

# Pursue your dream with the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme

As a world class city, Hong Kong can be justifiably proud of its outstanding success in many areas, among which is education – a reputation of excellence well-recognized internationally. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of scholars over the years and staunch support from the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government, the city has steadfastly developed into a regional education hub that has attracted many a bright researcher to its shores.

Internationally, Hong Kong's eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities have gained in stature in their research capabilities and accomplishments, with five of them having been recognized by

some of the well-established ranking exercises as among the world's Top 200. One such league table ranked three of them as third, eighth and tenth in Asia in 2020. Hong Kong's universities are on a par with a cluster of world-leading counterparts, and match those in global cities such as London, New York and Boston.

In line with the Greater Bay Area initiative, Hong Kong is well positioned as an education hub that facilitates research, knowledge transfer and innovation-centric entrepreneurship. In this connection, the HKSAR Government has long been committed to supporting excellence in Hong Kong's higher education development and progressively promoted its role as an education hub in partnership with multiple stakeholders, including nurturing young research talents for Hong Kong which has enhanced our global reputation of research excellence.

The Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS), established by UGC's Research Grants Council in 2009, is one of the highly valued and sought-after Fellowships for committed researchers around the globe. The competitive Scheme aims to attract outstanding students locally and worldwide to pursue PhD studies in Hong Kong's universities with an annual stipend for three years and research-related travel allowances. The awardees form a pool of excellent young talents who become important resources for Hong Kong's strategic development as an innovation hub where cutting edge research are conducted. While pursuing their PhD studies at our universities, the awardees also support research activities and enhance research capacities that are critical to the vitality of Hong Kong's higher education and research development. Our universities' world-class standing and research capacity is also further enhanced with an international network of Hong Kong-trained researchers who often continue collaborating with the research community here even when they seek opportunities elsewhere after graduation. Since its establishment, over 2500 awardees from 90 countries and regions have completed their PhD programmes in Hong Kong.

Dr Mariana Perez-Bobadilla from Mexico, a HKPFS awardee who graduated from the City University of Hong Kong (CityU)'s Creative Media Programme this year, says, "Hong Kong has the twofold advantage of living in an Asian city with easy access to everywhere, and doing



research in English at the same time". Her research project on post-anthropocentric microbiology literacy in society from the point of view of art and natural history museums was supported by the HKPFS.

During her time as a HKPFS Fellow, Perez-Bobadilla conducted field research in museums overseas, and presented her findings at international conferences in the Mainland, Denmark, Korea, Mexico, Portugal and the United States.

The pandemic has thrown a spanner in the works for her academic travels and cross-regional projects, but she has been able to promptly adapt her courses and projects into digital formats. "Hong Kong's quick reaction is way faster than other countries and regions that took a while to cope with the situation," she remarks.

Besides working in CityU's Creative Media Department, her project's specific focus connected her with the Biochemistry Department of the university. For example, one collaboration with a Chemistry professor led to the support of local artist Wong Kit-yi's research-based work "99-year Lease" displayed at Art Basel in 2018.

In addition to publishing articles on art education or distinct processes research and display technologies, which are shared between the sciences, natural history, museums and art, Perez-Bobadilla has also co-curated an exhibition for CityU's Art Machines Conference this year.

Currently working on her book based on her thesis which explores the representation or conceptualization of microorganisms in art natural history museums, Perez-Bobadilla says she enjoys the academic freedom in Hong Kong.

"In all the projects I've done, I have received a lot of trust from my supervisor and the team for my knowledge and ideas, which has encouraged me to pursue what I am truly interested in without pressure," she explains.

Having lived in Hong Kong for nearly five years, Perez-Bobadilla also enjoys the city's beautiful countryside, where she can go hiking in the mountains and swimming in the ocean with friends coming from all over the world. In Hong Kong, she says, you can easily switch between high-intensity work on weekdays to leisure activities at the weekend.

