

Incentives for Research at CUHK

(An Interview with Professor Henry N.C. Wong, Chairman, Research Committee)

Interviewer: Prof. Wong, as Chairman of the University's Research Committee, you play a very important role in developing the University's research policies. One of the most important aspects of this work must surely be providing adequate support for researchers at CUHK. I know that the University has introduced a number of research incentives, and that some of its policies are geared towards supporting research. Would you say that researchers are widely aware of these initiatives?

Prof. Wong: No, I would not. I am sure that a minority of researchers know what we have on offer, but I don't think that this knowledge is widely shared. One of my more onerous responsibilities as Chairman of the Research Committee is listening to complaints that the University does not provide incentives for its researchers. I am sometimes told that we love to penalise researchers who do not come up to scratch, but are less interested in encouraging them to pursue excellence.

As any restaurant manager will tell you, customers tend to take good service for granted and to complain at the slightest inadequacy. This is a simple fact of human nature. We do not notice when things are running smoothly. We only notice when the system goes wrong. And what holds true for restaurants also holds true for universities. Here at CUHK, our research policies attract rather more criticism than praise. This is fine. I have no problem with constructive criticism. If something is wrong with our system, we should indeed fix it. But I have noticed that some of the complaints I have received are a little unfair.

Interviewer: Would you like to elaborate on that comment?

Prof. Wong: It is sometimes claimed that we do not provide any support or encouragement for our researchers. I am afraid that this is simply not true. Some researchers may feel that the University does not do enough to support or encourage research. That is a legitimate subject for debate, and I would welcome such debate. But we should first get the facts clear. As the practitioner of an exact science, I have always believed that our first duty is to set out the evidence for a proposition before debating it. I think it might be very useful if I were to describe, with a minimum of technical exposition, the incentives the University provides for its researchers. We can then, if we wish, debate their adequacy.

Interviewer: What are the main areas in which the University provides support for its researchers?

Prof. Wong: Our incentives, like those of many other universities, consist basically of money (or help in attracting money) and honours. I would like to start by talking about money. In this respect, perhaps the most important incentive scheme the University runs is the Focused Investments Scheme. This substantial funding initiative is divided into four main categories, Schemes A to D. Funding under Scheme A (Major Areas), I'm afraid, is not up for grabs, as the money has already been allocated to key areas of strategic research investment, but important amounts of money are available for distribution under the other three Schemes (Specialized Areas, Groups and Individuals, and One-off Support). Researchers can in most cases apply for funding either as individuals, or through their academic units. All applications are carefully scrutinised, and the size of the grant is determined by the Resource Allocation Committee.

We have put aside HK\$10 million a year for Scheme B (Specialized Areas) projects. The University supports these projects in order to develop its actual and potential areas of strength and to raise its profile both inside and outside China. Accordingly, it only invites applications for Scheme B funding from groups or individuals of national or international stature, who are likely to be able to attract major external research grants and donations.

We have also allocated HK\$4 million a year for Scheme C (Groups and Individuals) projects. Scheme C, a complementary source of funding to Scheme B, is aimed at groups and individuals who have achieved a high level of excellence and have the potential for achieving even greater impact and excellence. Funding is meant to support activities that external grants normally fail to take into account, and grants are normally limited to HK\$1 million per project.

Finally, we have allocated HK\$5 million a year for Scheme D (One-off Support). The aim here is to enhance quality and build capacity in scholarship, and the scheme is designed to respond to exceptional rather than routine requests. Applications are only accepted from academic units, and the Scheme does not support research projects or recurrent expenditure. Typically, such funding might be used to enable a department to employ a distinguished scholar, purchase better research equipment, or fund start-up costs for a national centre at CUHK. We also use the Scheme to encourage collaboration with mainland researchers and to support high-impact research, by providing matching funding for 973/863 projects and by awarding research grants of up to HK\$100,000 to researchers who have published in leading academic journals.

Interviewer: I can see that these incentives will help researchers already established at the University to pursue important research goals. Does the University do anything to attract fresh research talent?

Prof. Wong: Yes, it does. We are very anxious to attract able researchers to the University, and we have introduced two schemes to make it easier to recruit promising research staff. We have established a central budget to enable departments to appoint more Research Assistant Professors, which supports the creation of 30 posts a year, and meets half the cost of their appointment for a period of up to three years. We have also introduced a scheme to support the appointment of Postdoctoral Fellows, under which funding equivalent to 43% of the total appointment cost for up to two years is provided for each appointment.

Interviewer: Every year the University vies for grant funding with Hong Kong's other tertiary educational institutions, in an increasingly competitive climate. Does the University provide incentives to encourage researchers to apply for funds from the Research Grants Council (RGC) and other funding sources?

Prof. Wong: Yes, it does. One of the most important sources of external grant funding is the RGC's General Research Fund (GRF, grants from this source used to be known as Competitive Earmarked Research Grants). We are anxious to secure as much funding as possible from this source, and under our Research Incentive Scheme, every Principal Investigator of a successful GRF project will receive a grant of HK\$20,000 as a top-up fund. Besides providing direct incentives of this kind, we also provide funding to enable Principal Investigators to improve the content of their GRF applications by seeking an external review, and to improve the style and presentation by using an external editing service. As far as the editing of GRF applications is concerned, the University has recently appointed an Academic Editor within the Research Administration Office, one of whose main duties will be to edit GRF and other external grant applications. Measures of this kind that improve the quality of our grant applications translate directly into a higher success rate and more money all round.

We also encourage researchers to compete for funds from the RGC's Collaborative Research Fund (formerly Central Allocation). In 2003 we introduced a Group Research Scheme to fund successful Central Allocation projects, or those shortlisted by the RGC but not ultimately funded for improving their proposals for future bids. Projects of the latter kind are eligible for a grant of up to HK\$500,000. We also provided grants of up to HK\$250,000 to a number of shortlisted applicants to assist with out-of-HK liaison expenses, to help them make a more convincing RGC presentation.

Interviewer: Incentives like these are designed to help researchers win funding. Essentially, they enable researchers to work on projects that they might not otherwise have been able to do. Are there other areas in which the University makes financial assistance available for its researchers?

Prof. Wong: Yes. We encourage our researchers to present papers at conferences and seminars both in Hong Kong and abroad, by providing conference grants that cover their air fare, registration fee and daily expenses.

Interviewer: So far you have been talking mainly about financial incentives for researchers. Does the University provide any other incentives?

Prof. Wong: Yes, it does. It recognises and honours outstanding research. Let me say a few words about our research awards. I noted earlier that our incentives consisted either of money or honours, and up to now I have been talking mainly about money. We also delight to shower honours on our researchers—and not just by promoting deserving staff members, although it could be argued that promotion is both a very real incentive and a very real honour. Every year the University makes a number of Research Excellence and Young Researcher Awards to recognise and encourage outstanding research performance. These awards, as a formal tribute from the University, undoubtedly carry a certain amount of prestige and look good on a researcher's CV. But they are more than simply a public pat on the back for successful researchers. Award winners also receive grants of HK\$100,000 or HK\$200,000 to help them with their research.

Interviewer: Do you think the incentives you have mentioned enable the University to achieve its research goals?

Prof. Wong: Well, I think I have said enough to demonstrate that CUHK does indeed provide incentives for its researchers. I will leave it to the researchers themselves to decide whether these incentives achieve their aims. Some researchers, no doubt, may think that we should be doing more in certain areas, and I would welcome constructive suggestions for improvements. As you have rightly suggested, the incentives I have mentioned were introduced to help the University to further its general aspirations and to achieve its stated research goals. It is in all our interests that they succeed in doing so.