26/09/2001

HKUST Neuroscience Project Selected as Area of Excellence

The "Molecular Neuroscience: Basic Research and Drug Discovery" project of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) has been chosen by the University Grants Committee (UGC) as one of the Areas of Excellence (AoE) this year.

Through the establishment of this AoE, a multidisciplinary team led by HKUST in collaboration with participating universities and regional institutions will combine their expertise to advance the understanding of neuroscience. The leading aim of the research is to make major contributions towards understanding the complex processes underlying brain function as well as discovery of novel drugs for the treatment of neurological disorders.

"A unique feature of this research program is the combination of molecular approaches with the utilization of Chinese herbal medicine as a source of potential neuro-drug candidates," says Prof Nancy Ip, Program Director of the project. Prof Ip is Director of the Biotechnology Research Institute as well as Department Head and Professor of Biochemistry at HKUST.

The five-year research will receive an allocation of HK$26.8 million from UGC. Launched in 1998, the AoE scheme aims at supporting UGC-funded institutions to build upon their existing strengths with a view to achieve an international standard of excellence.

As the population of the world ages, the incidence of debilitating disorders of the brain, such as Alzheimer's disease and stroke, increases dramatically. Neuroscience--the study of the brain--is therefore considered to be one of the most important areas of modern biomedical research. Continued discoveries in neuroscience and the completion of the genome project in recent years are bringing scientists closer to conquering many diseases of the human brain.

The development of an AoE in the field of molecular neuroscience in Hong Kong would have significant scientific, economic and social relevance. HKUST's multidisciplinary researchers and their collaborators have the expertise and international reputation to make considerable advancement in this field. Hong Kong's close ties with the Chinese Mainland also allow it to collaborate effectively with their leading neuroscientists and gain access to a wealth of potentially neuroactive traditional Chinese medicines.

The basic research and drug discovery activities under this AoE are expected to offer tremendous opportunities for local entrepreneurs to invest in biotechnology start-up companies. Hong Kong's innovative business culture and extensive international ties also give it unique advantages in seeking strategic alliances with major pharmaceutical and biotechnological companies.

Prof Paul Ching-Wu Chu, President of HKUST, says: "The establishment of this AoE yet again highlights our relentless pursuit of excellence and underlines HKUST's status as a leading research university in Hong Kong and the region. This AoE will assist the growth of Hong Kong's biotechnological infrastructure and ultimately the strengthening of our economy."

The AoE team is made up of researchers from HKUST, the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Baptist University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Collaborative ties have been established to tap into regional and international expertise. The program will also benefit from the support provided

through HKUST's corporate network and the Hospital Authority-HKUST Neuroscience Alliance.