

Partnership Research Programme

Funding and Administrative Guidelines for Successful Applicants



**Innovation and
Technology Commission**

February 2021

The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

(1) INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This document sets out the general funding and administrative guidelines for research and development (R&D) projects funded under the Partnership Research Programme (PRP) of the Innovation and Technology Fund (ITF).

(2) PROJECT AGREEMENT AND PROJECT ACCOUNT

2.1 Project Agreement

- 2.1.1 After funding approval has been obtained from the Commissioner for Innovation and Technology (CIT), the lead applicant and industry co-applicant should sign an agreement with the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (“the Government”) before commencing the project.

2.2 Project Coordinator

- 2.2.1 The project coordinator is responsible for overseeing the project generally; monitoring its expenditure and ensuring the proper usage of project funds in accordance with the approved budget and other guidelines and instructions set for the projects; liaising with and answering all enquiries/requests raised by the Innovation and Technology Commission (ITC) for information and clarification on all aspects of the project; and attending progress meetings on the project.
- 2.2.2 The project coordinator must have all outstanding reports and/or audited accounts of all other ITF-funded R&D projects¹ under his/her purview submitted to ITC before the commencement of a new project.
- 2.2.3 In order to facilitate timely use of ITF commitment, the project coordinator should report to ITC within 4 weeks if the industry partner fails to contribute on or before the due date specified in the project agreement. ITC reserves the right to terminate the project if the concerned sponsorship is still outstanding after 5 months of the due date specified in the project agreement.

2.3 Project Account and Interest

- 2.3.1 The lead applicant, viz. R&D Centres or designated local public research institutes², should open a separate risk-free interest-bearing bank account (project bank account) with a licensed bank registered under the Banking Ordinance (Cap. 155) under its name specifically for processing all receipts and payments of all ITF projects, and assign a unique account code specifically for processing all receipts and payments of each project.

¹ Including R&D projects under the Innovation and Technology Support Programme, the Mainland-Hong Kong Joint Funding Scheme, the Guangdong-Hong Kong Technology Cooperation Funding Scheme, the University-Industry Collaboration Programme, the PRP, the Midstream Research Programme for Universities, and the Public Sector Trial Scheme.

² They are local universities (including all University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded institutions), self-financing degree-awarding institutions registered under the Post-Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320), the Hong Kong Productivity Council, the Vocational Training Council, the Clothing Industry Training Authority and the Hong Kong Institute of Biotechnology.

- 2.3.2 Unless otherwise specified in the project agreements, all interest income generated in the risk-free interest-bearing project bank account should be credited to the project account and returned to the Government upon completion of the project or termination of the project agreement in accordance with the percentage specified in the agreement.

2.4 ***Books and Records***

- 2.4.1 Accounting on an accrual basis should be adopted for all PRP projects. Unless otherwise approved by ITC, expenditure could only be charged to the project account after the equipment and goods have been received or services delivered. Sponsorship and all other income derived from the project during the project period, budgeted or not, should form part of the project income and should be used solely for the project until its completion or termination. All the income and expenditure of a project must be received/accrued and expended (paid)/accrued respectively in accordance with the basis of each expenditure item in the approved budget.
- 2.4.2 The Director of Audit may carry out value for money studies on any organisation in receipt of ITF grants. ITC reserves the right to require the lead applicant to return any misspent amount together with interest income accrued to the Government.

2.5 ***Auditing Requirements***

- 2.5.1 The project coordinator is required to submit annual and/or final audited accounts to assure the Government that the project funds are applied to the project in accordance with the approved budget and in compliance with the terms and conditions for ITF projects. The annual and/or final audited accounts should be reported by independent auditors who must be Certified Public Accountants holding a practising certificate registered under the Professional Accountants Ordinance (Cap. 50) (the Auditors) and conducted in accordance with the latest version of the Notes for Auditors of Recipient Organisations (the Notes) issued by ITC.
- 2.5.2 The lead applicant should specify in the engagement letter for the employment of the Auditors that they should strictly follow the requirements and the specimen stipulated in the latest version of the Notes in conducting reasonable assurance engagements and preparing auditors' reports for annual and/or final accounts of the project. The engagement letter should also specify that CIT, the Director of Audit and his authorised representatives should have the right to communicate with the Auditors on matters concerning the annual and/or final audited accounts and the supporting statements.
- 2.5.3 The lead applicant is required to make available to the Auditors all information, documents and explanations relating to the project.

