

Review of the Mechanism for Considering Applications for Research Projects under the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF)

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to invite Members' endorsement to the guidelines and vetting mechanism for research projects applications proposed by the Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee (RPVSC).

Background

2. The RPVSC under the ECF Committee vets applications for research projects on topics related to environmental protection and conservation. Over the years, it has funded different types of research projects in the area of environmental protection and conservation, ranging from the extent/impact of environmental problems to public attitude towards environmental issues, and the application of environmental technologies as well as conferences. To further promote the use of ECF for researches on environmental protection and conservation, RPVSC Members considered it necessary for clearer priorities to be set in attracting research funding applications so as to cope with the Government's policy priorities and to more distinctly differentiate the positioning of ECF research projects from those funded by Research Grant Council (RGC) and Innovation and Technology Fund (ITF). The RPVSC discussed the matters at the meetings held on 10 September and 27 November 2009 and agreed the following principles:

Prioritizing Criteria

Objectives of funding support for Research Projects under ECF

3. RPVSC projects have a clear and distinct focus on the areas of environmental protection and conservation. RPVSC agreed that priority should be given to projects or studies whose outcome will have potential for general application in the fields concerned to enhance their performance in environmental protection, as well as those which will contribute to environmental protection and nature conservation. In this regard, the project applicant, particularly those involving large project sum, should engage the

relevant stakeholders (e.g. potential users or beneficiaries of study results) to solicit their input and support for the project. For example, if the project involves technology that may be adopted in environmental industries, the project proponent should preferably obtain an expression of interest from the relevant trade/industrial groups that technologies under study may likely be adopted in their operations if the project confirms the viability and feasibility of the technology. Where possible, the project proponent should have in place a continuing engagement and regular dialogues with the stakeholders during the projects to ensure the application of study results.

Priority Research Themes

4. The RPVSC will identify priority research themes on a bi-yearly basis so as to focus resources to build knowledge and talents on areas of priority. Drawing reference from government policy priorities, the following broad themes have been agreed at the meeting held on 27 November 2009:

Proposed Priority Research Areas (for 2010 and 2011)

- (a) Climate Change Impact, Assessment and Implication, Adaptation and Mitigation, as well as carbon footprint analysis
- (b) Green Transport Technologies, Application and Performance
- (c) Ecological and Geo Conservation

Other possible themes (Not Exhaustive)

- (d) Regional/ Local Air Quality
- (e) Improvement of Indoor Air Quality
- (f) Wastewater treatment processes/systems for ecosystem enhancement, or pollution reduction or conservation
- (g) Risk-based approach for toxic chemicals/priority pollutants
- (h) Waste separation, reduction, reuse and recycling

5. The RPVSC would proactively reach out to academic institutions to introduce the ECF and its priority areas. The RPVSC would normally set three research themes as priority. The priority themes aim to be indicative of research themes whose merits have been affirmed by RPVSC, drawing reference from government policy priority. Applications for research projects outside the scope of priority research themes would still be considered on individual merits.

Enhanced Vetting and Monitoring Procedures

6. When considering the merits of projects of higher project value, the RPVSC agreed to lay down suitably stringent vetting and monitoring procedures for projects of large value and to streamline those for small-scale projects. It was agreed to finetune the demarcation of project scales, with corresponding vetting and monitoring mechanisms, as follows –

Level 1: project value up to \$500,000

Level 2: project value more than \$500,000 but up to \$2M

Level 3: project value more than \$2M

Level of Application	Vetting Procedures	Monitoring of Progress	Project Completion
Level 1	Relevant government departments' assessment on the support worthiness + Endorsement from applicant institution (e.g. applications from universities should route through the research offices)	Half-yearly progress reports and interim payments based on satisfactory progress of project	Completion report and final payment based on satisfactory completion of project
Level 2	Ditto + at least 2 external expert assessments	Ditto	Ditto + Independent evaluation + Presentation of Project Result to RPVSC

Level 3	Ditto + 1 presentation to RPVSC + RPVSC to co-opt experts to assist the vetting process as necessary + 1 presentation to ECFC (subject to RPVSC's recommendation)	Ditto + Annual presentation or submission to RPVSC	Ditto + Presentation of Project Result to ECFC
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7. It may be possible for the project proponents to submit their research projects to different funding secretariats at different times or even simultaneously. To forestall possible double funding to similar/same research projects, the Secretariat of RPVSC would maintain the existing practice of consulting the Secretariats of RGC and ITF before putting forward funding applications for discussion by the RPVSC so that Members of RPVSC would take note of such information in considering the merits of each individual proposal and its overall support worthiness for funding purpose.

Implementation of the New Mechanism

8. The above proposed mechanism (i.e. prioritizing criteria for assessing research projects as well as the enhanced vetting and monitoring procedures) would be implemented on 1 April 2010. Applications received and being processed before 1 April 2010 would not be subject to the new mechanism so as to ensure smooth operation and fair treatment.

Advice Sought

9. Members are invited to endorse the prioritizing criteria for assessing research projects as stipulated in paragraphs 3-5, the vetting and monitoring procedures as stipulated in paragraphs 6 to 7 and the implementation date of 1 April 2010 as stipulated in paragraph 8 above. After that, the Secretariat would revise the guides to applications and application forms accordingly.

Secretariat, Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee
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