

Press release: Special funding to support SARS research

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## **BACKGROUND FACT SHEET**

### **RGC funding mechanism**

The Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (RGC) is an agency responsible for the distribution of public funding to support academic research undertaken by the academic staff of UGC-funded institutions. The Earmarked Research Grant of the RGC is allocated out of the total UGC budget for the higher education sector and grants are awarded by the RGC through a competitive process.

Under the current funding mechanism for higher education, funding is provided through a dual system of block grants and earmarked grants for institutions to undertake research. The triennial block grant allocated by the UGC supports research infrastructure and pays the salaries of research staff, whereas the Earmarked Research Grant of the RGC supports individual projects.

The fundamental funding policy of the RGC is that academic research must be supported over a broad front. As a matter of principle, institutions are given unfettered autonomy in venturing new areas and developing innovative research ideas.

### **Specialist Subject Panels**

The RGC is assisted by four specialist subject panels, namely the Biology and Medicine Panel, Engineering Panel, Physical Sciences Panel and Humanities, Social Sciences & Business Studies Panel. These panels consist of both local and overseas academics and are responsible for evaluation of grant applications received by the RGC.

### **Peer review process**

All applications for RGC grants go through a rigorous peer-review process for evaluation. Under the established process, research proposals are assessed by peers (experts) from the relevant disciplinary fields. The RGC at present operates a

network of more than 8,000 external referees to assist with the peer-review process. They are all well established academics in their own right and over 90% of them are from overseas. In the evaluation of research projects, academic merit is the overriding criterion, though the local relevance of the proposals and the potential for their application are also important considerations.

Peer-review is an important and effective tool for ensuring the quality standard of funded research projects. As an assessment agent, the RGC has been assisting the Education and Manpower Bureau with the evaluation of research proposals from the Open University of Hong Kong.

### Competitive Earmarked Research Grant (CERG)

The CERG exercise is the biggest and most important annual funding programme of the RGC and over 80% of the RGC's budget is allocated through this exercise. Funds are allocated in response to applications from the UGC-funded institutions and selection is based on peer reviews.

In the last (2002-2003) exercise, the RGC received a total 1,698 applications for CERG. Out of this number, the RGC funded 691 projects with \$428 million. For the Biology and Medicine area alone, the RGC supported 141 projects for \$144 million, representing more than 30% of the overall CERG budget.

For the special scheme for SARS, the expert group responsible for assessing applications is led by Professor Charles Bangham, the current Chariman of the RGC's Biology and Medicine Panel. Professor Bangham is the Head of the Department of Immunology at the Imperial College Faculty of Medicine and a renowned scientist in the field. He succeeded Professor Lap-Chee Tsui, currently Vice-Chancellor of The University of Hong Kong, as the Panel Chairman in 2002.

Professor Rosie Young is a former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of The University of Hong Kong and the Chairman of the Hong Kong Medical Council between 1988 and 1996. She will actively assist and participate in the planning and evaluation work in a personal capacity.

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