

HONG KONG PHD FELLOWSHIP SCHEME (HKPFS) CLASS BY ADEAGBO MUJEEB

Thank you all for having me here today, and special thanks to the Group Admin Team. May Allah purify their intentions and grant them goodness in this life and the Aakhirah.

Na'am, inshaAllah, the focus of the session shall be on the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS). In the course of my discussion, I'll be touching issues relating to the preparation stage, during the application period and after the application.

As much as possible, I'll try to stick to the scope as explained by the Admins; nonetheless, I might need to rove around when necessary. Also, you may come in with your questions during the session; or wait till the Q&A part. It's up to you.

This may be a very long session...I promise you it won't be boring inshaAllah.

BismiLla

1.0 BACKGROUND

The HKPFS is supported by the Research Grant Council (RGC) of HKSAR, and allows applicants to apply to 8 UGC-funded universities. Applicants shall choose **AT MOST 2 research focuses at one or two universities.**

2.0 PREPARING

2.1 PLANNING AHEAD FOR APPLICATIONS

A very good way to start preparing is to use an excel worksheet or create folders. Consider creating an excel file as a checklist for your targets. I suggest that you use this checklist to examine all applications and to keep tab on your progress. Even if the results are rejections, keep the data for reference purposes. This is not only for HKPS but also other scholarship applications.

I propose that you include these items as headings (you may increase the list as you see befitting).

- a. University/universities
- b. Scholarship program
- c. Discipline
- d. Scholarship benefits
- e. Application method
- f. Does the scholarship match my expectations of a postgraduate studies?
- g. Application fee
- h. Application progress/status
- i. Application start date

- j. Application deadline
- k. Decision of selection panel
- l. Specific details
- m. General Requirements
- n. Proof of language proficiency/ int'l exams and tests requirements
- o. Requirements fulfilment status
- p. Application information link
- q. Number of referees
- r. Referee report completion status
- s. Things to improve on for better application
- t. Contact of a previous winner

* **General Preparation:** General information on HKPFS is provided on <https://cerg1.ugc.edu.hk/hkpfs/index.html> and on universities' websites.

2.2 DESTINATIONS?? HONG KONG??

Your preferred destination is amongst the most important factors that determine the necessary preparations and requisites that'll guide your applications. Before deciding to start applications, some of the important things to consider about choosing your preferred destinations are:

- A. Your future expectations
- B. Your plan about working conditions after study (in the country of study or elsewhere)
- C. The environ (study, space, climate etc.) and geography of your destination
- D. Cultural and religious differences
- E. Need to learn a new language (either as instruction mode or just a requirement)
- F. Studies duration
- G. The prowess of the country(s) in a particular discipline or course of study
- H. Mode of study (research, study, or both)
- I. Health condition
- J. Family**

In selecting your preferred destinations; you should remember these:

***Do not pay too much attention to the names of countries or stories you've heard.** Do not be swayed by the "myth" that the education, standard of living and opportunities are better in certain countries compared to the rest.

***Do not also be carried away by the ranking of universities.** Really, you own your choice, and you deserve every top university you've decided to apply to. Nevertheless, do not forget that other candidates deserve these positions too! If you must select highly revered institutions, have as many backup plans as possible. I'll suggest that you base your choice on the strength of the university as regards your field or discipline ONLY.

***Do not be like the housefly in the legends.** Stipend rate should NOT be the first criteria on your screening list.

***The native language of your proposed destination** does not affect your study life. Nay, it can only be of benefit to you. Do not be scared of selecting destinations where the first language is not English language; in as much as you're convinced about the quality of study in such places.

2.3 WHY HONG KONG?

***Hong Kong Universities are world-class universities;** and 5 from amongst the 8 UGC-funded universities made the 2019 top 106 universities of QS World University Rankings.

*Besides that, **the annual stipend (about 30,000USD)** competes fairly with stipend rates obtainable in the US (**check www.phdstipends.com and websites of top US universities**).

***Postgraduate studentship at 16500HKD monthly**

***Conference grant (over 12000HKD per year for HKPS)**

*Sub-tropical Hong Kong climate

By now, I guess you must've made a decision as to whether applying to Hong Kong is the best for you, or not.

Please let me know if my messages are coming in too fast.

2.4 PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION FILE

We want to adopt the predating technique. Spend a lot of time calculating the moves of your prey, and in a swift swoop, the prey is yours!

Preparation, I believe, is the real application.

