

For information on
21 February 2013

Legislative Council Panel on Education Public Policy Research Funding Scheme

Purpose

The Legislative Council Panel on Education wrote to the Secretary for Education on 18 January 2013 to invite Government representatives for a meeting to present information on the Public Policy Research (PPR) Funding Scheme to the Panel and respond to their questions. This paper outlines the background and objectives of the PPR.

Background

2. The Administration attaches importance to public policy research and sees it as a means to facilitate rational and objective discussions. In the 2004 Policy Address, the Government proposed to strengthen public policy research, particularly from a macro and long-term perspective, to facilitate the building of consensus on public issues and help avoid sweeping, politicised and emotional debates. The Policy Address pointed out that to enhance the effectiveness of governance on a long-term basis, the Central Policy Unit (CPU) would “explore ways to promote public policy research and develop the human resources required”. After discussions with the University Grants Committee (UGC), the CPU decided to engage the UGC to assist in promoting public policy research. In the 2005 Policy Address, the Government announced that \$20 million would be allocated annually for three years for promoting public policy research in higher education institutions. Operationally, the CPU allocated \$20 million to the Research Grants Council (RGC)¹ under the UGC annually and formulated the research areas for academics’ reference. The RGC is responsible for invitation of applications and assessment. Application was restricted to the eight UGC-funded higher education institutions.

3. In 2007, the Government extended the PPR to 2011-12 following a review. In 2011, funding was further extended to 2014-15. To support

¹ The terms of reference and organisation of the RGC is at Annex I.

longer-term public policy research, since 2008-09 the Government has assigned half of the total annual funding of \$20 million, i.e. \$10 million, to run the Strategic Public Policy Research (SPPR) Funding Scheme. The objective of the SPPR is to facilitate longer-term public policy research on specific areas. The maximum duration of a funded project is five years with a funding cap of \$5 million.

Objective and Mode of Operation

4. The PPR aims to promote local public policy research and nurture the talents required. The RGC has been engaged and funded by the CPU to run the PPR and encourage the academics to share their research results for promoting public policy research. The two schemes invite applications once a year. The CPU is responsible for preparing research areas every year for applicants' reference. The RGC invites academics from the eight UGC-funded institutions to submit applications and assesses them in accordance with its established "peer review" mechanism.

5. To facilitate discussion of public policies in the community, both the CPU and RGC encourage academics to publish their research results. Information on funded researches and summaries of research reports are uploaded onto RGC's website. Since 2009, the RGC has published the "Public Policy Digest" with summaries of completed research projects and their findings. Also, the CPU has organised public policy research seminars from time to time. To foster discussions between the academic sector and the community, academics, think tanks, government officials, non-government organisations and people from the business sector were invited to attend. The CPU also sent completed research reports and recommendations to relevant bureaux for reference.

Functions and Roles of the CPU

6. The major roles of the CPU are as follows -
- (1) funding the PPR, including the on-cost for the UGC;
 - (2) formulating the overall direction for the PPR; and
 - (3) reviewing the effectiveness of the scheme in order to plan the way forward.

Statistics on Funded Projects

7. As at 1 February 2013, the total number of completed research projects is 69 (including four terminated or withdrawn projects). 94 projects are in progress or in the pipeline, of which 81 are under the PPR and 13 under the SPPR. The aggregate amount of funding involved is about \$112 million. Details are at Annex II.

Revised Mode of Operation

8. Since the introduction of the PPR, the social, economic and political landscape of Hong Kong has witnessed significant and continued changes over the years. Rising public expectations on the Government have entailed the need for more timely and issue-specific public policy research. Moreover, the CPU noted from its review of the operation of the schemes in 2011 that apart from the eight UGC-funded institutions, other higher education institutions and some public policy research institutions also hoped that the Government would support them in conducting public policy research, and promote applied research so that public policy research could focus more on actual local situations. After reviewing the above factors and operations of the scheme, the CPU has decided to adopt a revised mode of operation to keep pace with the new environment.

9. The objective of the PPR remains unchanged, which is to foster public policy research. The CPU will administer the day-to-day operations of the scheme, including identification of research directions, areas and topics, invitation of applications, assessment and monitoring. The scheme will continue to be open to academics from UGC-funded institutions. In addition, other degree-awarding higher education institutions² and non-profit-making public policy research think-tanks will also be eligible.

10. The CPU will specify research topics having regard to the public policy issues faced by the Government and the community. Applications may be invited whenever a research need is identified to allow more timely launch and

² Academics who are teaching undergraduate programmes or above in these tertiary institutions are eligible to apply.

completion of research. The revised mode of operation will commence in 2013-14. Projects which have already been funded will not be affected.

11. The revised mode of operation will enable the PPR to render more timely support to public policy research to address specific issues. It will also allow the launch and completion of research in a more flexible manner. Research projects will better address the current policy research needs of the community and the Government, such as research on poverty alleviation. At the same time, to encourage public policy research and to attract and support more academics, the PPR will allow other local degree-awarding higher education institutions and non-profit-making public policy research think-tanks to apply so as to foster a culture of public policy research in a wider context.

