

Regulations on the awarding of individual doctoral grants through the Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program

27.01.2025

1. Principle and aims

The Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS), with the support of associated faculties and private foundations¹, awards each year a limited number of competitive, individual MD-PhD grants to promising young physicians who wish to get a formal research training in natural sciences, in public health sciences, in clinical research or in biomedical ethics, in addition to their medical education. The Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program is open to graduates in human medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry who are matriculated as MD-PhD student at one of the Swiss Universities contributing financially to the Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program as listed under article 5, and who are enrolled in a local MD-PhD program. The aim of the dual training is to equip MD-PhD graduates to pursue a career combining research and clinics in an academic setting, to become experts in translational medicine and to contribute to evidence-based medicine. The Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+) provides ideational support to the Program.

2. Fellowship duration, work quota and amount

Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships are awarded for a minimum of two to a maximum of three years, within a time window of four years starting from the date of matriculation as MD-PhD student. This time window may be extended by a maximum of one year in justified cases. The reasons for requesting an extension of the time window must be explained in the application.

During the support period, grantees must in principle devote at least 80% of a full-time employment to their doctoral project. For clinically-oriented MD-PhD projects, grantees who have clinical duties next to their research activities, can request to devote a lower work quota, but at least 60% of a full-time employment, to their doctoral project. The maximum duration of the grant remains the same, irrespective of the work time percentage devoted to the doctoral project. All grantees need to be matriculated as MD-PhD students and to comply with the requirements of the local doctoral program in which they are enrolled for the entire duration of the grant. A prolongation of the grant is not possible.

The grant is awarded ad personam and covers the gross salary of the grantee as well as the social security contributions to be paid by the employer. Grantees must be employed by their university during the support period and the grant must be administered by the grant administration office of their university.

¹ The list of universities and foundations supporting the Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program is available on the SAMS website: sams.ch/md-phd.

The annual gross salary of the grantee is calculated on the basis of the SNSF highest salary scale for doctoral students for the entire duration of the grant. The employer's social security contributions are added according to the local flat rates defined by the SNSF.

3. Organization of the Program

The SAMS is responsible for the administrative and scientific management of the Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program. It coordinates the Program and is the point of contact for associated faculties and their local MD-PhD programs, for private funders and for partner organizations.

The SAMS prepares and publishes the calls for applications, appoints the Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee and organizes the two-step evaluation procedure. It is the point of contact for applicants, it checks applications for formal eligibility and completeness, and prepares the documents for the Committee who is in charge of the scientific evaluation. The Committee's recommendations are submitted for approval to the SAMS Senate, respectively to private funders, depending on the terms of their agreement with the SAMS. The SAMS communicates the final decisions to applicants.

The SAMS is further responsible for the management of awarded grants, for the payment of annual instalments to the grant administration office of the host institution of grantees and for the evaluation of scientific and financial reports.

4. Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee

The Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee is responsible for the scientific evaluation of applications. It submits its recommendations for approval to the SAMS Senate, respectively to private funders, depending on the terms of their agreement with the SAMS.

The Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee is composed of distinguished researchers with expertise in basic biomedical research, clinical research, public health sciences or biomedical ethics. Committee members are elected ad personam. They are active in various research institutions across Switzerland. The SAMS supports a fair representation of associated faculties and fosters diversity of the Committee members.

Private foundations financially supporting the program can each delegate one representative with scientific expertise and research experience as Committee member with voting rights. In accordance with the SAMS statutes, the Committee is chaired by a member of the SAMS Executive Board who is elected by the SAMS Senate. Committee members are elected by the SAMS Executive Board. The Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee can appoint ad hoc members for a specific call or request external reviews if additional expertise is required for the evaluation. Finally, the Committee can make suggestions regarding the general organization of the Program to the relevant deciding organs.

5. Associated entities (faculties, schools, departments)

The following faculties and schools are associated with the Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program, in accordance with the terms of their agreement with the SAMS for the period 01.02.2025 – 31.01.2027:

Faculty of Medicine, University of Basel
Faculty of Medicine, University of Bern
Faculty of Medicine, University of Geneva
Faculty of Biology and Medicine, University of Lausanne
Faculty of Medicine, University of Zurich
School of Life Sciences, EPFL

MD-PhD students matriculated at one of the entities listed under article 5 are eligible to apply for a Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowship, provided that they fulfil the personal and formal requirements of the present regulations.

6. Submission of applications

There is one annual call for applications for Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships. Detailed information about the Program and the submission requirements are available on the SAMS website at sams.ch/md-phd. The call can include specific information complementing the present regulations.

The submission deadline is published well in advance, generally three months before the closing date. The submission deadline is relevant for assessing the personal and formal eligibility of the applicant.

Applications for Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships must be submitted electronically according to the requirements defined by the SAMS and must contain all the necessary information and documents.