The following are some of the basic documents you require (in soft copies):

1. **Passport:** Identification document

2. Transcript and Certificates (for all degrees). The transcript seems to be more important during the application stage; as it gives your reviewer an overview of your study life (and the compatibility with the sought scholarship), as well as your strengths and weaknesses.

3. Language certification and tests: Although the HKPFS does not make this compulsory for candidates who studied with English language as the medium of instruction, you're advised to present any international test and exams like IELTS, TOEFL, GRE etc. that can further convince reviewers about your abilities.

4. Motivation Letter/Research plan and other essays: Having several nice drafts of these beforehand makes it easy to write program-specific statements and/or essays, by mere modifications and review.

5. CV (in various formats to suit your applications)

2.5 GETTING A SUITABLE SUPERVISOR

For research degree scholarships and admission, the most tedious and yet most-rewarding aspect is looking for a proposed supervisor.

In fact, an individual with a First-Class Bachelor degree, Masters Degree (Distinction) from a top-rated university and good run of research publications once told us that he sent mails to over 120 researchers, but couldn't get a PhD position.

Please use the following steps, and InshaAllah it'll be easy:

***Send an introductory mail** to a large number of faculty members who are active in the areas of your interest.

*** Reduce (to the barest minimum) the content of your mail.** You don't need to flaunt your language skills. Professors have got tons of mails to attend to; and you wouldn't want to make their jobs more tedious (one of the reasons why most mails are not responded to).

***No need to mention your awards or your new admission and other side information.** Note that your mail is just like a cover letter, it's the attachments (CV, Certificate, and Transcript) that should do these

*** Do not use phrases like "I may not have...", "If my request will not be considered..." etc. Stay positive.**

***Just go straight to the point, use a direct language**

***Collect enough information (just enough!) about the professor,** his research team, his recent publications etc. before sending a mail.

The major contents of your mail should be:

A. Your name

B. Department and institution where you graduated from, CGPA inclusive

C. Which program you'll be applying to, which session, funding etc.

D. Reasons why you've considered working with him (just mention the core areas of his research, no need to go into details of each publication).

E. State what you want explicitly, (mentorship during Application and desire to be on his team when admitted)

F. Attachments (CV, Certificates, Int'l tests scores, Transcripts)

You may also want to peruse this document as regards getting a proposed supervisor.

2.6 THE LOOK-OUTS AFTER FINDING A SUITABLE PROFESSOR

You must be ahead of other applicants who have chosen the same professor with you. Prove to the professor that you're always ready to work, keep tabs with him (force him to remember you!); then provide him with nice answers to his numerous questions.

Remember, he/she doesn't know you. He only reads you from whatever working relationships you've developed over the application period.

Ask if he has an on-going research he wants you to join or if you're free to make a selection. Ask him directly...don't mince words.

Read a lot of journals on the proposed research area; and most importantly, the ones authored by the professor. It makes them feel happy knowing you acknowledge their expertise in the area (massage his ego if necessary, he/she is human), and give you discussion chances.

And of course, the cementing agent would be the soundness of your research proposal. Get a nice proposal topic with clear objectives. He'll never want to miss working with you if you exploit these areas.

The HKPFS works on "nomination". The nomination process runs from your proposed supervisor (from amongst his/her proposed students) to the department/program then to the university's selection panel and finally to the Research Grants Council (RGC). As such, the Scholarship scheme is a very competitive one and requires your very best. Be the best applicant you can be!

During the course of your application, discuss at length with your proposed supervisor. Make your correspondence formal; however, sell yourself to him/her. Go with him from one section of your research proposal to the next, display your fastidiousness and good working rate. However, you must maintain certain level of independency too. HK professors have also been noted to readily provide research materials to their prospective students.

Your proposed supervisor's faith in you and in your work might be a valuable point; in fact, a plan B. In case your application was not successful, the professor can go out of his ways to secure you a "Postgraduate Studentship" with juicy benefits. Other scholarships (which depend greatly on recommendations from school, department or programme) are also available.

If possible (try as much as you can), get a graduate student on each of your proposed supervisors' research team; get a "mole in the camp". Some of the benefits of this are:

- *Generally, it is easier to communicate with a graduate student than a professor. He/she is more open to your needs.
- ***You learn the professor's method**, predict what gives him a kick and efficiently prepare whatever the professor asks of you with the help of your "man".
- ***Often, the research team's opinion influences your nomination.** This action assures you a vote of confidence.

