Guidelines for External Reviewers
General Research Fund, Early Career Scheme and
Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme

Outline of RGC Funding Schemes

1. An outline of all the Research Grants Council (RGC) funding schemes is available at http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/funding_schemes.html.

Conflicts of Interest

2. External Reviewers are assisting the RGC in their own personal capacity and they should in no way represent their own institutions.

3. Under the current RGC policy, an External Reviewer who has a major conflict of interest should NOT accept the invitation for avoidance of any perceived conflicts of interest. Please refer to the “Code of Conduct” and “Guidelines on Handling Conflicts of Interest During Proposal Evaluation Process” available in the Electronic System.

4. If, however, the External Reviewer is satisfied that there is no serious conflict of interest against the application and wishes to continue assessing the application, the External Reviewer could declare his/her past and present relationship with the applicant(s) by completing “Part II: Relationship with investigator(s)” of the assessment form.

Assessment by External Reviewers

5. 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.

6. Please preview the online assessment form before proceeding and note that the criteria adopted by the RGC for the allocation of earmarked research grants in competitive bids are as follows:

(a) academic quality, viz. (1) scientific and scholarly merit of the proposal, (2) qualifications and track record of the (principal) investigator(s), (3) originality and (4) feasibility within the time-scale of the proposal;

(b) the relevance of the proposal to the needs of Hong Kong;

(c) university’s commitment;

(d) contribution to academic/professional development (where applicable);

(e) potential for social, cultural or economic application; and
(f) availability of, and potential for, non-RGC funding.

7. Academic quality (criterion (6)(a)) is the overriding criterion in evaluating research projects, while all the other factors should be accorded equal weight.

8. External Reviewers should rate proposals according to the following 7-point scale: (Do not provide in-between grading)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point</th>
<th>Detailed Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Outstanding and internationally excellent. Provides full and strong evidence and justification for the proposal. <strong>Should be accorded the highest priority for funding.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Demonstrates very high international standards. Provides strong evidence and justification for the proposal. <strong>Should be funded as a matter of priority.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Demonstrates high international standards and provides good evidence and justification for the proposal. <strong>Worthy of consideration of funding.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Demonstrates good international standards but <strong>in a competitive context, it is not of sufficient priority to recommend for funding.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Has adequate qualities but is not internationally competitive. <strong>Not recommended for funding.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Has some strengths and innovative ideas but also has major weaknesses and flaws. <strong>Not recommended for funding.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Has numerous and significant weaknesses and flaws. <strong>Not recommended for funding.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rating as well as written justification (which MUST be provided in all cases) should be wholly based on the merits of the proposal.

9. Please note that applicants are not allowed to mention anything not related to the research proposal per se in the application form (such as describing the funding rules) with a view to communicating to the External Reviewers that the latter should give a certain rating if they intend to support the applications. Should such act be discovered, the applications concerned will be disqualified.

10. The guidelines for the consideration of project estimates are given at **Annex 1.**
11. It is important that the assessment given is independent and impartial. External Reviewers should observe the “Code of Conduct” and “Guidelines on Handling Conflicts of Interest During Proposal Evaluation Process” available in the Electronic System.

**Confidentiality of Applications**

12. All applications should be assessed in confidence. External Reviewers should not reveal or divulge the contents to any third party during or after the assessment.

13. External Reviewers should destroy all related documents after completion of the assessment.

14. To ensure fairness and consistency, External Reviewers should not contact the applicants by any means for clarification/additional information relating to their applications or disclosure of information relating to the assessment. The communication with applicants, if required, must be done by the Secretariat.

**Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (the Ordinance)**

15. Under the 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 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 anonymously to applicants with a view to helping them improve and refine their research applications and methodology.

**Communication**

16. All correspondence/enquiry should be directed to the Secretariat at rgc1@ugc.edu.hk.
Guidelines for Considering the Budgets for Supported Research Projects under General Research Fund / Early Career Scheme 2019/20

General Principles

1. RGC’s objective is to fund as many worthy projects as possible under the limited budget. Nevertheless, projects of exceptional merit i.e. those ranked 5 and, occasionally 4.5, should be funded more fully than other projects. The budgets of all supported projects may need to be trimmed to include essential items only. Care must nevertheless be taken to ensure that the projects remain viable.

