

# Bringing the two systems closer on scientific research

## Out of the Box

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**OVER THE PAST** week, my e-mail inbox has been flooded with news about President Xi Jinping's announcement on May 14 that the Chinese government will allow funding to come to Hong Kong for research in science and technology.

Xi stated that the purpose of this new policy is to promote further science and technology research collaboration between Hong Kong and mainland, to support the SAR to become a global center for innovation and technology, to encourage the SAR to contribute to the nation becoming strong in science and technology, and to spur further economic and social development by leveraging the complementary competitive advantages of both.

For Hong Kong as a whole, it should be a net gain, at least financially, because Hongkongers do

not pay tax to the mainland. The response from the local science and technology community has been overwhelmingly positive – as can be expected.

The uninitiated reader may wonder how this decision has come about at this particular time and what exactly will this mean for Hong Kong.

I'll provide my personal perspective.

The news refers to a joint letter written by 24 Hong Kong members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Academy of Engineering to Xi, urging him to do something along this line.

Certainly the collective reputation and expert opinion from these academy members should have carried a lot of weight. But there have been many other efforts over the last five to 10 years by various stakeholders from Hong Kong to try to persuade the mainland government to do this.

In particular, our universities were faced with the challenge of limited research funding, as well as opportunities in participation in large major scientific projects, due to Hong Kong's relatively small population base, the political constraint of the one country, two systems framework in facilitating cross-border funding, and the high tax that Hong Kong researchers working in the mainland have to pay.

The Heads of University Committee (HUCOM), consisting of the presidents of the University Grants

Committee institutions, has made early attempts with various funding agencies in the mainland, such as the National Science Foundation China.

Two members of HUCOM who were also members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Tim Tong of Polytechnic University and Albert Chan of Baptist University), had personally tried to make proposals at the two plenary sessions for several years.

The difficulty has been, even putting politics aside, that while everybody agreed with the idea and the goals, the practical implementation is a complicated process requiring coordination and approval from many mainland government agencies, such as the Financial Ministry, the funding agencies, and the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office.

Even as recently as March, some of the elected National People's Congress representatives from Hong Kong, (including University of Science and Technology vice president Nancy Ip and Open University president Wong Yuk-shan) were making related proposals at the Two Sessions in Beijing.

I am glad that all this cumulative effort has finally paid off, but I suspect that the key is endorsement from Xi.

The most immediate impact for Hong Kong is that the 22 State Partner State Key Laboratories and

Engineering Research Centers in Hong Kong, which are evaluated and certified by mainland's Ministry of Science and Technology, will each receive up to HK\$1 million per year.

To put this in perspective, the annual budget of each of these centers is around HK\$5 million, so financially speaking, this 20 percent increase in funding will not substantially change the funding level of the labs and centers.

The real additional value is the potential opening and encouragement of new complementary collaborative opportunities between Hong Kong and mainland science and technology communities, increased exchange of research personnel, participating in major large scientific projects requiring national support, and enhanced attractiveness for Hong Kong in recruiting international talent.

To me, the greatest potential, and also the greatest challenge, is whether this new funding framework will change people's mind-set on both sides of the border.

Will it take Hong Kong's research prowess up another notch globally?

Will it provide more job opportunities for our citizens in the science and technology areas?

Finally, will it encourage more Hong Kong young people to consider science and technology as a desirable career choice? Time will tell.