

VIEW COMMENTS FROM EXTERNAL REVIEWER

Project Number : 16603621

Project Title : Academic Freedom at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology

PI Name : Prof Holz, Carsten A.

Section A : Detailed Comments**1. Please comment on the objective(s) of the proposal, and whether the research agenda adequately addresses the objective(s)?**

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments:

The objective of the proposed research is to evaluate the degree of academic freedom at HKUST along with faculty members views of academic freedom. In order to achieve this objective, the research agenda is centred on applying a framework designed to measure academic freedom in European universities to HKUST, with the possibility of extending the study to HKU and CUHK. The framework identifies four broad components of academic freedom: freedom in research and teaching; institutional autonomy; self-governance; and tenure. The PI acknowledges that "many of the constituent components of academic freedom involve institutional procedures which at Hong Kong's universities tend not to be in the public realm." What does this mean for the research agenda? The PI needs to explain this. The main focus of the proposed research appears to be the first of the four constituent components of academic freedom: freedom in research and teaching. Somewhat surprisingly, there is very little substantive discussion of the concept of academic freedom. Links are provided to various websites (mainly professional organizations and official agencies) but there is almost no academic discussion of the concept of academic freedom in terms of its epistemology, historical origins and development, its global diffusion or even of its real or assumed status in Hong Kong, either historically or now.

2. Please comment on the Research Design and Methodology.

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments:

The PI intends to apply a study of academic freedom in European universities undertaken by Karran, Beiter, and Appiagyei-Atua (2017) and Karran (2009b), in which academic freedom is broken down into approximately 50 different components grouped into four broad categories (freedom in teaching and research, institutional autonomy, self-governance and tenure). In addition, the PI also intends to develop a questionnaire based on an earlier survey developed by Karran and Mallinson (2017) for measuring faculty members' perceptions of academic freedom in European universities. No information is provided about any of the 50 constituent components of academic freedom that the proposed research is designed to measure. Statements such as "I doubt that I can improve (or improve much) on the framework provided by Karran, Beiter and Appiagyei-Atua (2017)" are difficult to evaluate in the absence of a detailed discussion of the framework and its strengths and weaknesses. There are other omissions. No information is provided on how the participants for the study will be chosen. There is no discussion of how the PI intends to protect the anonymity of participants if the survey is to be carried out electronically. There is no discussion of how the PI intends to address the issue of self-censorship (including in the completion of the survey itself), which has the potential to be a critical factor in the Hong Kong context.

3. Please comment on the feasibility of the proposed research.

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comments:

In the absence of more detailed information concerning the methodology and how it will be applied in the Hong Kong context, it is difficult to determine the feasibility of the proposed research. The difficulty is compounded by the fact the PI admits he has no prior research experience in this field, and that he does not know how to use the software for carrying out the software. The latter will be entrusted to a Research Assistant, the recruitment of which the PI has stated will be "not so easy."

4. What do you consider to be the most original or innovative aspect of the proposed research? What advances would the research result bring about to the related field if the proposed research is successful?**Comments:**

The proposed program of research is described as a "fact-finding mission." It does not claim to be original or innovative. The PI specifically states: "I am not proposing new methods, new solutions or alternative approaches." The research, if successful, would yield benchmark data that may be useful for comparing the present state of academic freedom at HKUST with that of universities in other countries and against future changes in academic freedom in Hong Kong. The PI foresees that the impact of the proposed research will "likely be primarily short-term" as the project is designed to provide insight into the current situation, which may change in the future.

5. Please comment on the reasonableness of the proposed budget and manpower planning and project duration.**Comments:**

The budget is very modest. The PI is requesting HKD 188,000.00 over a 36-month period, of which 168,000.00 is earmarked for a Research Assistant. Few details are provided with respect to the RA component of the budget. The RA's responsibilities are described as being "to assist in conducting the survey", surveying relevant literature and "whatever odd tasks arise." The PI says he anticipates it will be "not so easy" to recruit an RA for the project.

The project duration seems overly long given the anticipated output (one academic journal article). The PI's stated rationale for extending the project over 36 months is that he would find it "cumbersome" to be "going back to the project proposed a year earlier" because by then he has "long moved on to a different project." This seems a rather weak rationale. A gap of 8-10 months between the formulation and writing of a major research grant application and the notice of its final adjudication is pretty much standard for all of the national university research granting agencies with which I am familiar.

6. Overall Comments

Overall Comment : Numerous flaws; not suitable for funding.

Strength: The topic is timely and important on multiple levels.

Weaknesses: I approached this research grant application with a great deal of anticipation. A major, longitudinal study of academic freedom and faculty members' perceptions of academic freedom at Hong Kong's universities, stretching back to the colonial period and forward into the future under the new National Security Law and China's increasingly direct intrusion into Hong Kong affairs, would be an extremely valuable contribution to knowledge with potentially important implications for public policy. Unfortunately, the proposed research has numerous flaws, as indicated above. Moreover, the vitriolic and vindictive tone and the personalized anger and resentments expressed by the PI seriously undermines the credibility of the proposal.

Suggested improvements: Consider a collaborative undertaking with scholars that have established research expertise in this field to develop a major longitudinal study of academic freedom in Hong Kong. A potential model for such an undertaking might be the longitudinal surveys of public opinion carried out under the Hong Kong Transition Project (1989-2018).

Section B : Summary of Assessment

The project :

Scientific/scholarly merit	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Duration Proposed	Too Long	Appropriate	Too Short		
	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>		
Impact of Research	High	Moderate	Low	None	
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

The principal investigator :

Ability to undertake the proposal	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Track record in field	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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