Transitional Arrangement

12. The CPU met the RGC's Chairman on 31 October last year to inform the latter of the initial thinking behind the revised mode of operation, and that the objective of the PPR would remain unchanged. The CPU explained that academics from the eight UGC-funded institutions could continue to apply for funding in future and reference would be made to the assessment mechanism of the RGC. The CPU noted that the RGC Chairman would write to inform the eight institutions concerned of the changes and notify the RGC of the transitional arrangement. The CPU and the RGC also agreed that the RGC would continue to follow up projects which had been funded in 2012-13 and before. The CPU will be responsible for the operation of the PPR from 2013-14 onwards.

Safeguarding Academic Freedom and Quality of Research Projects

13. To ensure academic freedom and the quality of research projects, the CPU will invite well-respected academics to form an assessment panel and serve as its chairperson and members. The CPU will, where necessary, invite officials involved in policy formulation to play a part in assessment so that the public policy research would better address topics and issues of concern to the Government.

14. The assessment process will employ objective assessment criteria. A declaration of interests system will be in place. These will ensure academic

freedom and the independence of academic research. The PPR will mainly fund short-term and mid-term projects. Longer-term projects may be funded should the need arise.

15. The CPU respects and has faith in academics' professional ethics and independence. We believe that the revised mode of operation will be more effective in promoting public policy research, and encouraging rational and objective discussions among various sectors of the community. The CPU welcomes comments from Members, and will continue to take into account views from different sectors in the community, including the academia, when working out the details of the scheme.

Central Policy Unit
February 2013

Research Grants Council (RGC)

Terms of Reference

- (a) To advise the SAR Government, through the University Grants Committee (UGC), on the needs of the institutions of higher education in Hong Kong in the field of academic research, including the identification of priority areas, in order that a research base adequate for the maintenance of academic vigour and pertinent to the needs of Hong Kong may be developed; and
- (b) To invite and receive, through the institutions of higher education, applications for research grants from academic staff and for the award of studentships and post-doctoral fellowships; to approve awards and other disbursements from funds made available by the SAR Government through the UGC for research; to monitor the implementation of such grants and to report at least annually to the SAR Government through the UGC.

Organisation

The RGC operates through subject panels and committees responsible for considering applications for research grants and fellowship applications :

- (i) **Subject Panels**

There are two pools of panel members, one focuses on the evaluation of proposals in General Research Fund and other funding schemes for individual research and the other on Joint Research Schemes proposals. Five subject panels namely Biology & Medicine, Business Studies, Engineering, Humanities & Social Sciences and Physical Sciences are set up under each pool. A Mechanical, Civil & Materials Engineering and System Design Sub-Panel is formed under the Engineering Panel to handle the applications relating to this area whilst five sub-panels are also formed under the Humanities & Social Sciences Panel to handle the applications in the respective disciplines. These panels consist of local and non-local academics. In assessing applications for research grants on the basis of peer review, the panels work through a network of reviewers, comprising international experts in their fields both in Hong Kong and other regions.
- (ii) Collaborative Research Fund Sub-Committee gives advice to the RGC on the Collaborative Research Fund, including selection and monitoring of the approved projects.
- (iii) Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme Steering Committee gives advice to the RGC on the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme, including selection and monitoring of the approved fellowships.
- (iv) Major Projects Steering Committee gives advice to the RGC on the Theme-based Research and the Areas of Excellence Scheme, including prioritizing proposals for funding and monitoring of approved projects.

(a) Research projects completed

Institutions	No. of funded projects		Amount of funding (\$)	
	PPR Funding Scheme	SPPR Funding Scheme	PPR Funding Scheme	SPPR Funding Scheme
University of Hong Kong	18	--	8,243,234	--
Chinese University of Hong Kong	15	--	7,691,651	--
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	7	--	4,711,737	--
Hong Kong Baptist University	6	--	3,538,024	--
Hong Kong Polytechnic University	6	--	3,141,421	--
City University of Hong Kong	6	--	2,451,134	--
Lingnan University	3	--	2,196,200	--
Hong Kong Institute of Education	8	--	4,448,924	--

(b) Research projects in progress or in the pipeline

Institutions	No. of funded projects		Amount of fundings (\$)	
	PPR Funding Scheme	SPPR Funding Scheme	PPR Funding Scheme	SPPR Funding Scheme
University of Hong Kong	26	4	12,410,223	9,747,000
Chinese University of Hong Kong	22	3	10,358,096	9,250,000
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	6	1	3,103,069	3,960,000
Hong Kong Baptist University	2	1	1,011,228	1,152,415
Hong Kong Polytechnic University	14	1	6,698,167	3,800,000
City University of Hong Kong	4	1	2,149,318	1,000,000
Lingnan University	1	--	384,090	--
Hong Kong Institute of Education	6	2	2,713,540	8,242,639