

Research Grants Council (RGC) Areas of Excellence Scheme

FAQs

What are the objectives of this scheme?

- ▶ The Areas of Excellence (AoE) Scheme aims to provide support to the UGC-funded universities to build upon their existing strengths and develop them into areas of excellence.
- ▶ The Scheme intends to support both basic and applied research of high academic merit. The scope of a proposal should be broad and long term, and at the same time sufficiently focused.

What are the objectives of this scheme? (continued)

- ▶ Research collaboration is one of the core requirements for a proposed AoE, and both inter-institutional collaboration projects and inter-disciplinary projects within the same university are encouraged. A successful proposal should involve a combination of research and teaching, and should aim to:
 - be inter-disciplinary (if it is based on one distinct discipline, address a wide range of specific problems);
 - address a broad range of inter-related problems;
 - show a clear sense of purpose, direction and priorities; and
 - focus on a number of well-defined problems.

Which discipline(s) is(are) covered in this scheme?

- ▶ The RGC does not impose any disciplinary priorities or preference on the proposals. However, proposals that fall within the scope of the topics of the Theme-based Research Scheme (TRS) should be submitted under the TRS. If the applicants choose to submit such proposals to the AoE Scheme, full justifications should be provided.

Who is eligible to apply (as a PC/PI)?

- ▶ Those who are eligible for the RGC General Research Fund (GRF) may submit application under the AoE Scheme. For details, please refer to the Explanatory Notes for GRF Application Form “GRF2” which is uploaded on the RGC website (<https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/rgc/form/GRF2.pdf>).
- ▶ Each applicant can submit one application as Project Coordinator in each round of the AoE Scheme exercise.
- ▶ To ensure that the PCs of major projects will spend reasonable time on project management, a PC of major projects (i.e. projects funded under the AoE Scheme and the Theme-based Research Scheme) should hold no more than two on-going projects at the same time.

Any eligibility requirement on Co-PI/Co-I?

- ▶ There is no eligibility requirement on Co-I.

What are the stages of application?

- ▶ PIs submit preliminary proposal
- ▶ Formal submission of preliminary proposal (paper mode)
- ▶ PIs submit full proposal
- ▶ Optional internal/external review
- ▶ Optional editing service
- ▶ Formal submission of full proposal (paper mode)
- ▶ Proposal update
- ▶ Selection interview
- ▶ “Right of Reply” procedure to allow project teams to respond to assessments made by external reviewers

What document(s) should be prepared before and/or during application stage?

► At Preliminary Proposal Stage:

- Preliminary Proposal
- Signed Undertaking
- VeriGuide scanning result
- Proposed budget split for 1st phase with non-CUHK collaborators
- An Excel file for Completing RGC's Critical Data File

► At Full Proposal Stage:

- Full Proposal
- VeriGuide scanning result
- Quotation list for services/purchase with a value exceeding HK\$ 0.2 million

What document(s) should be prepared before and/or during application stage? (continued)

▶ At Information Update Stage:

- Research Ethics / Safety / Data access Approval Letter(s) (if required)

▶ At Selection Stage:

- Written response to external reviewers' comments
- Presentation file(s) and written response to Panel Members' questions if shortlisted for attending selection interview

Is there an institutional quota for this scheme?

- ▶ There is no institutional quota for this scheme.

What is the range of funding support?

- ▶ Maximum duration: Eight years
- ▶ Project fund:
 - The ceiling of direct project cost to be awarded by RGC is \$60 million (\$40 million for the first phase and \$20 million for the second phase), excluding on-costs and PC allowance.
 - Proposals exceeding the direct project cost limit may be submitted if there are exceptional reasons and justifications.
 - There is no funding floor for the projects.
 - With reference to the past exercises, the typical funding per project is in the range of \$20 million to \$90 million, inclusive of on-costs and PC allowance.

What does the funding budget cover?

- ▶ Supporting Staff Costs
- ▶ Other Personnel
- ▶ Equipment Expenses
- ▶ Outsourcing Expenses of Research Work Outside Hong Kong
- ▶ Conference Expenses
- ▶ General Expenses
- ▶ Others

If PIs opt to submit without vetting by ORKTS, what will the minimum processing time be?

