaced by a lower level alert on the condition that the TRS Selection Panel have interviewed all the project teams. If the central board meeting cannot take place before the RGC meeting, the Secretariat will arrange tele-conference for the Panel Members to consider and recommend proposals for funding after the RGC week. MPStC’s endorsement and RGC’s approval on the funding recommendations will be sought via circulation of presumption paper.

8. Taken into consideration the time required for the arrangement of tele-conference(s) for the replacement interviews and the central board meeting as well as the time required for seeking MPStC’s endorsement and RGC’s approval on the funding recommendations, the announcement of TRS funding results may be postponed to August. The issue of the next call for proposals will also need to be postponed.

9. The AoE Selection Panel meeting will be cancelled if within two hours before the appointed time of the meeting, Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is hoisted or remains in force or Black Rainstorm Warning Signal is issued or remains in force. Shortlisting of preliminary proposals for submission of full proposals will be decided on the basis of the written assessments submitted by Panel Members.

RGC Meeting

10. Due to high cost and practical difficulty in re-arranging meetings, RGC meeting would not be rescheduled if it is cancelled due to bad weather. RGC members’ views/endorsement on the agenda items including the funding recommendations of the various funding schemes will be sought by email.

RGC Visit to UGC-funded University and RGC Forum

11. The RGC visit and the RGC Forum will be cancelled if the Black Rainstorm Warning or Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is still in force by 6:00 a.m. on the day when the visit and forum are held.

RGC Dinner

12. The RGC dinner will be cancelled if the Black Rainstorm Warning or Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 or above is still in force by 4:00 pm. on the day when the dinner is organized.

Other Points to Note

13. The Secretariat will inform RGC and its sub-committee members of cancellation of meetings/activities and resumption of meetings by email.

14. The contingency arrangements proposed in paragraphs 6 to 13 above may not be exhaustive and the Secretariat will work out the logistics in consultation with the chairs of the RGC and its sub-committees where appropriate if any other unforeseen circumstances arise.

UGC Secretariat
December 2018