New HKU Fund Allows “Grass-roots” Students to Pursue Educational Activities Beyond the Classroom
Rinoa Chan 陳家慧 says an email she received last September from The University of Hong Kong was like a gift from God.

The email informed first-year undergraduate students like her of the new “First-in-the-Family Education Fund” (FIFE Fund) 第一代大學生助學金, which provides financial support to students whose families’ mean monthly household income is HK$12,000 or less. As the name implies, the FIFE Fund is aimed specifically at students who are the first in their families to attend university.

HKU students like Rinoa and Geoffrey Cheuk 卓尚昆 are among thousands of Hong Kong students from so-called “grass-roots” families, those that make little more than enough for daily necessities. For families like these, finding the money to cover the basic costs of a university education is often a stretch.

The purpose of the FIFE Fund, which was established at HKU only last autumn, is to allow grass-roots students to also take advantage of learning opportunities outside the classroom, which they might not otherwise be able to afford: field trips, study tours, internships and international exchange programmes.
Chasing a Dream of Helping Others
When Rinoa learned she had been accepted by HKU, she screamed with joy.

Rinoa, who began her studies at HKU during the autumn 2008 semester, was successful in her application to the fund, along with more than 200 other students. She and the other recipients will receive HK$10,000 during their course of study.

With the help of this money, Rinoa says she now hopes to take part in HKU’s Worldwide Student Exchange Programme, which sends students to HKU partner universities abroad for one or two semesters during their undergraduate studies. She could use the money from the FIFE Fund to pay for the cost of living overseas.

After completing a two-year associate degree programme, Rinoa, now 22, had three choices for study, all leading to different careers. “My first choice was HKU music, second was psychology at City University and third, Asian studies at the Institute of Education,” she said.

Her dream was to be a music therapist, who helps patients with emotional problems through music or the playing of musical instruments. She remembers sitting at her computer, waiting for results to be published by the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS), to see if she had been accepted at HKU. Unable to get the results online, she called the university’s admissions office, and when she learned she had been accepted, she screamed with joy. That night, the family celebrated at a restaurant. “I was very happy. I paid for the dinner,” said her mother.

The family’s financial support comes primarily from Rinoa’s mother and Rinoa’s elder brother. Her mother, 53, is an office assistant, while the brother is a furniture merchandiser.

Her father, 59 and formerly a truck driver, is recovering from intestinal surgery, and also suffers from cataracts and chronic physical disability resulting from an accident he suffered while working at a construction site.

The family, which lives in Aberdeen, says it is willing to reduce expenses in the years to come to help Rinoa realise her dream. But money is still tight. Hoping to experience residence hall life at HKU, she successfully applied for a place at Lady Ho Tung Hall for the first semester, but she had to give up her place because her family could not afford the cost.

She says Australia is renowned for training music therapists, and she would like to take professional training courses there after graduation from HKU. “Also, like other music lovers, I wish to go to Vienna to experience the musical culture there,” she said. But at the moment, the family cannot afford to send her to Australia or Austria.

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For now, she is involved in extra-curricular activities. She is currently the external vice president of the HKU Music Society, and an affiliated member of the Lady Ho Tung Hall. She is also a member of the HKU Ruby team.

She acknowledges the importance of language skills in today’s globalised world – a realisation she says first struck her when she worked as a part-time waitress at a Causeway Bay restaurant and came into contact with a lot of tourists.

“Good language skill is an important tool in the job market. And globalisation makes it even more competitive than ever,” she said. She is now learning Spanish, and says she plans to study other languages if resources allow.
Looking Abroad in Order to Help at Home

The FIFE Fund allows me to dream of joining the Worldwide Student Exchange Programme which I hadn’t thought of before.

Geoffrey Cheuk 卓尚昆, a year-one student in economics and finance, has taken a part-time job as a tutor to finance his daily expenses. He also relies for cash on his 60-year-old father, a security guard who works a night shift seven days a week.

His two sisters did not have the chance to attend university – one works as a member of an airline cabin crew and the other is a merchandiser – so he was the family’s sole remaining hope for sending a member to university. He did not disappoint them.

Recalling his struggle to make his way to HKU, Geoffrey said he did not even have a desk in his small flat in Lai Chi Kok. “I went to the nearby City University, which required a 15-minute bus trip, and looked for a quiet corner for studying during Forms 6 and 7.”

Now that he has succeeded in making his way to the university of his choice, he is eager to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Geoffrey is active in the local branch of AIESEC, the international student organisation. He is also a member of Rotary International, the international social services group. He said he is interested in social services because he wants to help the many needy people in Hong Kong. He said he also wants to experience other parts of the world, to explore different cultures and take on challenges in foreign environments.

Like Rinoa, he said the money from the FIFE Fund has allowed him to dream of studying abroad under the university’s Worldwide Student Exchange Programme. “The fund gives me the opportunity to think of something which I hadn’t thought of before, going overseas,” he said.

“People in Hong Kong have similar backgrounds,” he continued. “Overseas exchange would enable me to mingle with people from different backgrounds. This will enhance my ability to adapt to different environments, which will be most useful for me to begin my career.”

Geoffrey doesn’t know yet what career he hopes to follow. He says he hopes to get a job as soon as he graduates in order to help support his family. But he says he plans to continue participating in social work, and helping the needy in society.
Paying Forward

The “grant-and-loan” plan has allowed many poor families to send a member to higher education for the first time. This has enhanced social mobility in Hong Kong over the last 40 years.

