



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

# The Hong Kong Foundation: an update on the impact of your support

April 2026

# Welcome from the Chair: Dr Guy Look

(BCom Industrial Economics and Business Studies, 1979;  
DUniv, 2013)

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Dear friends of the Foundation,

It is my privilege to introduce you to the 2025 edition of the University of Birmingham Hong Kong Foundation impact report. In a year where the University has celebrated its 125th anniversary, and its many accomplishments in that time, it is a fitting moment to reflect on the enduring and evolving relationship between Birmingham and Hong Kong—a partnership built on shared knowledge, mutual respect and a determination to address the world's most pressing challenges.

I am struck by the sheer breadth of our collective impact. As you read through these pages, you will see how our support is driving innovation that spans from tackling regional issues to challenges that are faced across the globe. Ground-breaking new research into nasopharyngeal carcinoma brings together experts from Birmingham and The Chinese University of Hong Kong to tackle a disease that affects so many in our region, and our work in decarbonising the cold chain industry and mapping microplastics demonstrates our resolve to engineer a more sustainable future for our planet.



Our commitment to nurturing the next generation remains at the heart of our mission. The Geoffrey Ma Scholarship programme continues to flourish, and it is a joy to see our scholars excelling in diverse fields such as medicine and engineering. Through the Global Futures programme and our expanded Empowering Physical Education initiative, we are ensuring that young people—whether university students or school children—are equipped with the resilience, leadership skills and cultural intelligence needed to thrive in a complex and changing world.

These achievements are a testament to the power of collaboration. Partnerships with local institutions, including The University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The Chinese University of Hong Kong, are stronger than ever, creating a vibrant ecosystem of knowledge-sharing and progress.

I would like to express my full appreciation to our founding stakeholders, alumni and donors. Your generosity and vision are the lifeblood of this Foundation, and your support enables us to turn ambitious ideas into a reality that benefits both Hong Kong and the wider world.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our shared vision. It is important to appreciate that our university takes seriously our commitment to Hong Kong, and this underpins the work of the Foundation. I look forward to seeing what we can achieve together in the years to come.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Guy Look'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