- ▶ At Preliminary Proposal Stage: Around 7 working days
- ▶ At Full Proposal Stage: Not applicable as internal review of full proposal and Panel's endorsement of the PC's declaration of research ethics / safety / data access approvals are required.

What are the assessment criteria?

- ▶ The criteria for assessing proposals are grouped under the following four primary “filters”:
 - academic excellence, impact and relevance of the proposals;
 - credentials of the project teams;
 - clear strategy; and
 - governance structure of the proposed projects.
- ▶ Each of the four “filters” carries the same weight. Details are described in the template and the assessment criteria in Annexes C and D (https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/aoe/how_to_apply.html).

Is it possible to include/exclude specific potential reviewers? If yes, how can I file a request?

- ▶ If, for any reason of possible conflict of interest, the PC wants to exclude a person from reviewing his / her application, he / she should submit the request in writing separately through ORKTS setting out the full circumstances and justification.
- ▶ Such request should not be made under any section of the full proposal and appendices, which in its entirety will be sent to external reviewers for assessment.
- ▶ In all cases, the RGC reserves the right of final decision on the selection and invitation of external reviewers having regard to the merits involved.

When will grantor announce the funding result?

- ▶ It is expected that starting from the 2022/23 exercise, the AoE funding result will be aligned with that of the Theme-based Research Scheme. Further details will be available in the call circular for the upcoming exercise.

Is there any support available for applicants of this scheme?

- ▶ External review service fee
- ▶ Editing fee
- ▶ Institutional matching
- ▶ At Preliminary Stage:
 - Potential applicants can obtain application materials of funded projects archived at ORKTS for reference when preparing their applications. They may also get the contact method of the past awardees from the ORKTS's archive if they wish to seek advice and tips from past awardees direct.

Is there any support available for applicants of this scheme? (continued)

- ▶ At Full Proposal Stage:
 - The following support are provided to applicants who have shortlisted for submission of full proposal: 1. Funding support for academic editing: ORKTS Coordinator will help line up with external editors to provide free editing services if sufficient time is provided (details: <https://www.orkts.cuhk.edu.hk/research-and-funding/editing-services>) 2. Internal review by relevant experts, e.g. members of CUHK Research Committee, past large grant awardees, etc. 3. Provision of funding support for inviting external reviewers to review the full proposal 4. Provision of institutional support letter signed by VC At Selection Interview Stage: For project teams being shortlisted to attend RGC's Selection Interview, Grants Team of ORKTS will assist the Research Committee to organize mock interview so as to help the project teams to better prepare for the interview.

Both AoE Scheme and Theme-based Research Scheme (TRS) support large-scale and long-term research projects. Which scheme should I apply for?

- ▶ The scope of an AoE proposal should be broad and long term, and at the same time sufficiently focused. Unlike TRS, AoE has no pre-determined themes or topics. Proposals that fall within the scope of the TRS should be submitted under the TRS. If the applicants choose to submit such proposals to the AoE Scheme, full justifications should be provided. The RGC reserves the right to transfer such proposals to the TRS. In that case, applicants should resubmit the proposals under TRS in the coming exercise and follow the related application.
- ▶ For details of the research themes and grand challenge topics of TRS, please refer to the call circular on the RGC's website at https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rgc/funding_opport/trs/call_letter.html

Is institutional matching contribution required for this Scheme?

- ▶ Yes, institutions are required to make monetary contributions on:
 - 50% of the total equipment cost (irrespective of the number of items) if the total amount of equipment expenses is \$2 million or above; and
 - 10% of the total approved budget, inclusive of the direct project cost (excluding the equipment cost if the total amount of it is \$2 million or above), on-costs and PC allowance.
- ▶ The University will arrange for matching funds on the basis of actual amount to be received by CUHK. As for the arrangement of matching contribution by other participating institutions, the applicant should liaise with the project team members concerned to ensure that the RGC's mandatory matching requirements are met.