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Clerk to Panel
Legislative Council Panel on Education
Legislative Council Complex
1 Legislative Council Road
Central
Hong Kong
(Attn: Ms Polly YEUNG)

Dear Ms YEUNG,

**Legislative Council Panel on Education
University Grants Committee-funded
Research Postgraduate Programmes**

Regarding Hon Helena Wong Pik-wan's enquiry in her letter to the Chairman of the Panel on Education dated 18 April on funding for research postgraduate (RPg) programmes offered by local universities, our reply is set out below.

Research is a crucial part of the development of higher education and enhancement of economic competitiveness. Across the globe, countries are actively attracting scientific and technological research talents from around the world. Countries with advanced higher education systems such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) have been attracting a large number of non-local students to study their RPg programmes, so as to boost the research capability of their universities and nurture talents with a view to fostering the development of research and innovation. For example, in the UK, the percentage of non-local students in RPg programmes is 40%-50%, whereas in some of the world's top universities, the percentage of non-local students in RPg programmes is as high as 60%-70%.

In the light of the successful international experiences, we consider that the development of research activities in Hong Kong's higher education sector should be promoted with a forward-looking vision and international perspective. The Government and University Grants Committee (UGC) have been supporting the academic and research development of local higher education institutions by providing subsidised places of RPg programmes through the allocation of funding on a triennial basis. The approved student number targets for the UGC-funded RPg programmes remain at 5 595 per annum throughout the 2012/13 to 2014/15 triennium. Institutions may enrol RPg students up to 40% over and above their respective approved student numbers for RPg programmes, subject to the conditions as stipulated in the UGC Notes on Procedures, namely the aggregate over-enrolment does not exceed the number of on-going General Research Fund projects for the respective institution. Over the years, institutions have been exercising this flexibility in over-enrolment to support their research projects, boost their research capability and sustain their internationalisation efforts. In the 2012/13 academic year, the actual number of RPg students is 6 773 and 21% above the approved student number for RPg programmes, representing about half of the 40% upper limit of over-enrolment.

Established in 2009 by the Research Grants Council (RGC) under the UGC, the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS) welcomes applications from local students and students from any other country or region. The HKPFS aims at enhancing the quality of PhD students, strengthening the training of academic researchers and improving the overall research capability of institutions in Hong Kong by attracting research students who demonstrate outstanding qualities of academic performance, research ability or potential, communication and interpersonal skills as well as leadership abilities, to pursue their research-based PhD programmes in Hong Kong's UGC-funded institutions. Those who are seeking admission as new full-time PhD students in UGC-funded institutions, irrespective of their country of origin, prior work experience and ethnic background, are eligible to apply. In the 2012/13 academic year, RGC received a total of 4 785 applications from 106 countries and regions around the world. After a rigorous selection process, 185 elite candidates from 33 countries and regions have accepted the scholarship awarded by the RGC.

The objective of RPg programmes is to enhance academic standards, extend the frontiers of knowledge and develop theories through research activities. As a matter of fact, RPg students play an important role in the higher education sector. Not only do they participate directly in a large number of research activities, but they also participate in teaching activities (such as acting as tutors of tutorial classes and markers of exam papers) and serve as a bridge between the undergraduates and the teaching staff, thereby contributing to teaching and learning and knowledge transfer in tertiary institutions. In view of these facts, and with a view to boosting the research capability in Hong Kong by attracting high quality talents from around the world, UGC-funded institutions admit RPg students on a merit basis, taking into account the students' academic results and research capability, but not their places of origin.

In the 2012/13 academic year, only about 10% of the applications for UGC-funded RPg programmes by non-local students (including those from the Mainland) were admitted by institutions, whilst about 25%¹ of the applications by local students were admitted, which indicates that the chance for local students to study RPg programmes is indeed much higher than that for non-local students. In fact, there are diversified choices of further studies and employment available for Hong Kong students after graduation from undergraduate programmes, and quite a number of students intending to pursue RPg studies choose to do so at overseas universities, so that they can conduct research under a different culture and environment. Moreover, UGC-funded institutions have not yet reached the 40% upper limit of over-enrolment. If outstanding local students apply to study RPg programmes, UGC-funded institutions will still have ample capacity to consider their admission on a merit basis.

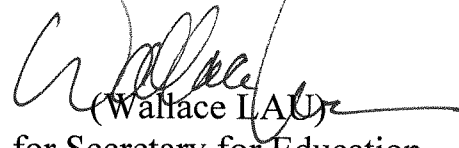
Outstanding universities need freedom in the exchange of knowledge and talents. Admission of outstanding qualified non-local students to RPg programmes on a merit basis not only helps boost the level of local researches and enhance the effectiveness of public spending, but also diversifies the student mix and benefits local students. As such, setting upper limits on the number of non-local students to be enrolled in publicly-funded RPg programmes will pose hindrance to the academic development of the local higher education sector and

¹ As individual students can submit applications to more than one institution or for more than one programme, the percentage calculated using student number as denominator will be higher.

will cause a loss of some of the high quality research talents and projects to other places. It is also contradictory to common international practice. We therefore consider that the prevailing policy on funding publicly-funded RPg programmes is suitable and conducive to the development of local higher education.

Since the establishment of the HKPFS, about 6% to 9% of the applications by local students are awarded with the scholarship, whilst only about 3% to 4% of applications by non-local students are awarded with the scholarship. Since the objective of the HKPFS is to improve the overall research capability of institutions in Hong Kong and promote internationalisation in the higher education sector by attracting the best students around the world to pursue their PhD programmes in Hong Kong, we consider that the target beneficiaries of the HKPFS at this stage are in line with its objective.

Yours sincerely,



(Wallace L. Au)
for Secretary for Education