**Dr Guy Look**

Chair of the University of Birmingham Hong Kong Foundation

# The Geoffrey Ma Scholarships: Empowering Hong Kong students through education

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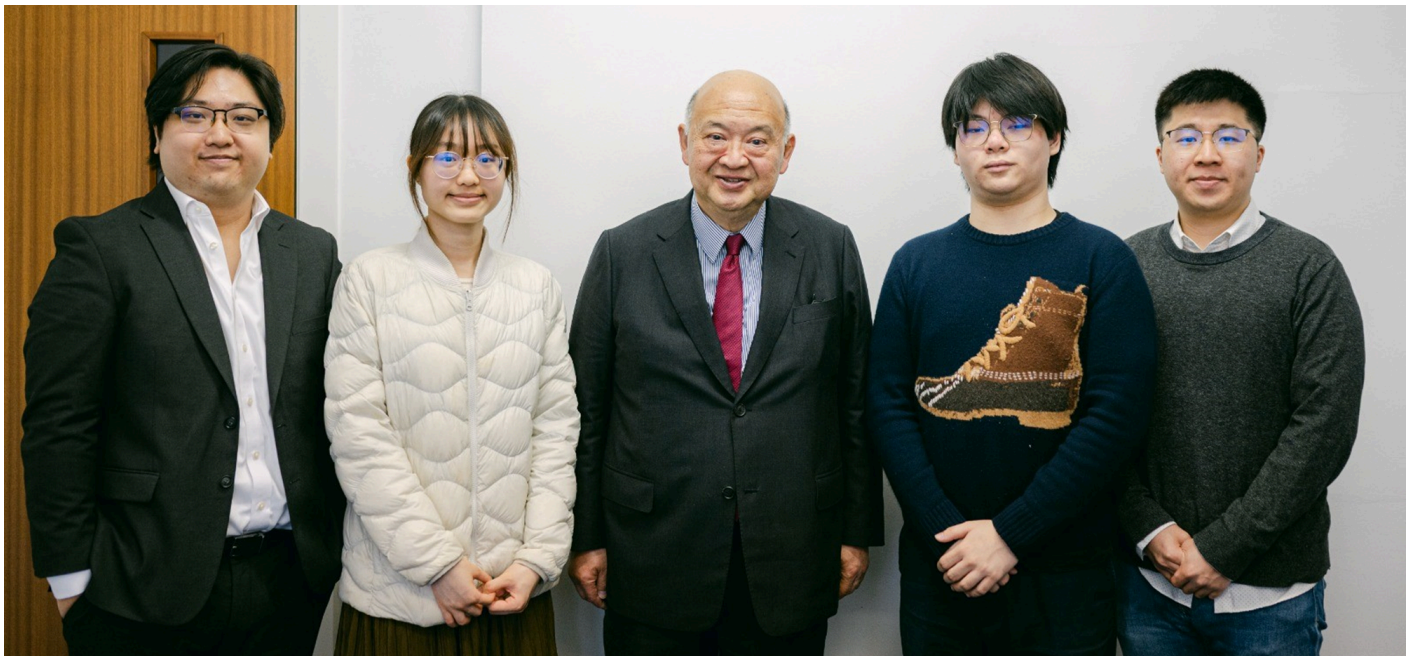
Established in 2021, the Geoffrey Ma Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Scholarships stand as a testament to the University of Birmingham's enduring commitment to Hong Kong. Funded by the Hong Kong Foundation, these merit-based scholarships are designed to support outstanding undergraduate and postgraduate students from the region.

The programme serves a dual purpose: it recognises and nurtures exceptional academic talent whilst simultaneously strengthening the University's visibility and reputation in Hong Kong. By alleviating financial barriers and providing a prestigious platform for high achievers, the scholarships cultivate a diverse and intellectually vibrant student community.

The programme has supported 21 Geoffrey Ma Scholars, a cohort defined by their academic brilliance and leadership potential. The current reporting period highlights several success stories that exemplify the calibre of these students. Aidan Lee, a student from the Chinese International School, was accepted into the highly competitive MBChB Medicine programme at the age of sixteen, having achieved three A\* grades while self-studying alongside his International Baccalaureate. Similarly, Wai Ho Ricco Tsang, a graduate of the University of Hong Kong, completed his MSc in Railway Systems Engineering and Integration with distinction at Birmingham and has since secured a position with Arup in the UK, highlighting the programme's role in launching global careers.

The scholarships have helped engage secondary schools across Hong Kong and have been central to recruitment, demonstrating a strong preference among local students to choose Birmingham, and the presence of these scholars on campus enriches the academic environment creating a living bridge between the UK and Hong Kong.

The strategic vision for the Geoffrey Ma Scholarships involves broadening the scope of applicants. Future efforts will focus on encouraging applications from a wider array of academic disciplines, ensuring that the cohort represents the full breadth of the University's research and teaching strengths. The team plans to intensify outreach to secondary schools, using the success stories of current scholars to inspire the next generation, solidifying Birmingham's status as a destination of choice for Hong Kong's most ambitious students.



The Hon. Geoffrey Ma meeting with the Geoffrey Ma Scholars studying at the University in March 2025

# The 2024 Hong Kong Global Futures Programme

**This project is in collaboration with Common Purpose and The University of Hong Kong (HKU).**

In an increasingly interconnected world, cultural intelligence is a critical skill for future leaders. The Global Futures Programme is a flagship initiative delivered in partnership between the University of Birmingham, the University of Hong Kong and Common Purpose. It is designed to take students—particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds—out of their comfort zones and immerse them in a new cultural context where students build resilience, develop leadership skills and engage with diverse perspectives to prepare for the complexities of the global workplace.

