

Funding of academic research projects by Research Grants Council

The Audit Commission ("Audit") conducted a review of funding of academic research projects by the Research Grants Council ("RGC").

2. Hong Kong adopts a dual funding system for research at universities funded by the University Grants Committee ("UGC") (hereinafter known as "the universities"). The Research Portion of UGC's recurrent grants¹ is disbursed to the universities as infrastructure funding to enable the universities to provide the human capital and the facilities necessary to carry out research, as well as to fund a certain level of research. The universities would also seek funding from RGC for the conduct of research projects on a competitive basis.

3. RGC operates under the aegis of UGC and functions as a non-statutory advisory body on research matters. It administers 19 funding schemes, and has established 10 committees and 18 panels to assist its work. The amount of funds granted under RGC funding schemes increased by 20% from \$1,074.3 million in 2011-2012 (all years mentioned hereinafter refer to academic years) to \$1,288.5 million in 2015-2016.

4. Hon Abraham SHEK Lai-him declared that he was currently a member of the Court and Council of the University of Hong Kong, and a member of the Court of The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

5. The Committee noted the following findings from the Director of Audit's Report:

- RGC's members are appointed by Secretary for Education under the delegated authority of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The Government has promulgated the six-year rule to ensure a healthy turnover of members of advisory and statutory bodies. However, out of the 48 RGC's members appointed in the period 2011-2012 to 2015-2016, eight of them had continuously served RGC for more than six years;

¹ Please see Chapter 2 of Part 7 of this Report for "Funding of universities by University Grants Committee".

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- RGC had not promulgated rules of procedure governing the conduct of meetings for the Council, its 10 committees and 18 panels. In the period 2013-2014 to 2015-2016, no minutes had been prepared for all the meetings of five committees and 10 panels;
- one of the terms of reference of RGC is to approve awards from funds for research. When Council meetings were held to approve the projects, only the total number of projects and the total amount of funding to be approved were provided to the Council. For six funding schemes, there was no documentary evidence showing that the Council had been provided with any information on individual projects. Furthermore, some projects were approved without documented declarations of interests;
- 23 of 56 Register of Interests Forms of Council members for 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 could not be located. In 2015-2016, 179 of the 211 panel members for the individual research schemes submitted or updated the Forms late, with delays averaging 53 days;
- Audit reviewed the 3 314 projects approved in the period 2013-2014 to 2015-2016 in respect of the General Research Fund, the Early Career Scheme and the Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme, and noted that for six projects, the principal investigators were four RGC members. However, no documentation was available showing that declarations of interests had been made before or during the meetings at which funding was awarded;
- universities are required to submit progress and completion reports for research projects funded by RGC. As at 31 May 2016, there were 973 completion reports received but not assessed, of which 678 (69.7%) reports had been received for over one year. In extreme cases, four reports had been submitted more than nine years ago but were still pending assessment;
- the Disciplinary Committee of RGC completed the investigation of five misconduct cases (e.g. plagiarism) discovered during the processing of the funding applications for the 2015-2016 exercise and made a recommendation to RGC for approval in December 2015. However, since RGC decided in June 2015 to separate the role of investigating allegations from the role of imposing penalties for substantiated cases, the recommendation on penalties for these five substantiated cases was

left to the newly formed Disciplinary Committee (Penalty). Consequently, up to August 2016, the five substantiated misconduct cases were still pending determination of the level of penalty;

- Audit examined 26 alleged misconduct cases handled by RGC and noted that the time taken from the discovery of the suspected misconduct cases to the notification of investigation results and the penalty to the universities concerned ranged from one to four years (averaging one-and-a-half years); and
- statistical information on research outputs (i.e. the total number of research outputs, the total number of referred research outputs and the total number of research outputs per academic staff) is submitted to UGC members by the UGC Secretariat annually. Audit noted that, from 2010-2011 to 2014-2015, the total number of research outputs of the universities decreased slightly by 2.6% and the overall research output per academic staff for the universities decreased by 9%, whereas research funding provided by UGC and RGC increased by 26%.

6. The Committee did not hold any public hearing on this subject. It conducted a visit to RGC on 13 December 2016 to better understand the administration of the RGC funding schemes. The Committee also asked for written responses regarding the appointment of RGC's members, the rules of procedure governing the conduct of meetings for RGC, its committees and panels, measures to improve the approval process of funding applications and the management of conflicts of interest, the monitoring of funded projects and the handling of alleged misconduct cases by RGC. The replies from **Secretary for Education** are in **Appendix 33** and the replies from **Secretary-General of UGC** are in **Appendices 34** and **35**.

Photograph 1



Members of the Committee were briefed on the administration of the RGC funding schemes by RGC Chairman.

7. The Committee wishes to be kept informed of the progress made in implementing the various recommendations made by Audit.