The stories of Rinoa and Geoffrey illustrate how financial support from different facets of the community provides educational opportunities for the children of grass-roots families that can benefit society as a whole. The Hong Kong Government has been providing university funding to needy students since 1969, through the Tertiary Student Finance Scheme, a grant-and-loan plan for full-time students at government-funded tertiary institutes. The grant covers tuition fees and academic expenses, while the loan is for basic living expenses. Money for the FIFE Fund, by contrast, relies on donations from the community.

Although the government scheme, unlike the FIFE Fund, is not aimed specifically at the first-in-family university students, in practice it has allowed many poorer families to send a member to higher education for the first time. This has enhanced social mobility in Hong Kong over the last 40 years, and the university graduates who have benefitted from the scheme have in turn contributed to the vibrant development of Hong Kong, by passing on the benefits to their own families.

Today, through a combination of government and private-sector investment in education, 18 percent of young Hong Kong people between the age of 17 and 20 are receiving tertiary education, compared with less than 2 percent in the early 1970s.

The FIFE Fund recipients are expected to repay the benefits they receive by advancing Hong Kong society, and providing opportunities for the generations that follow them.

During the 20th century, Hong Kong gradually evolved from a manufacturing-led to a service-led economy. Now, in the 21st century, it is headed towards becoming a “knowledge” economy. The challenges of globalisation, including increased mobility and keen competition from around the world, means young generations will have to develop the ability – aided by such programmes as the FIFE Fund – to pursue knowledge outside the classroom, and understand diverse cultural differences.

As envisioned by The University of Hong Kong, FIFE Fund recipients are expected to use this expanded knowledge for the good of Hong Kong. During a ceremony on campus last November 20, the recipients were told they are expected to repay the benefits they receive from the fund, by advancing Hong Kong society, and providing opportunities for the generations that follow them.
The alma mater is where you can get . . . and give back

The acceptance by HKU placed Kwan Chuk-fai among a group of grass-roots students who were the first in their families to attend university. When he reached home, the neighbours stood in the corridor and clapped.

For Kwan Chuk-fai 關則煇 (BA1983), giving something back to society and his alma mater - The University of Hong Kong - has long been his wish. Chuk-fai, now the group director for corporate affairs at New World Development, was one of the early beneficiaries of the Hong Kong Government’s Tertiary Student Finance Scheme, which provides financial assistance for university study in Hong Kong. He is now an active supporter of HKU’s new First-in-the-Family Education (FIFE) Fund, which is aimed at giving students experience outside the classroom, and abroad.

Chuk-fai smiles when he recalls the cheers from his neighbours in the Tsz Wan Shan public housing estate 28 years ago, when he brought home the news that he had been admitted to HKU. The acceptance placed him among a group of grass-roots students who were the first in their families to attend university. “When I reached home, (the neighbours) all stood in the corridor and clapped,” he says.

The neighbours’ joy showed the value that is placed in Hong Kong on a university education, which is the dream of many, but also financially out of reach for families like that of Kwan Chuk-fai. Chuk-fai’s acceptance letter, which he opened with his parents, gave him the opportunity to change his life – and, if he made the most of the opportunities offered to him after graduation, to escape from poverty.

At the time, his father was a bank security guard earning between HK$1,000 and HK$2,000 a month, while his mother worked at a manufacturing company. With the government subsidy, Chuk-fai was able to pay the university fees.

“I didn’t apply for (the residence) halls because I couldn’t afford it,” he said. “In the Student Union canteen, I preferred to eat cheaper – dinner cost me no more than HK$3.50, while others had a meal for HK$4.30. Without the grant-and-loan scheme, I think I would have had to take many part-time jobs to finance my studies.”

Chuk-fai made sure he would not disappoint his parents and neighbours. He studied hard, and also joined the university’s Social Service Group, providing free tutoring to children living in Yau Ma Tei. There, he said, he realised many Hongkongers lived in conditions even worse than his own. “Some families lived in a 60- to 80-square-foot flat,” he said.

These experiences helped shape his attitude towards life. Chuk-fai says he is grateful to those who have supported him, and wants to give back to society. He encourages students nowadays to be “hungry” in acquiring knowledge and helping the needy.

As a grateful HKU graduate, he volunteered to organise his class’ 25th anniversary celebration, as well as the fund-raising activities in support of the new FIFE Fund.

One way the FIFE Fund benefits students is by giving them the financial means to participate in overseas exchange programmes. “The global trend has changed the focus of tertiary education,” Chuk-fai said. The trend has made clear the need for “whole-person education – with international exposure being part of it.”
Chuk-fai said, "When we were young our livelihood was supported by my father who worked as a bank guard in HSBC. It was a very respectable job. We lived in a public housing flat of 200 sq ft. Since there were seven of us, we had to build a "mezz" floor above the bed of my parents."

"飲水思源" (When you drink water, think of its source) is my firm belief. It is my parents, my father in particular urged me to study hard and be good.
*Composition Fee of Bachelor’s Degree (First Year Study) and the Median Monthly Domestic Household Income

*The figures include Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral Degrees
Source: HKU Congregation graduation lists

*Composition fee includes registration, tuition, laboratory, workshop, and health service fees.
The figures shown are the lowest fee of that particular year.
Sources:
• Calendar 1961-2008, The University of Hong Kong
• Hong Kong-25 Years’ Development: Presented in Statistical Data and Graphics (1967-92), Census & Statistics Department, HK
• 1996 Population By-census: Summary Results, Census & Statistics Department, HK
• 2006 Population By-census: Summary Results, Census & Statistics Department, HK
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At its first year, the Fund received support from HKU Foundation and society, including Philip K H Wong Foundation, Mr Yeung Kwok-keung 楊國強, and the Class of 1983 at their Silver Jubilee.

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