Since 2023, the Foundation has enabled 85 students to take part in this enriching experience. The feedback speaks volumes about its success: 99% of participants stated they would recommend the programme to a friend, and 85% reported feeling greater confidence in their leadership abilities.

Students move beyond theoretical learning to address live societal challenges with local partners through cultural attachments. Working with FoodSPORT, students explored how to combine sport with food assistance to tackle poverty; with the African Centre HK, they engaged in projects fostering social inclusion; and with the HK Society of Psychological Innovation, they examined technological solutions for mental wellbeing.

Another success of the programme is that it helps in bridging the gap between current students and our established alumni community. Participants have the unique opportunity to meet with Hong Kong-based graduates, gaining invaluable mentorship and first-hand insights into building international careers. This intergenerational exchange has proven to be a highlight for our students, inspiring them to envision their own professional futures on a global stage.

The Global Futures Programme will continue to be a cornerstone of the University's student mobility strategy. Future aims are to expand the network of local partners in Hong Kong, providing an even richer array of cultural attachments across the NGO, corporate and social enterprise sectors. We aim to create a sustainable talent pipeline between Birmingham and Hong Kong, and we remain committed to ensuring that students from all backgrounds have access to these life-changing global experiences, to build the next generation of alumni who are not only ready for work, but ready for the world. By empowering students to contribute meaningfully to Hong Kong society during their visits, we ensure a relationship of mutual benefit and enduring impact, and we look forward to continuing this journey with your generous support.





The group we have this year is excelling in communication. They demonstrate excellent teamwork and collaboration skills, as they are quick in discussing ideas and reaching agreements. This ability to communicate effectively allows them to streamline decision-making and turn discussions into actionable plans efficiently. Their proactive approach to teamwork is commendable and has been a key strength in their performance.

**Healthy Wong - Founder & Director, Symbol Of Alliance Limited**



My month working with FoodSPORT in Hong Kong changed how I see my future. As an Economics student, I've always been interested in how theory meets real life, and this placement showed me exactly that.

Living in Hong Kong also gave me confidence that I want to work abroad long-term. The city's energy and the way local organisations adapt to global challenges was inspiring. Back at university, I'm using what I learned to get more involved with our Social Impact Society.

**Dayaan Ukaye, Economics student**



# Paving the way for a sustainable future

**Professor Yulong Ding, Founding Chamberlain Chair of Chemical Engineering, in collaboration with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU).**