If one of your choice professors seems to show more interest in your work, or one of your choices apparently seem to have better chance, match it with equal devotion and effort. You should understand that you cannot secure both slots of the scholarship; each applicant can only be awarded one (only the first choice if both applicants make it to the RGC panel). This however does not translate into you neglecting the other choice totally; create some sort of "balance"

3.0 APPLYING FOR THE HKPFS

3.1 GENERAL CRITERIA

1. **Good Grades:** Having a good grade is almost the first criteria. Academic performance is considered because the awarding body wants to be sure that the chosen candidate(s) can complete their studies if awarded the scholarship, especially within the stipulated time.

2. **Good Application:** This is equally as important as your certificates. How well did you fill the application? Did you follow the application instructions? Are your uploaded documents complete and visible enough? Is your research plan very good? Are all your certificates in a language which the awarding body request that they should be? Is your transcript easy to understand? Is your research plan achievable?

It is not enough that you cook a good soup; you have to serve it on nice, clean, silver plates!

3. **Research Experience and Publications:** In applying for research studies; having good experience in research is really an important item; considering that most applicants will probably graduate with very high grades. Give a report of your investigation experiences (starting from the term papers in your undergraduate studies, if they are related to your present focus, and if you do not have much experiences in research), conference papers, keynote lectures, journal papers, thesis etc.

4. **Awards, Certificates, Previous scholarships won, Certifications etc.**

5. **Voluntary Work, extra-curricular activities, Community services etc. (with evidence).**

6. **Work Experience (if related).**

7. **Ranking of Previous Institution(s) attended:** For checking the quality of your background. I do not think any university in Nigeria can have an edge on this.

8. **Place of Origin:** Universities give preference to International diversity; and have some quota for each region in the world, most especially CityU and PolyU. It is rumored that students from Africa, some part of South-East Asia, Europe and the United States have extra points in CityU's admission grading (not

verified). Nonetheless, it's very obvious that preference is given to International students in Hong Kong's research programs.

9. Communication Skills: During the interview stage (via voice- or video-call), the panel does not only consider how correct or reasonable you answer their questions, but also your eloquence and technical skills in providing answers.

3.2 APPLICATION

3.2.1. Online Application

In applying for HKPFS; two applications are necessary

(a) Registering on the RGC online application portal; and obtaining a RGC's reference number.

You should make sure to click on submit your application on the RGC portal; after supplying all necessary information, even though if you are yet to reach a definite decision on some of the information you provided. Note that submitting on this platform does not mean you will be prevented from making changes to all information you provided; it is just a step to enable the system to assign a reference number to you. Hence, you can still change your research topic, proposed supervisors and other details until the deadline. The assigned RGC's reference number is required in the second phase of your application.

(b) Full Application of the HKPFS on the university's application portal

On the university's graduate school application portal, applicants are required to apply as a normal applicant seeking for graduate studies admission. At the concluding section of the application; before submitting, applicants are asked if they would like to apply for HKPFS. This is where the full application is done.

An applicant who answers "no" to the question above or fails to supply his/her RGC's reference number is regarded as applying for just admission; not admission and scholarship. In the same vein, an applicant who is denied admission has his/her HKPFS application cancelled automatically.

Need I remind you again that all applicants are considered for the government-funded "Postgraduate Studentship" scholarships.

3.2.2 Some of the essays and fields to fill in HKPFS application

While providing answers to all questions, applicants should use clear and understandable terminologies as the selection panel is made up of inter-disciplinary members. Use professional jargons only when necessary. It is also important to note that essay answers should be written as many times as possible before submitting. A first-draft essay submission is not the best approach; remember that the review panel do not know you and can only assess you based on what your certificates and information you provided. Panel members can tell when an applicant could have done better, but chose not to.

(a) Applicant's research plan and past research experience

Applicant's past experience or participation in research projects (showcase your research skills and strength, data handling and analysis abilities, field work abilities etc.)

(b) Proposed plan for doctoral research

This should be a summary of the research proposal reviewed earlier by your proposed supervisor. It should contain elements like proposed research topic, general field of research, specific research questions / project aim, motivation and significance of work / anticipated impacts, research methodology and approach (describe this using tasks and sub-tasks for clarity), preliminary results that support feasibility of work (if applicable).

(c) Vision statement

(i) Reasons for choosing the program you are applying for

(ii) Reasons for choosing Hong Kong

(iii) Long term career plans, aims, interest and future development

(iv) Contribution the applicant will like to make to development of research in Hong Kong and to the society

4.0 IMPORTANT POINTS TO NOTE

4.1 FOR HKPFS

Although not necessary, please, provide test score evidence of any Int'l exams or tests you've done. You need every possible asset you've got to prove your intellectual and analytical prowess to the selection panel.