2. Project estimates should not include hidden costs already covered by recurrent block grant funding, such as salaries of teaching staff who spend a portion of their time on research, computer time, utility charges, consumables, stationery, etc. Only expenditure which would not otherwise be separately incurred will be considered.

Duration of Projects

3. For GRF projects, the normal period of support is three years or less. Where a project is supported, but for a shorter duration than requested (e.g. as an exploratory project for, normally, one year), reduced funding will be provided accordingly. A funding template for longer-term research is available to cater for projects with a research objective(s) which can only be realistically achieved in a time span of more than three years. Under this template, GRF proposals with a project timeline of four to five years will be considered subject to justification.

4. For ECS, a maximum of 5-year project duration is allowed for applicants in their first year of full time academic job, a 4-year duration for applicants in the second year and a 3-year duration for applicants in their third year, if the proposed duration is deemed appropriate and necessary by the RGC.

Characteristics of Project Fund

5. Project funds are divided into two major categories: (A) one-line vote items and (B) earmarked items. The budget of items under (A) can be re-arranged freely by the concerned Principal Investigator (PI), while the items in (B) cannot. In case the PI intends to transfer funds to cover costs in items in (B), they have to submit a request to the Secretariat for consideration. Panel Members will be invited to consider them on a case-by-case basis.
(A) One-line Vote Items

(I) Research Support and Technical Staff

6. Support is generally provided at the lowest level (i.e., Research Assistant (RA)). As a general yardstick in scrutinizing the budget of each proposal, indicative flat rates of monthly salary will be available for RA and Senior RA in the Electronic System. Panel Members are required to consider the scope and complexity of the job of the staff support required, and indicate in the Electronic System the number of man-months required for performing such duty.

7. Panels should decide, on the merits of current average teaching load and the case presented, on the level and number of research support staff/years to be supported, which should be the minimum practicable. In the case of applications for funding for Post-doctoral Fellows (post-doc), the qualification and experience requirements or the CV (if available) of the post-doc should be requested.

(II) Equipment

8. Universities are expected to provide necessary infrastructure, basic equipment and overhead supports for research projects as on cost has already been provided to them for meeting such expenditure. Hence, the RGC only funds specialized equipment essential for the projects and not otherwise provided. In particular, Panel Members should be mindful that, the following items should not be supported:

   (a) Postage, stationery, fax, photocopying fees, reference books and overseas telephone charges should not be supported as these costs should be met by universities’ departmental expenses;

   (b) standard equipment (e.g., desktop PCs, servers, laptop computers, standard software licence/dataset, printers and scanners) known to be available, or reasonably expected to be provided, in the universities concerned;

   (c) equipment not wholly or mainly to be used for the research in question during the project's duration; and

   (d) personal electronic devices such as smartphones, iPad/computer tablet, and digital cameras save for exceptional cases with sound justification.

9. To avoid ambiguity, Panel Members should indicate the items supported and provide detailed comments in the Remarks column.

10. Consideration could be given, in competition with other project bids, to funding equipment requests to support multiple research projects within the same university.
Outsourcing of Research Work Outside Hong Kong

11. RGC research grants should primarily be used in undertaking research work in Hong Kong by the Principal Investigators and their teams in order to nurture research talents in Hong Kong. It will be legitimate for a Principal Investigator to subcontract out a small part of the research work (regardless of geographic locations) only if:

(a) The proposed activity is a necessary and justified part of the research plan which is outlined in the proposal for approval;

(b) The Principal Investigators should have identified and possessed a high level of research expertise in their teams when they submit research applications to the RGC. The activity to be subcontracted out, for instance, data collection, should not be the main intellectual focus of the research project;

(c) The persons/organizations providing the subcontracting services should be at arm’s length with the Principal Investigators or their serving universities (for instance, employees, friends, relatives, subsidiary companies, etc. should be avoided) and the procurement of such services should be in full compliance with the concerned university's prevailing procedures and guidelines in this regard; and

(d) The Principal Investigators or team members should be involved in primarily monitoring and the supervision of the subcontracting services.

12. For subcontracting services to be conducted outside Hong Kong, the Principal Investigators have to justify in their proposals to the Panels for approval. The Panels will deal with the matter on a case-by-case basis, having regard to the merits and justification given by the Principal Investigators and whether the conditions specified in paragraph 11 have been fulfilled.