2.6 *Change Requests*

- 2.6.1 An approved project is required to be carried out strictly in accordance with the final proposal appended to the project agreement. Any modification, amendment or addition to the project or the agreement, including change of the project commencement or completion date³, project coordinator or key equipment, scope, methodology, budget or cashflow projection, will require prior approval by ITC. Unless otherwise agreed by CIT, change of the industry co-applicant should not be allowed. The project coordinator should inform ITC well in advance by submitting a change request electronically through the Innovation and Technology Commission Funding Administrative System II (ITCFAS).
- 2.6.2 Where the cumulative deviation of expenditure for a category does not exceed 30% of the original approved budget and does not result in any increase in the total approved project cost and the total amount of ITF grant requested, prior approval from ITC is not required. However, any virement as a result and the underlying reasons should be reported in the relevant progress report(s) and/or final report. If the deviation exceeds 30% of the original approved budget, prior approval from ITC is required and such request should be made electronically through the ITCFAS.
- 2.6.3 As a general rule, transfer of budgeted expenditure for patent registration to other cost items is not allowed.

(3) **PROJECT EXPENDITURE**

3.1 *ITF Funding*

- 3.1.1 All project funds (including ITF grants, sponsorship and other income derived from the project during the project period) must be used exclusively for the project and incurred within the project period. It may be used for covering -
- (a) the costs of manpower employed specifically for carrying out the project;
 - (b) new equipment procured specifically for carrying out the project; and
 - (c) other direct costs which are specifically incurred for carrying out the project.
- 3.1.2 In general, up to 50% of the approved total project cost (net of overheads) can be incurred in the Mainland. When certain R&D tasks need to be conducted outside Hong Kong (other than the Mainland), prior approval from ITC must be sought with justifications.

Manpower

- 3.1.3 Project funding can generally be used to cover the salary of project staff, including employer's mandatory contribution to the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF), contract gratuities, annual salary adjustment (excluding increments and promotions) and general fringe benefits (e.g. medical) in accordance with the established mechanism of the relevant R&D Centres and designated local public research institutes.

³ The commencement and completion dates are specified in the project agreement.

- 3.1.4 Specifically, project funds cannot be used to cover allowances such as expenses on housing (including nominal rental for quarters), education, training, passage and travelling⁴, food, insurance, severance pay, overtime and untaken leave, etc.
- 3.1.5 Except for clause 3.1.6 below, the lead applicant or the industry co-applicant in general must not charge the salary of their existing staff against the project unless this is a deployment absolutely necessary and essential for the project and ITC's prior approval has been obtained. This principle should apply irrespective of whether the relevant service/work is carried out within or outside normal working hours of the person concerned.
- 3.1.6 In order to assist local universities and industry to conduct projects in the natural science or engineering fields that respond to industrial needs and with good development potential in the longer term, funding can be provided to engage a distinguished university researcher as the chairholder to lead a particular project for a finite duration. Salary of the chairholder⁵ is allowed to be charged under manpower expenditure. The chairholder is expected to accept a light teaching load and devote no less than 90% of his/her working time to conduct the R&D work of the project during the project period.
- 3.1.7 Funding for studentship will also be provided for the industry co-applicant to engage graduate students to undertake research on a specific issue. The student researcher(s) must have already registered for a higher degree in a local university and the university will provide teaching guidance for the student(s) in handling the project. The maximum contribution from the ITF to the monthly studentship for each graduate student amounts to \$7,500.

Equipment

- 3.1.8 Cost of new equipment for implementing the project can be charged to the project account. In general, hire-purchase of equipment is not allowed. If the new equipment is to be shared among different projects with its cost charged on a pro-rata basis under each project, the lead applicant is required to maintain a record on the usage of the equipment by the concerned projects for cost allocation purpose. Maintenance cost of the existing equipment can be charged against the project account on a pro-rata basis if a record on the usage of the equipment is properly maintained.
- 3.1.9 Specifically, project funds cannot be used to cover -
- (a) unless absolutely necessary and agreed by CIT, charges/time cost for use of existing equipment owned by the lead applicant/implementing organisation and/or the industry co-applicant;

⁴ Travelling if fully justified and at reasonable cost (e.g. economy class fare only if applicable) that are of direct relevance to the project can be included in the budget **subject to a cap of no more than 5% of the total amount of funds requested from the ITF**. These should be itemised and put under the category of "Other Direct Costs" in the budget of the application proposal for ITC's approval. Unless exceptionally justified, the number of participant per trip should be limited to no more than one person from the project team, members of which shall be from the lead applicant or the implementing organisation(s) (if applicable).

⁵ The salary of the chairholder should generally not be more than his/her current salary.

- (b) depreciation/amortisation or provisions not representing actual expenses incurred; and
- (c) general office and IT equipment.

3.1.10 Subject to ITC's prior approval and the following general principles, any piece of equipment for the project purchased using the project funds may be installed in the facilities of supporting parties located outside Hong Kong -

- (a) the equipment remains under the ownership of the lead applicant for at least two additional years thereafter;
- (b) the equipment is installed in a university or a public research institute (not a private company); and
- (c) the cost of the equipment concerned should not account for a dominant part of the equipment budget (in general, the total cost of all equipment to be installed outside Hong Kong should be less than 25% of the total equipment budget, as a substantial part of the R&D activities is required to be conducted in Hong Kong).