Another HKPFS awardee, Dr Shi Qiquan from the Mainland who completed his PhD Programme on Computer Science and Information Technology at the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) in 2018, also likes hiking with friends, but what

impresses him most is the city's inclusivity and cultural affinity.

Originally from a poor family in the Mainland's inland province of Guizhou, Shi appreciates the HKPFS which supported him pursuing his PhD studies at the HKBU in Hong Kong. Compared to Quebec, Canada, where he had spent four months in 2012 through the Globalink Exchange Scheme during his undergraduate studies in the Mainland, he found Hong Kong to be much more dynamic and culturally diverse.

The linguistic affinity means there are no major communication problems, while the HKPFS stipend allowed him to focus on his

studies without financial worries. "Being a HKPFS awardee also helped me land a good job at Huawei Noah's Ark Lab in Hong Kong," Shi adds. He emphasizes that the HKPFS Fellowship boosted his confidence in the Huawei interview.

Shi notes that one has to go through a very competitive selection process to win a HKPFS Fellowship. He understands that in the last round exercise for awardees for the 2021/22 academic year, the Scheme received applications from over 6000 applicants from more than 100 countries and regions. Among them, only 300 people were selected for the award of the Fellowships.

"Every applicant is very well qualified: they may have outstanding academic achievements or brilliant research ideas," Shi observes. "What won the Fellowship for me is, I think, my decade-long volunteer service experience which also played a part in this."

As an AI researcher at Huawei after finishing his PhD programme, he has published a number of papers on artificial intelligence and was granted a patent.

"To me, as a researcher, it's more important to look for the right supervisor and be passionate about the specific research focus that interests you," he says.

Dr Kennedy Chan Kam-ho is a local HKPFS awardee who completed his PhD Programme in Education at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 2014. He is now an Associate Professor at the HKU's Education Faculty. A former secondary school Science teacher who recognized the multifaceted and complex nature of science teaching, Chan developed an interest in uncovering the 'secrets' of high-quality science teaching, leading him to pursue his PhD studies at HKU.

Passionate about science teachers' professional knowledge and practices, Chan uses classroom video as a central tool to elicit, characterize and develop the situational and dynamic factors of science teacher expertise. He also investigates teacher learning in video-based learning environments.

"Education is about local content, and specifically, it is important that science teaching

is contextualized in Hong Kong," Chan observes. "That's why I've never left Hong Kong since my undergraduate studies. I want to contribute to my home city, so if I studied overseas, I would still need to come back to collect data."

In Chan's field of expertise, he believes that there are privileges of being a local. Because of his understanding of the local education system, he was able to participate in teacher training in the first year of his PhD studies, and accumulated a lot of experience and observations which laid a solid foundation for his research.

It is not an easy decision to give up a stable job as a secondary school teacher and devote oneself to academic research. Chan, who completed his postgraduate diploma studies part-time, also knows that the heavy administration workload on him had prevented him from concentrating on doing research.

Chan appreciates HKPFS's support of his full-time PhD studies, which allowed him to reflect on his teaching methods in the past, and his role as a teacher in the local education system. It has also changed his mindset about science teaching, and completed his transformation from teaching students to teaching teachers. He believes that anyone who has the ambition to do research should not underestimate the value of their findings, and must seize the opportunity.

Chan has received a number of teaching and research awards and is also a Member of The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority's Subject Committee. Perez-Bobadilla, who has become a senior lecturer at Shanghai Institute of Visual Art's DeTao Masters Academy, is expecting a balance between doing art and teaching and see how her knowledge could be passed on. Shi has imparted experience to other applicants and helped two of them successfully secure the Fellowships.

They all believe that anyone from any part of the world with passion to undertake meaningful research should look to the HKPFS as an excellent platform to pursue their dreams.

**For the 2022-23 academic year, 300 HKPFS Fellowships will be awarded. The Scheme opens for applications in September 2021. For details of the Scheme, please visit the website at [www.rgc.edu.hk/hkphd](http://www.rgc.edu.hk/hkphd).**



Shi Qiquan



Chan Kam-ho



Mariana Perez-Bobadilla