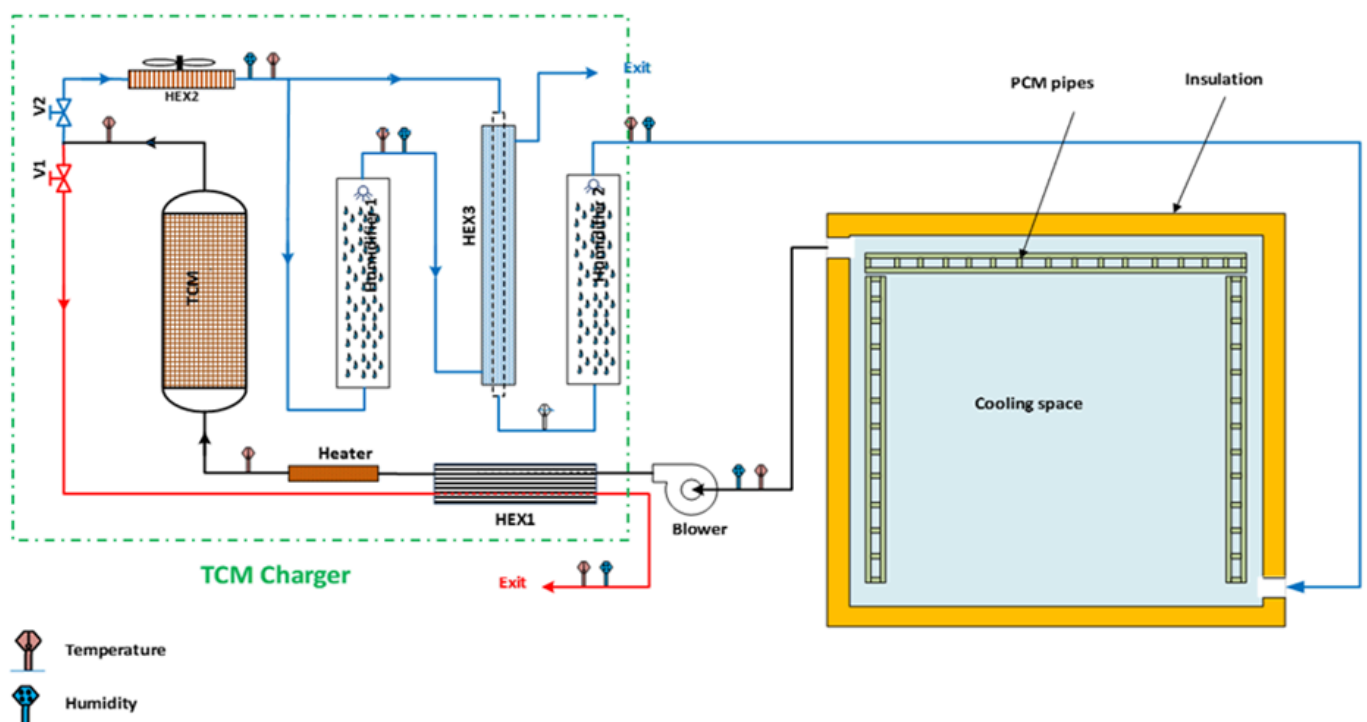
Cold-chain transport is the backbone of food and pharmaceutical security, essential for safely delivering temperature-sensitive goods. However, in dense, rapidly developing regions like Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, conventional diesel-powered refrigeration units are a major source of carbon emissions and air pollution.

As the planet grapples with the issue of climate change, this project plays a valuable role in addressing the urgent need for a zero-emission alternative in cold-chain transportation. By integrating Composite Phase Change Material (cPCM) for cold storage with Thermochemical (TCM) technology for passive refrigeration, the team aims to create a hybrid system that eliminates the need for diesel engines entirely, offering a cleaner, quieter and more efficient solution for urban logistics.

Thanks to the support of the Hong Kong Foundation, the project has successfully transitioned from conceptual design to a fully functional prototype. Recent work has focussed on optimising the thermal and airflow dynamics of the mobile units, and the team achieved a major technical breakthrough by developing a closed water-air loop configuration that allows for consistent, repeatable cold supply below 8°C. Although initial tests revealed challenges with heat-exchanger effectiveness (originally at 35-45%), a redesigned counter-flow core with internal turbulence wires has significantly improved performance.

The project has now demonstrated, at prototype scale, a fully diesel-free cooling capability. This is the first integrated demonstration of a PCM+TCM hybrid for mobile cold chains, turning laboratory concepts into a practical solution with a clear set of control strategies. The system not only reduces emissions but also offers grid-friendly charging options, aligning perfectly with Hong Kong's decarbonisation goals.

The immediate focus is now on engagement with operators, manufacturers and policymakers to move from test rigs to practical fleet trials. For Hong Kong, this technology promises cleaner air, quieter night-time deliveries and a resilient logistics network capable of withstanding power outages or extreme heat, positioning local industry at the forefront of the next generation of green refrigeration.



Schematic of the system

# Climate change and mental health in young people

Dr Stephanie Burnett Heyes and Dr Christian Chan (HKU, Tokyo ICU).