13. For subcontracting services to be conducted in Hong Kong, the Research Offices of the Universities should check and confirm if the conditions specified in paragraph 11 have been met.

Travel and Subsistence

14. An amount of HK$20,000 per annum will be provided to all supported projects, except for exploratory projects of one year duration, for travel and associated expenses in connection with conference attendance for delivering paper(s) related to the projects. This is for indicative purposes only. Applicants may juggle the amount in the entire project period. But the basic principle, i.e. attending for delivering paper(s) related to the projects, must be met.
(B) Earmarked Items

(V) Relief Teacher

15. In the case of applications for funding for relief teacher, the qualification and experience requirements or the CV (if available) of the relief teacher should be requested. On the employment of relief teachers for proposals submitted under the Humanities and Social Sciences Panel, the RGC agrees in principle to provide, in cases where there is genuine need, funding for relief teachers so as to enable the PI to allocate sufficient time for research. Such funding will be provided only if the cases so warrant and upon detailed and sound justification. Relief teachers engaged for this purpose are meant to relieve the PIs of their day-to-day teaching loads and administrative burden related to teaching work. The relief teacher is also not supposed to take up non-teaching related duties, such as purely administrative work, of the PI. It is considered that academic staff in the rank of Staff Grade ‘G’ (i.e. ‘Lecturer’) as defined in the Common Data Collection Format of the UGC or equivalent should be competent enough to carry out teaching-related duties for degree courses. The universities are requested to confirm in Part III of the application forms that the salaries proposed by the PIs do not exceed the salary rate of above-mentioned academic rank of the universities concerned. If a relief teacher with salary higher than that for ‘Lecturer’ is requested, strong and detailed justification must be provided in the application form.

(VI) High-performance Computing Services

16. An amount of up to HK$100,000 may be provided for the subscription of high-performance computing services for each supported project.

Guidelines specific for Biology & Medicine (B&M) Proposals

17. The B&M Panel noted in the last exercise that the size of grants requested varied considerably and some of the larger grant applications were poorly justified. The RGC therefore decided that the budget for B&M proposals should normally be below HK$1.2 million. Strong justifications must be provided for proposals seeking more than HK$1.2 million.

18. The B&M Panel normally supports one full-time equivalent (fte) RA only. If more than one fte RA and/or staff above the RA level are requested, strong and detailed justifications should be provided.

19. These arrangements are applicable to B&M proposals only.
Annex 1(b)

Guidelines for Considering the Budgets for Supported Research Projects under Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme 2019/20

General Principles

1. A maximum amount of HK$1 million per award (covering salary costs for relief teachers and staff, travel, subsistence and dissemination costs) for a period of up to 12 months may be granted. In view of the prestigious status of the fellowship award, not more than ten awards should be granted per year. Projects of exceptional merit i.e. those ranked 5 and, occasionally, 4.5, should, funds permitting, be funded more fully than other projects. The budgets of all supported projects may need to be trimmed to include essential items only. Care must nevertheless be taken to ensure that the projects remain viable.

2. Project estimates should not include hidden costs already covered by recurrent block grant funding, such as salaries of teaching staff who spend a portion of their time on research, computer time, utility charges, consumables, stationery, etc. Only expenditure which would not otherwise be separately incurred will be considered.

Duration of Projects

3. The Fellowship period is capped at a maximum of 12 months.

Characteristics of Project Fund

4. Project funds are divided to two major categories: (A) one-line vote items and (B) earmarked items. The budget of items under (A) can be re-arranged freely by the concerned PI, while the items in (B) cannot. In case the PI intends to transfer funds to cover costs in items in (B), they have to submit a request to the Secretariat for consideration. Panel Members will be invited to consider them on a case-by-case basis.

(A) One-line Vote Items

(I) Relief Administrative Staff

5. Panels should decide, on the merits of the case presented, on the level and number of relief administrative staff to be supported. Staff budget is provided to relieve the applicant’s administrative workload which should not be research-related.

(II) Subsistence

6. A ceiling of HK$900 per day will be provided.
(B) Earmarked Items

(III) Relief Teacher

7. Relief teachers engaged for this purpose are meant to relieve the awardees of their major teaching loads or/and administrative burden related to teaching work.