7. Personal and formal requirements

Applicants for a Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowship must fulfil the following requirements:

- a. they have successfully completed their studies in human medicine, veterinary medicine or dentistry, or will have completed their studies on the envisaged start date of the grant;
- b. they have obtained their medical degree (Swiss state examination or equivalent degree) generally shortly before and no more than five years before the submission deadline;
- c. they are admitted as doctoral students to one of the local MD-PhD programs of an entity (faculty, school or department) associated with the Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowships Program listed under article 5, and comply with all the local requirements. The head of the local MD-PhD program guarantees the admission in writing;
- d. they have the support of a thesis supervisor for the entire duration of the grant. In addition, the host institution guarantees funding for a fourth doctoral year after expiration of the grant, if necessary to complete the doctorate;
- e. they carry out their doctoral work in Switzerland. Research stays abroad are possible during the grant if in agreement with the thesis supervisor and with the regulations of the local MD-PhD program in which the student remains enrolled.

An extension of the eligibility window defined under article 7b can be requested for the following reasons:

- maternity leave (18 months per child);
- paternity, adoption or parental leave (effective duration, up to maximum 18 months per child);
- long-term inability to work due to illness or accident (effective duration);
- care duties (effective duration);
- military or civilian service (effective duration).

Applicants must explain the reasons for applying for an extension of the eligibility window and properly document all relevant career breaks in the application.

8. Evaluation criteria and evaluation procedure

Applications that meet the formal requirements are evaluated scientifically according to the following evaluation criteria:

- a. the applicant's qualification (including her or his examination scores during medical studies);
- b. the applicant's scientific knowledge and demonstrated interest for research;
- c. the scientific relevance and the feasibility of the proposed doctoral project;
- d. the likelihood of the MD-PhD being successfully completed and the quality of support offered by the thesis supervisor;
- e. the applicant's aptitude for an academic-clinical career and her or his career plan;
- f. the applicant's performance during the interview with the Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee.

The evaluation procedure comprises two phases. In the first phase, each application that meets the formal requirements is evaluated in writing by two members of the Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee (referee and co-referee). The Committee selects the best applications based on the evaluation criteria 8a to e listed above. Applicants who are not selected for the second evaluation phase are informed in writing about the rejection of their application by the SAMS.

In the second phase, preselected candidates are invited to an interview with the Swiss National MD-PhD Evaluation Committee, during which they present their research project, their career plan and answer the questions of the Committee members. The Committee makes a final recommendation concerning approval or rejection of the applications and prepares a provisional distribution of the applications to be funded by each partner organization involved in the call. The final funding decision is made by the SAMS Senate, respectively by the decision-making body of the associated private foundations, in accordance with the terms of their agreement with the SAMS.

All applicants are informed in writing by the SAMS about the final decision regarding their application for a Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowship.

9. Grant administration, annual instalments and reporting duties

Following the award of a Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowship, grantees must request the opening of the grant in accordance with the requirements defined by the SAMS. The earliest possible start of the grant is announced in the call. The grant must start on the first day of a month and the start date can be postponed for a maximum of 12 months counting from the date of the decision letter.

The annual payments are made by the SAMS to the grant administration office of the host institution of the grantee.

Grantees must submit annual interim scientific and financial reports in accordance with the requirements defined by the SAMS. The scientific reports must provide in particular information on the progress in the project, on the results obtained, on a possible deviation from the original research plan, on the output from the project and on the planned next steps until the defence of the doctorate. The reports must be approved and co-signed by a member of the grantee's thesis committee in addition to the thesis supervisor. The financial reports, compiled by the grant administrative offices, must provide an account on the use of grants. Payment of the annual instalments depends on the approval of the interim reports by the SAMS, after consultation with the grant funder.

Grantees must also submit a final scientific and financial report to the SAMS within six weeks of completion of the grant. The final scientific report must give information about the doctoral project, its output, the planned next steps until the defence of the doctorate (if relevant) and about the future professional activities of the grantee. The consolidated financial report must cover the entire grant period. Grantees are required to update the output data relative to their grant once they have completed their MD-PhD according to the requirements defined by the SAMS.

Depending on the funder of the grant, additional reporting duties may apply.

In case of maternity, adoption, illness, accident, military service or other services recognized by the employer's local regulations and entitling the grantee to continued salary payments, the relevant insurance benefits must be credited to the grant account. The grant amount is increased by the funder to compensate for the salary costs which are not covered by insurance for one year at the most. In such cases, the maximum funding period is extended to include the duration of the continued salary payments.

Significant changes in the approved research work or research conditions (in particular in case of change of host institute or of thesis supervisor) must be notified immediately to the SAMS. Such changes require explicit approval by the SAMS and by the grant funder. In the event of premature termination of the MD-PhD project, the remaining amount of the grant must be returned to its funder. In case of non-compliance with the present regulations, part of or the entire grant amount can be reclaimed.

Support through a Swiss National MD-PhD Fellowship must be mentioned in all publications, posters and presentations resulting from the funded project.

10. Ethics, research integrity and open access

Research activities and methods that have ethical implications or may raise questions regarding ethical assessment must be declared in the application, in conformity with the Swiss laws and ethical standards. Furthermore, the rules of scientific integrity must be respected².

Grantees are further expected to ensure open access to all peer-reviewed scientific publications of their results.

These regulations replace the «Regulations on the awarding of individual doctoral grants through the national MD-PhD grants program» from November 2017, last adapted and approved by the SAMS Executive Board on 13 September 2022 and by the SNSF Research Council on 13 September 2022.

Approved by the SAMS Board on 27.01.2025.

² See: Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences (2021) : Code of conduct for scientific integrity.