

LCQ14: Impacts of social turmoil on scientific research and experiment projects

Following is a question by the Hon Martin Liao and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (February 26):

Question:

It has been reported that amid months of social turmoil, the operation of individual universities has been disrupted, and the facilities in the laboratories on campus have been damaged and the chemicals therein stolen, resulting in some scientific research and experiment projects being delayed or disrupted, the progress of scientific research work being hindered, as well as quite a number of non-local students and overseas experts giving up their plans to come to Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the Research Grants Council (RGC) under the University Grants Committee has initially allowed the funded research projects which were affected to defer the submission of completion reports. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the details of the impacts of the social turmoil on the scientific research work and RGC-funded research projects of the various tertiary institutions, including (i) the number and percentage, (ii) the contents, (iii) the originally scheduled time of completion and the additional time needed for completion, and (iv) the causes of delay, of the affected research projects;

(2) whether it knows the respective numbers, since June last year, of non-local postgraduate students and scientific research experts of the various tertiary institutions who have given up their plans to conduct researches in Hong Kong or come to Hong Kong for such purposes, with a breakdown by their places of origin and the areas of the research projects in which they were engaged; and

(3) whether it has assessed the impacts of the delay in scientific research work and the talent wastage on the development of scientific research in Hong Kong; if so, of the details, and the appropriate relief measures in place?

Reply:

President,

The social incidents in the past few months have disrupted university operations to varying degrees. During this period, violent protestors blocked roads, threw objects from heights, committed arson, criminal damage, and violent storming on a number of university campuses and in various nearby public places, committing a breach of the peace and endangering the personal

safety of other members of the public.

Calm has been restored on university campuses as the universities have commenced restoration works. However, the violent incidents have caused the universities trauma and loss in various aspects, not only in facilities such as campus premises but also in the loss of valuable time for teaching and research and even talent, hampering university operations and regular teaching and research activities, and even possibly affecting the international reputation of the universities. The Education Bureau, the University Grants Committee (UGC) and the Research Grants Council (RGC) will provide appropriate assistance and support, having regard to the needs and actual circumstances of the universities.

My reply to the Hon Martin Liao's question is as follows:

(1) Some of the research projects conducted by the UGC-funded universities and self-financing degree-awarding institutions and monitored by the UGC and/or the RGC have been affected by the social incidents to varying degrees. According to the RGC, as at end-January 2020, requests for extensions citing the recent social incidents as the main reason were approved for 58 research projects, with approved extension periods ranging from one to six months. These projects have an original project period of one to three years, involving different areas including Biology and Medicine, Business Studies, Engineering, Humanities and Social Sciences as well as Physical Sciences, making up about 0.9 per cent of the total number of research projects monitored by the UGC and/or the RGC. The reasons for extensions include the research staff not being able to enter the campus for conducting research or to collect data for their projects, and delays in recruiting project research assistants, etc.

(2) According to the RGC, 57 non-local research postgraduate (RPg) students terminated their studies in UGC-funded RPg programmes in the first semester of the 2019/20 academic year. A breakdown of the figures by place of origin and research discipline is tabulated below:

Research Disciplines	Places of Origin		Total
	Mainland China	Other Countries	
Biology and Medicine	6	5	11
Business Studies	5	0	5
Engineering	9	7	16
Humanities and Social Sciences	4	4	8
Physical Sciences	17	0	17
Total	41	16	57

It is worth noting that in the first semester of the previous academic year (i.e. the 2018/19 academic year), a total of 85 non-local RPg students terminated their studies in UGC-funded RPg programmes. The number of non-

local RPg students dropping out in the first semester of the 2019/20 academic year is, in fact, fewer than that in the same period of the previous academic year.

The UGC-funded universities have not maintained any statistics on non-local academics who have given up their plans to pursue a career in Hong Kong.

(3) Overall speaking, some research activities of individual universities may have been temporarily suspended as a result of the closure of campuses, and the damage done to a small number of research facilities has also hindered the progress of research work to a certain extent. Nonetheless, the universities have been doing their best to minimise the disruption as far as possible by making flexible arrangements for research activities, such as arranging for RPg students to conduct research at temporary offices, external laboratories or non-local partnering institutions, and adopting a flexible approach towards the coursework and work arrangements for RPg students.

The UGC and the RGC will continue to maintain close communication with the universities and provide appropriate assistance on the premise of looking after the interests of students and the development of higher education in Hong Kong and having regard to the actual needs of the universities so as to facilitate their smooth operations.

In recent years, the Government has been committed to promoting the research development of the universities. In response to the recommendation of the Task Force on Review of Research Policy and Funding, we have injected \$20 billion into the Research Endowment Fund (REF) to substantially increase the research grants for post-secondary institutions and provide a more stable source of research funding. Furthermore, the RGC launched the \$3 billion Research Matching Grant Scheme in August 2019 for a period of three years, with the aim of incentivising the private sector to provide research and development funding and donations for the research sector.

In addition, the Government injected \$3 billion into the REF in 2018 whereby the investment return will be used to provide a full tuition waiver for all local students studying on UGC-funded RPg programmes within the normative study period. This aimed to further support local students on the RPg programmes so as to nurture more local academic and research talent. The RGC also introduced three prestigious fellowship schemes in the 2019/20 academic year to nurture and retain research talent in support of the sustainable development of the research ecosystem in Hong Kong. The Government has earmarked a recurrent provision of about \$190 million per annum for the schemes.

The above initiatives will help strengthen the research capacity of the higher education sector and promote the sustainable development of the research ecosystem in Hong Kong. In fact, the universities in Hong Kong have built a solid foundation for academic and research work and enjoyed a good international reputation after years of development. We believe that with calm and harmony restored to the universities, they can gradually rebuild order and make arrangements for teaching and research work, so that the

research achievements of the higher education sector in Hong Kong can continue to maintain a world-class level.