As the climate crisis intensifies, its impact extends beyond the physical environment to affect the psychological wellbeing of young people globally. This collaborative project between the University of Birmingham and the University of Hong Kong addresses a critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of the crisis: youth mental health. The research is driven by the premise that climate change is the greatest threat humanity has faced, and that the anxiety it generates among the younger generation requires urgent attention. The project aims to answer pivotal questions: Are young people in Hong Kong concerned? Does this concern lead to action or paralysis? And crucially, is it possible to be engaged in climate action while maintaining good mental health?

The research team, supported by a wider 'Climate Change and Mental Health' taskforce, has made significant breakthroughs across two primary research strands. The first project involved a comprehensive survey of students at the University of Hong Kong. To ensure cultural accuracy, the team developed Traditional Chinese translations of survey measures. The findings revealed that while young people in Hong Kong experience genuine grief regarding environmental degradation, this emotion often serves as a catalyst for pro-environmental behaviour rather than leading to 'eco-paralysis', where the sheer scale and complexity of environmental problems leads to feelings of helplessness, resulting in inaction or a failure to make necessary behavioural changes. This catalytical reaction is particularly true for those who feel a strong personal connection to nature.

The second project developed an innovative laboratory model to test climate anxiety. Findings showed that the framing of climate information has a large impact on emotional stability; benign framing of climate facts maintained an emotional stability in the participant, whereas negative framing triggered a short-term increase in stress and anxiety. These vital findings regarding communication strategies were presented to the academic community at the British Environmental Psychology Society annual meeting in Nottingham in September 2025.

The implications of this research are far-reaching for charities, policymakers and educators. The project has established that responsible climate messaging is essential for safeguarding youth mental health. The next phase of the work will focus on translating these research findings into practical guidelines for communicating climate science. The goal is to foster 'constructive hope' and community solidarity, helping young people to remain engaged and committed to making a difference without succumbing to hopelessness or anxiety. By empowering young people with the resilience to face these challenges, we are investing in a generation of leaders who are not only environmentally conscious but also psychologically equipped to drive sustainable change.



# Bridging research and clinical excellence

**Professor Deborah Falla, Chair in Rehabilitation Science and Physiotherapy, in collaboration with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU).**

Spinal pain is a leading cause of disability worldwide, necessitating advanced research and specialised clinical care. This project is a strategic collaboration between the University of Birmingham's Centre of Precision Rehabilitation for Spinal Pain and the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). This work aims to build research capacity and clinical expertise in Hong Kong through inter-institutional exchange, joint funding applications and the nurturing of postgraduate talent.

A key part of this collaboration has been the sponsorship of Geoffrey Cho Yu, a talented physiotherapist from Hong Kong. With funding support, Geoffrey pursued a Master of Research in spinal pain at Birmingham, co-supervised by experts from both universities. His research journey has been highly successful; he presented his findings at the prestigious 2024 Congress of the International Federation of Manual and Musculoskeletal Physical Therapists (IFOMPT) in Basel, Switzerland, and has since progressed to a PhD programme at the University of Birmingham focussing on precision rehabilitation.

Professor Deborah Falla visited Hong Kong in June 2024 and 2025, delivering practical workshops and lectures to physiotherapists at PolyU and Tung Wah College, as well as sharing expert clinical knowledge to local practitioners. The collaboration has supported two successful grant applications at PolyU, including the 'ASPIRE' project (Adolescent Spine: Interdisciplinary Research for Excellence) and a teaching collaboration involving the University of Sydney.