3.1.11 For projects undertaken by R&D Centres where the industry sponsorship covers less than 50% of the total project cost, if considered necessary, ITC may require the relevant Centre to transfer any equipment costing HK\$500,000 or above purchased under the project to the Government or another party within a period of two years after project completion or termination.

3.1.12 As a general rule, the lead applicant is required to keep all equipment costing less than HK\$500,000 purchased for the project for at least two years after project completion or termination of the project agreement and should make such equipment available for ITC and the Director of Audit's inspection upon request.

3.1.13 The title to all equipment procured will vest with the lead applicant. The industry co-applicant, however, has the right to use the equipment during the project period. Both the lead applicant and industry co-applicant should make the equipment available for ITC and the Director of Audit's inspection upon request within two years after project completion or termination of the project agreement.

Other Direct Costs

3.1.14 Project funds can be used to cover -

- (a) External consultancy and purchase of consumables and technology licences.
- (b) Patent registration fee for functional inventions directly relating to the project may also be included in the budget. The above notwithstanding, the patent registration fee charged to the project account should not exceed HK\$250,000.

- (c) The maximum funding support allowed for an annual/final audited accounts of a project costing less than HK\$1 million, between HK\$1 million and HK\$5 million and more than HK\$5 million should not be more than HK\$8,000, HK\$14,000 and HK\$20,000 respectively.

3.1.15 As a general rule, services provided by the lead applicant, industry co-applicant and/or the implementing organisation (e.g. inter-departmental charges for universities) are not allowed to be charged to the ITF. ITC may however consider approving the charging of such services to the ITF project account on the following basis -

- (a) prior application is made to ITC on grounds of operational efficiency, reliability and quality of services, etc.;
- (b) the services are not general or administrative support in nature, such as personnel, accounting, security, cleansing, library services, etc. as listed above. Examples of allowable services are printing and testing services. Other services should be considered on a case-by-case basis; and
- (c) the charges should only be at cost.

Administrative Overheads

3.1.16 Administrative overheads up to 15% of the approved project cost (net of overheads) can be included in the project budget. The industry co-applicant is required to pay its share of administrative overheads (in the form of cash) proportional to its contribution to the project.

Unallowable Cost Items

3.1.17 Project funds cannot be used to cover -

- (a) building facilities (including office, laboratory, accommodation) - rates, rental, renovation, and operation, repair and maintenance expenses;
- (b) costs of setting up office or forming association/consortium;
- (c) utilities - charges for electricity, gas, water, telephone and fax;
- (d) transport - shuttle bus services and home to workplace travelling expenses;
- (e) general administration and office expenses;
- (f) staff-related costs - provident fund handling charges, staff training and development costs and staff facilities;
- (g) entertainment expenses, and any prizes, either in the form of cash or other types of souvenirs;

- (h) advertisement (except for staff recruitment);
- (i) organisation of trade missions and participation fees at study/trade missions for individuals/companies;
- (j) charges for non-R&D services (e.g. accounting, personnel, procurement, library, security, cleansing, legal, and central and departmental administrative support) provided by the lead applicant/industry co-applicant or their contractors/agents;
- (k) costs related to prior/subsequent year(s)/period(s) adjustment(s); and
- (l) capital financing expenses, e.g. mortgage and interest on loans/overdrafts.

3.1.18 The list of unallowable cost items for manpower, equipment and other direct costs set out above is not exhaustive. The lead applicant should consult ITC if they have any doubt whether an item could be charged to a project account.

(4) PROJECT MONITORING AND DISBURSEMENT OF GRANTS

4.1 *Progress and Final Reports*

4.1.1 Upon project completion or termination of the project agreement, the lead applicant is required to submit progress report(s) and a final report **strictly** against the stated milestones for approval according to the reporting schedule as set out in the project agreement or any subsequent revised submission schedule(s) as prescribed by ITC. All reports should be prepared in the standard format and submitted through ITCFAS. Any non-compliance of reporting requirements (e.g. delay in submission of report(s), report quality not to the satisfaction of ITC) may affect the lead applicant's future applications for funding support from ITC. If the lead applicant has encountered difficulties and an extension of the report submission is required, he or she should seek prior agreement from ITC. Upon ITC's request, the lead applicant is also required to provide timely clarification and/or supplementary information to substantiate the content of the report. ITC may organise visits or progress review meetings to examine the progress of a project.