For your research skills to be evaluated, you are required to provide information about at least one publication you have written. Here, the quality of the paper(s) is more important than their number. It is also not compulsory that the publication has to be on the research area indicated in your application. Also, it suffices that you present an abstract and editor/publisher note stating the acceptance and status of your manuscript. Your paper does not have to be published by the time you submit your application; but at least, it should be with the publisher ready for publication.

Remember that all contents of the HKPFS application to your university (including research proposals) are subjected to plagiarism checking!

In the reference section of your application, If you feel you can provide the recommendation on behalf of your referees using pseudo-accounts (perhaps you could not get professors and/or doctors to write one on your behalf); be careful about it! Do this only if there appears to be no other option (really??)

Some points to note in choosing your referee:

1. Preferably referees in academia, unless where the application specifies. You may use the individuals who have not taught you directly (and also from other institutions if necessary).
2. Avoid using friends, parents/family members, religious leaders unless when specifically required etc.
3. Make sure they are people who know you very well, and are able to write strong recommendations on your behalf. If you are still in school, start building a strong relationship with some selected faculty members and let them know you'll be requesting recommendations from them.
4. Again, inform such individuals who are on your referees list before filling your application; and know beforehand if they'll be able to oblige your request.
5. Up-to-date official contact details (not copied from a website page or otherwise). It is best to request for their university email to portray better credibility.
6. Use (if possible) high ranking faculty members.
7. Be sure your referees can provide prompt replies to referee request; and are able to work with the specifics of the contacting university(s). Do not let your quest for high-ranking referees push you to an individual who checks emails once in a blue moon.

4.2 FOR GENERAL SCHOLARSHIPS

- *Be sure you really want to study; not because a job is not forthcoming or to be able to travel outside the country. There are situations in graduate schools when only your focus and passion will keep you going.
- *Get a list of the countries you wish to apply to, mark out all the universities and scholarships in each region, and create a folder for each. Highlight all the requisites for all of these applications before starting.
- *Work towards fulfilling these requirements one at a time, re-write your statements, and re-brand your missions at every need.
- *Set goals, be very specific and sure about what you want from a scholarship; and do not settle for less! You do not want to win a scholarship; and in few months after starting studies, wish you had never applied. Do not look at so many scholarships, that you'll lose count of them. Know exactly which ones match your expectations.
- * At the initial stage, list out your expectations of graduate studies, and use these criteria to prune out all unnecessary applications. This will imply that you have very good perspective of the benefits, requirements, key strengths of your applications from the very beginning.
- *Take charge of your applications. Applying for scholarships impromptu makes one lose focus and waste energy. Plan all applications well ahead, before submitting applications / applying. Do not consider just any applications advertisement that comes your way.
- * Once you start, get committed. Taking breaks in-between might remove your enthusiasm.
- * Find and connect to groups where information on opportunities is shared and discussed.

This is the soul of scholarship applications.

*Get good mentors. Talk and connect with scholars who have won your target scholarships. Make enquiry about the best way to make your application with the certificates you have (as well as many more questions). Of course, scholarship applications may be very similar, but the little details may matter in the long run. You can also get a good dose of motivation from their stories.

* Do not be fooled by your certificate. Having a first-class certificate does not guarantee you a scholarship, if you put forward a bad application. On the other hand, applying with a lesser grade does not ultimately translate into being at a disadvantaged position, in as much as this meet the application criteria.

* Get scanned copies of all your credentials ready and well-arranged at all time, in anticipation for openings.

* Take part in extra-curricular activities, social welfare programs, voluntary organizations/ volunteering, community development programs, entrepreneurship and other activities outside academics. Get certifications outside the academic field, build your skills in your areas of passion and take part in professional bodies. Participate in international leadership programs like YALI, MYMUN etc. (if you've got the knack for it); as well as personal development programs as much as possible. And most importantly, have evidences to prove these.

****Before submitting applications**, think about what makes you stand-out amongst other prospective candidates. Assess yourself beforehand! *******

*Train yourself hard in preparation for applications. Write on varieties of possible scholarship essays; and review these writings several times. It's never too much. I learnt sometimes ago that Asians will write a 2-pages SOP in at least 6 months; this will translate into them writing different versions of the same essay multiple times and reviewing them several times.

* Work on online interviews and other forms of academic interviews if the application involves one. You may need to convince the selection panel within the limited interview duration.