The partnership is set to deepen as the joint research projects develop. The focus remains on raising the profile of physiotherapy research in Hong Kong and developing a cohort of clinician-researchers capable of leading the field. By continuing to link academic excellence with clinical practice, the project aims to improve patient outcomes for those suffering from spinal pain across Hong Kong



Professor Deborah Falla, University of Birmingham, visiting Hong Kong to deliver practical workshops and lectures at PolyU and Tung Wah College

# Empowering PE in Hong Kong

**Professor Joan Duda, Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology. This project builds on an initial three-year project with The Education University of Hong Kong (EduHK), funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, entitled 'Empowering Coaching HK'.**

The Empowering Physical Education in Hong Kong project addresses a critical need to enhance the quality of coaching and teaching practices within schools across Hong Kong. With physical education being a compulsory subject for nearly all students, there is a huge scope to benefit students throughout the region. The project is designed to create a motivational climate that encourages resilience, social inclusion, mental toughness, confidence and leadership among youth. By translating the 'Empowering Coaching™' principles into local context, the project aims to ensure that sports participation becomes a character-building experience for the next generation.

The past year has seen remarkable strides in both the reach and depth of the programme. The team has successfully established robust partnerships with five major sports associations: Hoops for Hope Asia, Action Sports Foundation Limited, the Hong Kong China Rugby Union, the Hong Kong China Tennis Association and the Hong Kong China Dragon Boat Association. These collaborations have been instrumental in co-designing practical, sport-specific activities that resonate with young people. In terms of capacity building, the project has trained 17 Sports Partner Tutors through an intensive 30-hour regimen. These tutors have, in turn, delivered an 18-hour combined course to a broader network, resulting in the upskilling of 219 youth sports coaches and 35 student coaches from EdUHK.

The educational component has been equally successful. Supported by the UoB Hong Kong Foundation, the 'Empowering PE™ Hong Kong' workshop was piloted with 34 in-service and pre-service teachers. Feedback has been exceptionally positive, with 92 per cent of participants reporting increased confidence in their ability to deliver empowering lessons.

Attendees specifically highlighted the value of practical tools which helped bridge the gap between theoretical motivational constructs and classroom application. The project's digital footprint has also expanded, with over 5,000 stakeholders engaging with online course materials, significantly raising public awareness regarding the benefits of positive sports environments.



Looking ahead, the project is poised for significant expansion. A proposal is currently under development with the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust to broaden the scope from sports coaching to a comprehensive physical education focus under the banner of 'Empowering PE@EdUHK'. The strategic plan for the next three years is ambitious, aiming to train ten new tutors who will lead a series of 49 workshops. This rollout targets 1,000 in-service and pre-service PE teachers, embedding these empowering principles deeply within the Hong Kong education system. Additionally, the team plans to host two major conferences at EdUHK to disseminate findings and further cement the partnership between the University of Birmingham and local Hong Kong educational bodies.

# Collaborative research on nasopharyngeal carcinoma and immune response

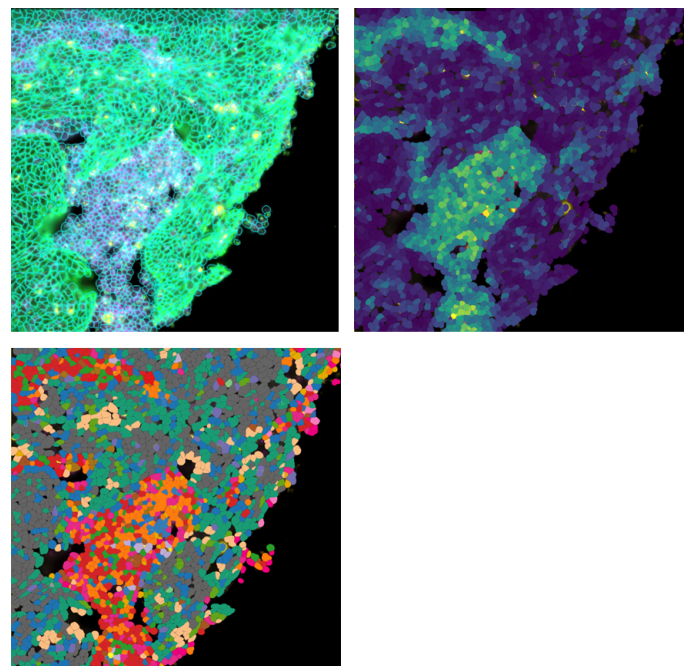
**Dr Graham Taylor, Senior Lecturer in Tumour Immunology, Institute of Immunology and Immunotherapy, in collaboration with The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).**

Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma (NPC) is a unique form of head and neck cancer that disproportionately affects populations in Southeast Asia, including Hong Kong. This unusual distribution is strongly linked to the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), which plays a critical role in the cancer's development. A major clinical challenge is that although immune cells heavily infiltrate these tumours, the cancer often evades immune detection, leading to a poor response to standard immunotherapies. This project brings together experts from the University of Birmingham and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) to characterise NPC tumours in unprecedented detail. By understanding the role of EBV, the impact of genetic mutations and the status of immune cells, the team aims to unlock new pathways for enhancing immunotherapy efficacy.

A significant achievement of this collaboration has been the establishment of complex legal and ethical frameworks required to transfer human tumour tissue samples from Hong Kong to the UK, marking the first collaborative research of its kind between the two teams. Utilising the University of Birmingham's newly acquired NanoString CosMX spatial molecular imager, the researchers can now analyse the activity of 1,000 genes within millions of individual cells across multiple tissue samples. This cutting-edge spatial biology technology provides a level of detail previously unattainable, allowing the team to map the tumour environment with precision.

The analysis of these samples generates vast and complex datasets, which are being processed using the University's supercomputer, BlueBEAR. By applying advanced machine learning algorithms, the team is beginning to unravel why NPC tumours manage to evade immune system eradication despite the presence of immune cells. The successful transfer and analysis of the first batch of tumour samples represents a major logistical and scientific milestone, with further batches scheduled for analysis in the coming months.

The data generated from this high-resolution analysis will be invaluable for addressing future research questions and refining treatment strategies. The partnership is expected to lead to a series of follow-on studies based on the scientific insights currently being generated. Ultimately, the goal is to translate this biological understanding into better, more targeted treatments for patients. The team remains immensely grateful for the Hong Kong Foundation's support, which has been the catalyst for this vital, cross-border research effort.



**Three different views of a small section of NPC tumour (0.5mm x 0.5mm)**

Top left  
Green cells are non-cancer tissue. The cancer is coloured purple.

Top right  
Classification of the tissue into cancer (dark blue) and non-cancer (green/yellow).

Bottom left  
Sub-classification of the different types of immune cells based on their gene expression patterns (red/orange).

# Mapping microplastics

**Professor Iseult Lynch, Professor of Environmental Nanosciences and Professor Stefan Krause, Professor of Ecohydrology and Biogeochemistry, working in collaboration with The University of Hong Kong (HKU).**

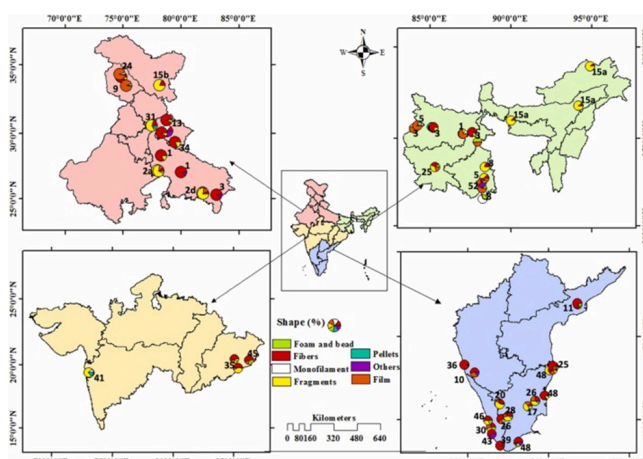
Microplastic pollution is a rapidly escalating global crisis, with projections suggesting that plastic waste in river systems could rise from 360 million tons to 2 billion tons by 2050. In response, the 'Mapping Microplastics' project, part of the global '100 Plastic Rivers' initiative, uses non-professional volunteers and advanced scientific analytics to monitor contamination in freshwater and groundwater systems. This work is critical for understanding the scale of the problem and informing policy decisions. The project represents a significant collaboration between the University of Birmingham, the University of Hong Kong and SUSTech in Shenzhen, highlighting the Foundation's role in facilitating international scientific cooperation.

