



Carsten Holz <carstenholz@gmail.com>

Those HK\$7,500 for “Research Travel/Duty Visits”

Carsten A. Holz <socholz@ust.hk>

Fri, May 17, 2024 at 6:31 AM

To: [Dean, School of Humanities and Social Science]

Dear [Dean],

Back in 2018 I had an exchange with [Head, Social Science Division] about the “faculty development fund” that led to exactly nowhere (<https://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/Initiative/2018-9-3-SOSC-FacultyDevelopmentFund2018-19.pdf>), with [Head] hinting at decisions taken at higher levels. Therefore I am sending this email to you as dean.

The current practice of HK\$7,500 for “Research Travel/Duty Visits” makes absolutely no sense to me.

(1) It’s not enough money to attend a conference overseas. (It might, just, be enough to attend a two-day conference / visit one’s parents on the mainland).

(2) It’s not enough money for a research trip.

(3) I can’t accumulate it over time since there is a 100% clawback every 30 June.

-- I asked the relevant division staff to charge the first 7.5K expenses of my recent field research travels to this academic year’s research travel fund, and the remainder to next academic year’s, and the staff thought since next academic year’s research travel funds have not yet been announced, I should claim the remainder from my “DDF” (whatever ‘DDF’ stands for). But my 7-year old laptop = main computer is exhibiting enough problems to warrant a replacement, for which next academic year’s DDF, no matter whether it’s 7.5K or ‘7.5K + later 7.5K New Year’s present,’ after paying for the usual expenses, will simply not be enough (I need post-clawback accumulated DDF from the past). Next academic year’s research travel/duty visits funds cannot be used towards a laptop purchase. In other words, the message received is that if you do field research or conference travel you are stupid, you lose.

(4) I can’t use the 7.5K to (partly) cover a research trip in July/August (the core teaching-free period) because the 7.5K of the previous academic year are 100% clawed back end-June, and the July-onwards academic year’s funding for research travel/duty visits, if any, won’t be announced until September.

(5) I am not aware of any rationale whatsoever for the choice of 7.5K.

(6) I am not aware of any rationale whatsoever for the strict distinction between “Research Travel/Duty Visits” and “Additional Staff Development Fund” (the latter, BTW, a misnomer, since “research travel/duty visits” does not equal “staff development fund”).

The DDF is typically insufficient to cover the various ongoing expenses and provide the missing funds for an overseas conference trip. While the DDF can be accumulated over time—subject to some 15% annual clawback—it’s still hard (if not impossible) to manage an overseas conference trip with the 7.5K research travel/duty visits funds and any accumulated DDF. (Conference attendance at the American Economic Association meetings in early January is applied for 10 months in advance, around March, crossing two academic years. Trying to make that work financially is hopeless and I don’t bother.)

Perhaps “Research Travel/Duty Visits” is not intended for research travel or duty visits (it’s a fake)? (1) In the past, the funds could indeed be used for conference travel. While I do not have a record for the time of my early years at HKUST, I think it used to be 12K or 15K. (2) The “Research Travel Grants” which postgraduate students apply for are exclusively for conference travel (with no upper \$ limit, and available annually if needed.).

I can imagine HKUST managers arguing that conference travel is to be financed through the 20K allocation in a General Research Fund grant. I cannot apply for a GRF to cover conference travel only. In other words, faculty members who do not do research that requires lots of money and fits a particular mold—a requirement that violates academic freedom—are not allowed to go to conferences. (Only regime-approved research warrants presentation at conferences.)

It doesn’t matter how I try to make sense of the 7.5K, I can’t, with perhaps one exception: HKUST managers are hell-bent on destroying academia at HKUST. Take, for example, HKUST’s standing in international rankings: In the 2024 QS World University Rankings, HKUST scores 5.3 out of 100 points in “International Research Network” (<https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/hong-kong-university-science-technology#p2-rankings>) In no other category along which the QS World University Rankings rate universities does HKUST score that low. HKUST’s next lowest scores are in Sustainability with 31, six times higher, and in Employment Outcomes with 50.3, ten times higher. I can’t think of any better measure for HKUST managers to destroy international networking (and field research) than its farcical 7.5K allocation and the barbed wire fences surrounding it. A second piece of evidence for HKUST manager’s determination to destroy academia would be the enormous amounts of valuable professor time it takes to try to run circles around HKUST managers’ arbitrarily plopped-down barbed wires.

I am not much up for HKUST managers’ absurd demolition maneuvers any more. I would prefer that the—what look like bs—faculty fund allocations be revised to make obvious sense, and that we can have some regularity over time (ability to plan ahead). Or that, otherwise, a rational argument be presented to faculty members for the current practice. At the moment, this just looks like an enormous, disgusting heap of bs. I doubt this amount of bs is attractive to any faculty member.

Best,
Carsten

NB: HKUST managers’ use of the term “clawback” in case of the DDF, to me, is suggestive of animals of prey digging their claws deep into faculty members. Is that an appropriate picture of HKUST managers’ self-perception (they chose the term) and behavior?



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[Dean, School of Humanities and Social Science] Sat, May 18, 2024 at 3:39 PM

To: Carsten Andreas HOLZ <socholz@ust.hk>

Cc: [Senior Officer and Head, Division of Social Science]

Carsten,

If I remember correctly, the \$7500 is an allocation directly from the UGC or RGC. I don't know the history. I remember wondering about it when I first arrived in 2013. I am cc:ing Dora nd Yongshun since they may know more about the origin of this scheme and the source of the funds. I don't think it is something we have any control over. I can mention it to Tim Cheng next time I see him.

regards,
[Dean]