****Before you become committed to applying for scholarship**, make a strong resolve to never give up on your target; even when everything seems to fall apart*

* **Be ready for the worst at all times**; even when you had put in your best effort. Scholarship enthusiasts are immune to "regret" emails. If some applications meet the brick wall; start planning how you can improve your chance in the next round or other offers. Every scholarship winner has loads of rejection emails in their boxes, it just does not show after you have won!

* **Write scientific journals and papers** to boost your chances in research studies scholarships.

* **If you think you need TOEFL/IELTS, GRE etc.**, do not be worried about the cost or preparation; your goal should motivate you. Set out early!

****Choose your referees wisely**, and be careful of how often you send in referee requests, such that you do not get them disgruntled. Your referees should be available to reply emails promptly; and so is not necessarily that old professor. Of course, referee report alone can jeopardize your applications. *

* After putting in your best efforts, hold your head high, knowing you could not have done more. Be proud of what progress you have made, even if these efforts may not be enough in the eyes of the selection panel. And be determined to put in more effort when the next opportunity beckons.

* And ultimately, you need that bit of luck! Scholarship applications are like races, and even when you put forward your best, the number of available slots as well as the quality of other applicants may mean that you are rejected.

* Sometimes, it's not about not giving one's best...or being out of luck...but our Lord knows what and when is the best for us

Could we have been where we are today by our might? After giving your best; trust Allah for his Qadar on you.

For WaLlahi...I have been told of a young brother who got a Hifz-ul-Qur'an scholarship in Turkey just recently...and he died just 3 days after arrival.

4.0 FEES

Certain fees are incurred by applicants during and after the application process. Fees vary from one university to the other. I made this section come last; so that you can weigh what you stand to gain in the long run against your monetary sacrifices.

1. Application fee (about 200HKD)

2. Acceptance fee; to confirm applicant's interest after he/she is granted admission and scholarship (HKD5000-7014)

3. Hall residency confirmation fee; after a scholar has been granted a place in the university's Hall of residency (HKD500-1400). ONLY for those granted university accommodation.

4. Visa processing fee (HKD 500-550)

The nice thing about HK is that you don't have to worry about your visa application. You're almost 100% sure that you'll get a visa. The University acts as your guarantor, secures visa on your behalf and sends it by postal mail to your address

5. Flight ticket and transportation costs

All scholars are responsible for their transportation costs.

[Of course, there are other things to take care of; BUT that will be only after confirmation of your admission status

I urge you not to look at the "investment"...the return is worth it.

5.0 SOME PREPARATIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDIES WHILE AWAITING RESUMPTION

While anticipating a favourable result...we can't afford to sit back and relax. No! Work just began!!

All research done in the world today requires some expertise on computing. Aside learning software relating directly to your field, you also need some other packages in the course of your graduate studies.

Some skills/tools you need for your studies:

1. Literature search and review tools/Databases (CiteSeeker, Web of Science, etc)
2. Word and referencing software for desktop publishing (MS-Word, Latex, Libre office, Zotero, Bibtex, Endnote, cite this for me etc.). You can't afford to rely on "business centres".
3. Quantitative Analysis tools: Excel (Formulas, PowerPivot, plots, data), Origin, SPSS, R etc. In most research, you're bound to work with data and statistics.
4. Coding and Scientific Programming for data analysis, image processing, machine learning, control systems analysis etc. Learn MATLAB, JULIA, SciLab, LabView, Python etc.
5. Use of cloud storage for backups and sharing large documents: One drive, Google Drive, Dropbox etc.
6. Teamwork tools: Google forms (for creating online surveys), Google docs, sheets, slides for accessing group work/file from online, TeamViewer (for accessing colleagues computer on permission and working directly on it from a distance) etc
7. Editing tools: Windows Snipping Tool, Paint, Photoshop, CorelDRAW, PowerPoint, Screencast, Camtasia etc.
8. Some "crooked" ways of retrieving old books and journals that are not readily available (Sci-Hub, B-ok.org etc)

.....they'll get handy someday

And lastly...

IN LOVE WITH HK ALREADY, AND WANT TO INCREASE YOUR CHANCE???

You can select one or two other universities and apply to them as an international student under UGC-funded studentship. The application fees are usually around 200HKD (about 6k-7k NGN)

However, you might get very lucky to still be considered for the normal studentship scholarship...in case, a professor finds you worthy enough to take your application up during the review process. I have an office mate who was lucky with this.

But, it's really risky.....