

Legislative Council Education Panel Special Meeting on PPR scheme funding

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Submission of views

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1. I note the current plan by the CPU to end the pre-existing funding and scrutiny mechanism of the PPR, which has been in force since 2004. I also note that CPU officials have on various occasions (written and otherwise) claimed that they are not opposed to the objectives of the pre-existing mechanism – namely encouraging more quality academic research on public policy issues in Hong Kong – but they believe that shifting the vetting and administration of the funding scheme from Research Grant Council (RGC) to itself will ‘improve’ the research, in particular to bring future PPR projects ‘closer’ to the ‘needs of the society and of the government’.
2. The starting point of the proposed change is thus two-fold –
 - A. Previous PPR projects are probably not as good as expected, and thus we need changes to improve their quality.
 - B. Such change is found in the vetting and administration mechanism. Making CPU the manager and vetting authority of the funds/projects, instead of RGC, will achieve the purpose of improving research quality.
3. Let’s take a closer look at these 2.
 - A. Research not good enough? In whose eyes, to what standard and for what purpose? Who is to judge? E.g. A project on poverty recommending an official poverty line will draw criticisms, and praises, from different directions. Is a research recommending ‘smaller’, incremental changes ‘better’ than one recommending ‘bigger’ moves?
 - B. Make CPU the manager and vetting authority: How can CPU as manager of PPR scheme improve the scheme? How will it work? CPU officials have stressed that they will invite senior academics to help with the vetting, and will bring in policy bureaus in the process, so as to balance the needs of the government and to maintain academic vigor of the research. But it is clear that CPU and the government will play a large role in the vetting process, otherwise why need to change? The academics will play at most an advisory role, thus radically changing the original spirit of the PPR scheme, despite the rhetoric from CPU to the contrary. Is the CPU conflating consultancy with research in this case?
4. What is public policy RESEARCH, *vis-à-vis* consultancy?

PPResearch, as proposed and led by academics, opens up options for informed discussions in society and government, and between the two. Academics will formulate ideas and questions for research independently. Competing proposals for funding are vetted for their academic vigor, based on well tested principles and drawing on expertise locally as well as globally. Completed research will then provide new food for thought for the policy community, comprising the citizens, politicians and government administrators, to enable better informed policy discussions and debate. With these discussions, policies will be better designed and more amenable to successful execution and greater acceptance by society. Thus all PPR research findings need to be publicly accessible, and copyright ownership resided with the researcher not with the Government. On the other hand, consultancies are commissioned by a body to engage a group of experts to conduct work based on a specified set of parameters. Often the key questions are provided by the commissioning body and the researcher has the task of finding answers to them. The utility of consultancy is on the technical side, as the key questions are given. Consultancies are useful when the society has reached broad consensus over a public policy area so that only work on the details is required.

5. It is crystal clear PPR and public policy consultancy are two genuinely different things. PPR is not aimed at meeting the ‘needs of the government’. It is aimed at bringing forth more informed discussions in society as well as in government, and between them, so that the government will *then* know what to proceed and how to proceed with public policy. Consultancies can then be the next step.
6. I see that by proposing the change in vetting/administrative mechanisms of PPR, and justifying the change by its perception that the change will ‘make PPR closer to the needs of the government’, the CPU is indeed conflating research with consultancy. As such it is negating its position that it does not intend to weaken PPR, as instituted from 2004, by this change. Consequently, by simple logic, I can conclude that the CPU’s plan to shift the vetting authority to itself will not work to achieve its intended objective - to improve PPR - and should thus not be supported.
7. Research can always be improved, and the academia knows well how to: by incessantly practicing the well-tested peer review mechanism, and keeping an open mind to feedback from the government and the society on our findings and methods. We welcome more communications with policy bureaus and departments during the planning and execution of PPR, and would welcome CPU’s assistance in facilitating this communication. But the new mechanism with CPU replacing RGC’s peer review mechanism will not work. Let’s not seek change for the worse.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

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