A central pillar of this work is the team's targeted research within the Pearl River Delta. As a hub of global manufacturing, this region serves as a critical environment for understanding industrial pollution. By mapping contamination pathways, the project aims to directly influence the region's biggest microplastics producers, providing the evidence needed to drive sustainable changes across key industries, including textile manufacturing, automotive production and packaging. This work highlights the Foundation's role in facilitating international scientific cooperation between the University of Birmingham, the University of Hong Kong and SUSTech in Shenzhen.

There have been substantial achievements over the last year, with the team analysing over 1,500kg of sediment and 1 million litres of river water collected from over 30 countries. A major operational success has been the commissioning of a new pyrolysis instrument—generously co-funded by the Foundation. This device uses thermal decomposition in an oxygen-free environment to break down organic waste, significantly boosting the team's capacity to identify complex pollutants. In addition, the appointment of Bridge Fellow Dr Sophie Comer-Warner, an aquatic biogeochemist specialising in chemical movement within water systems, has injected tremendously valuable expertise into the team.

Importantly, the Foundation's flexible funding allowed the team to expand their research scope to include groundwater systems—a critical but under-researched area. Sampling at 20 wells across varied aquifers has revealed widespread contamination, with detailed analysis identifying pollutants linked to specific industrial outputs, such as polypropylene (ubiquitous in packaging and plastic production) and tyre-wear particles (stemming from the transport and logistics sectors). The research has also highlighted regional variations; for instance, fibres (primarily from the fashion and textile industries) were the most common pollutant in Indian surface waters, while heavier fragments dominated sediment layers.

The project is now entering its dissemination phase, with results in advanced preparation for submission to the prestigious journal 'Nature Water'. Future plans involve a significant expansion of the international research network, applying the successful regional funding model used in Hong Kong to new territories including India, Sweden and Africa. This expansion will further cement the University of Birmingham's position as a global leader in environmental nanoscience, and we are grateful to the Hong Kong Foundation for its continued support in enabling this vital work.



The example (left) highlights the differences in dominant microplastic shapes in surface water and sediment in India. Fibres were most common in surface waters, while fragments dominated sediments due to higher density.

# A thank you from our Vice-Chancellor

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The last year has been one of real celebration for the University of Birmingham. As we marked our 125th anniversary, we reflected on the partnerships and relationships that make our university so special. Our relationship with Hong Kong remains one of our longest and most valued connections and is built on a shared commitment to opportunity, collaboration and global impact.

I want to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude for your support. Whether through your time, expertise or financial contributions, your generosity makes the achievements highlighted in this report possible.

It is wonderful to see the incredible impact of our collaboration. Our research initiatives are driving solutions to some of society's most pressing challenges. The work into nasopharyngeal carcinoma – a disease that affects so many in the Hong Kong region – is a testament to what we can achieve when we bridge research and clinical excellence. Similarly, the efforts of Professor Yulong Ding to decarbonise the cold chain industry demonstrate our shared resolve to create a greener and more sustainable future.

Students, of course, remain at the heart of our mission. The Geoffrey Ma Scholarships and our various mobility programmes, such as Global Futures, ensure that bright and talented individuals have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background, by equipping them with the skills and experience that will help them succeed in a changing and connected world.

Thank you again for your continued support and for being part of this shared journey. Together, we are building a legacy of innovation and partnership on a global scale that will benefit future generations in Hong Kong, Birmingham and beyond.

**Professor Adam Tickell**  
Vice-Chancellor and Principal



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