4.2 *Project Steering Committee*

4.2.1 A steering committee shall be established to monitor the project progress, endorse progress report(s)/final report, and financial statements and audited accounts of the project before their submission to ITC. The committee should comprise representatives of the lead applicant, industry co-applicant and the implementing organisation and should meet at least once every three months. Representatives from the lead applicant should not be directors/shareholders/management team members of the industry co-applicant. The lead applicant and the industry co-applicant should jointly submit to ITC regular progress report(s) and/or a final report on the project, including the minutes of the steering committee meetings.

4.3 ***Disbursement of Grants***

4.3.1 Disbursement of grants to the lead applicant will be made by instalments, which will be contingent upon, among others -

- (a) production of receipt(s) or other record confirming payment of industry sponsorship and other sources of financial contribution to the project within the specified timeframe, if any; and
- (b) satisfactory progress has been made in the previous reporting period, e.g. the project is able to meet the prescribed milestones and ITC is satisfied with the progress, etc.

4.4 ***Final Report***

4.4.1 Upon receipt of the final report, ITC will assess the effectiveness of the project by comparing the project results against its original objectives and targets (both technical and financial) as set out in the project proposal. Upon request, the lead applicant is required to provide timely clarification and/or additional information to substantiate the content of the final report, or be invited to present the project results.

4.5 ***Audited Accounts***

4.5.1 The lead applicant is required to submit to ITC annual and/or final audited accounts. The financial statements for progress report(s) and annual audited accounts of each project can be prepared on either *accrual* or *cash* accounting basis. However, the financial statements for the final report and the final audited accounts of each project have to be prepared on *accrual* basis.

- (a) Annual audited accounts made up to 31 March each year should be submitted on or before 30 June of that particular year. The first annual audited accounts may cover more than 12 months but not more than 18 months. The last annual audited accounts can be waived if it covers not more than 18 months.
- (b) Final audited accounts covering the period from project commencement date to project completion date or termination date of the project agreement should be submitted within three months from the approval date of the Final Report or termination date of the project agreement. (For details, please refer to the reporting and submission schedules as specified in the project agreement.)

4.5.2 If the lead applicant has encountered difficulties and an extension of the audited accounts submission is required, he or she should seek prior agreement from ITC. Upon ITC's request, the lead applicant is also required to provide timely clarification and/or supplementary information to substantiate the content of the audited accounts.

4.6 ***Suspension or Termination of Funding Support***

- 4.6.1 ITC may terminate a project or withhold the disbursement of ITF grants at any time for reasons which include, inter alia, overdue sponsorship, a lack of progress of the project against the agreed milestones, slim chance of completion of the project in accordance with the project proposal, the original objectives of the project being no longer relevant to the needs of the industry as a result of material change in the circumstances, the objectives and relevance of the project having been overtaken by events, or ITC seeing fit to terminate the project in public interest.
- 4.6.2 The financial position reported in each annual and/or final audited accounts should tie in with the technical progress/results of that reporting period(s)/year(s).

4.7 ***Return of Residual Funds***

- 4.7.1 Upon project completion or termination and submission of the final audited accounts, or on a date as specified by ITC, the lead applicant should return to the Government its portion of the residual funds and any interest income (calculated in proportion to the percentage specified in the project agreement) remaining in the project account.

4.8 ***Post-Project Evaluation Report***

- 4.8.1 The lead applicant should submit a post-project evaluation report to ITC one-year after project completion to report on the efforts in publicising and technology transfer of the project deliverables and to provide quantitative measurement on the adoption of the project results by the industry. The report should be prepared in the format specified by ITC. ITC will take into account the outcomes of the R&D work and the post-project evaluation in considering future applications from the same applicant or the same project coordinator.

(5) **PROCUREMENT AND RECRUITMENT**

5.1 ***Procurement Procedures***

- 5.1.1 The lead applicant and the implementing organisation(s) (if applicable) should ensure that all procurements for goods and services are carried out in an open and fair manner and must comply with the procurement procedures as specified in the project agreement. Any exceptions will require the approval of ITC.

5.2 ***Hiring of Project Staff***

- 5.2.1 The lead applicant is required to abide by the principle of openness and competitiveness in hiring staff for the approved project. The project staff so employed should not be directors/shareholders/management team members of the industry co-applicant.

(6) DISSEMINATION OF R&D RESULTS

6.1 *Dissemination of R&D Results and Acknowledgement*

6.1.1 The lead applicant should provide ITC with information about the project (including project title, implementation schedule, requested ITF amount, and key project staff, etc.) as well as the project events, if any, so that ITC may publish it on the ITF website.

6.1.2 Acknowledgement of ITF support must appear on all equipment, facilities, publicity/media events related to an ITF project, as well as in publications arising from the project. The following disclaimer should also be included in any publications and media events related to an ITF project -

“Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material/event (or by members of the project team) do not reflect the views of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region or the Innovation and Technology Commission.”