

Regulations on the awarding of doctoral scholarships through the national MD-PhD Program

November 15, 2017

1. Principle and aims

The Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), with the support of private foundations¹ and in collaboration with the Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+), award each year a limited number of competitive MD-PhD scholarships 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 national program is open to graduates in human medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry who are enrolled as MD-PhD or PhD student at a Swiss University. 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.

2. Scholarship duration and amount

MD-PhD scholarships 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 or 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 scholarship, grantees must devote at least 80% of a full-time employment to their doctoral project. All grantees need to be matriculated as MD-PhD or PhD students and comply with the requirements of the local doctoral program in which they are enrolled for the entire duration of the scholarship. No prolongation of the scholarship is possible.

The scholarship 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 scholarship must be administered by the grant administration office of their university. The annual gross salary of the grantee is calculated on the basis of the SNSF highest salary scale for doctoral students increased by ten percent. The employer's social security contributions are added according to the local flat rates defined by the SNSF.

3. Organization of the program

The program is run jointly by the SAMS and the SNSF. The SAMS general secretariat coordinates the program, prepares the calls for applications, is the point of contact for the local MD-PhD Commissions and for the involved partner organizations. It provides scientific and administrative support

¹ A list of private foundations supporting the national MD-PhD program is available on the SAMS website: www.samw.ch/en/MD-PhD.

to the National Expert committee, organizes the second evaluation phase, submits the committee's decisions to the involved funders for approval and communicates the final decisions to applicants.

The SNSF is responsible for the management of awarded scholarships, for the payment of annual instalments and for the evaluation of scientific reports.

The local MD-PhD commissions of the five Swiss Medical Faculties are the first point of contact for applicants interested in applying for a national MD-PhD scholarship. They are responsible for the first evaluation phase and for the pre-selection of the applications to be recommended to the National Expert committee. The commission's composition and the evaluation procedure conform to the regulations of their home institution. Local MD-PhD commissions also ensure that their MD-PhD program complies with the standards defined by their home institution for the obtention of a doctoral title and for the supervision of doctoral students.

The National Expert committee is responsible for the evaluation of candidates pre-selected by the local MD-PhD commissions and for making a funding proposal to be approved by the individual funders, in accordance with their written funding agreement. The committee is also responsible to make suggestions regarding the general organization of the program to the competent decision organs. The National Expert committee is composed of distinguished researchers in basic biomedical research, in clinical research, in public health sciences and in biomedical ethics. The SNSF is represented by a minimum of two delegates in the committee; other partner organizations can each delegate one representative. The committee is chaired by the Vice-President Research of the SAMS and its members are confirmed by the Board of the SAMS. The National Expert committee can appoint ad-hoc members for a specific call if additional expertise is required for the evaluation.

4. Submission of applications

There is one annual call for applications for national MD-PhD scholarships. Detailed information about the program and requirements for proposals submission are available on the SAMS website at www.sams.ch/en/MD-PhD. The yearly call for proposals can include specific information complementing the present regulations.

Applications must be submitted according to the requirements defined by the SAMS to the local MD-PhD commission of one of the five Swiss Medical Faculties at which the applicant intends to be matriculated as MD-PhD or PhD student. The deadline for submission is December 15. This date is relevant for assessing the personal and formal eligibility of the applicant.

Applicants pre-selected for the national competition by their local MD-PhD commission are invited to submit their application to the SAMS. The deadline for the electronic submission of these applications by the local MD-PhD commissions to the SAMS is March 15.

5. Personal and formal requirements

Applicants for a national MD-PhD scholarship must fulfil the following requirements:

- they have successfully completed their studies in human medicine, veterinary medicine or dentistry at a Swiss university by the time the scholarship starts. Applicants with a foreign medical degree must have been legal residents of Switzerland for a minimum of two years by the submission deadline;

- they have generally obtained their medical degree directly before but no more than three years before the submission deadline;
- they are admitted as doctoral students in the local MD-PhD program of a Medical Faculty at a Swiss university and comply with all the local requirements;
- they have a guaranteed position as doctoral student and the support of a thesis advisor for the entire duration of the scholarship. In addition, the host institution guarantees funding for a fourth doctoral year after expiration of the scholarship, if necessary to complete the doctorate;
- they carry out their doctoral work in Switzerland. Research stays abroad are possible during the scholarship if in agreement with the thesis advisor and with the regulations of the local MD-PhD program in which the student remains enrolled.

6. Evaluation criteria and evaluation procedure

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

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

The evaluation procedure comprises two phases. In an initial phase, each local MD-PhD commission selects the best applicants among the ones who have submitted an application by the December 15 deadline and recommends them to the National Expert committee for the second evaluation phase. Applicants who are not retained for the second evaluation phase are informed in writing about the rejection of their application by the local commission. Each MD-PhD commission informs the SAMS general secretariat about the number of MD-PhD candidates who have submitted an application by the December 15 deadline, the number of candidates who fulfill the formal requirements of the national MD-PhD program and the number of candidates pre-selected for the national competition. There are generally 25 interview slots available in the second evaluation phase and each local MD-PhD commission can send up to 5 candidates, provided that the scientific quality is sufficient. Should not each commission select 5 candidates, the freed-up interview slots go back to a common pool available to the other commissions if needed. Allocation of these interview slots is made by the SAMS general secretariat by taking into account the success rate of the first evaluation phase of each local commission.

In the second phase, each pre-selected application is evaluated in writing by two members of the National Expert committee (referee and co-referee). All pre-selected candidates are then invited to an interview with the National Expert 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 organisation involved in the call. The actual awarding occurs through the respective organization, after approval by its final decision-making body, in accordance with its own internal regulations. Applicants who are not retained after

the second evaluation phase are informed in writing about the rejection of their application by the general secretariat of the SAMS.

7. Scholarship administration, annual instalments and reporting duties

Following the award of a national MD-PhD scholarship, grantees must submit the documents relating to their application to the SNSF via the electronic platform mySNF. They must request the opening of the grant, and submit intermediate and final reports, in accordance with the requirements defined by the SNSF. The earliest possible start of the scholarship is on September 1st of the year following the December 15 submission deadline. The scholarship must start on the first day of a month and can be postponed for up to 12 months counting from the earliest possible start.

Grantees must submit intermediate scientific reports (3 to max. 4 pages) to the SNSF at intervals defined in the decision letter providing information on the progress in the project, on the results obtained, on a possible deviation from the original research plan, on 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 advisor. Payment of the annual instalments depends on the approval of the intermediate reports by the SNSF.

Grantees must also submit a final scientific report to the SNSF within six weeks of completion of their scholarship. The 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. Grantees are required to update the output data relative to their scholarship in mySNF once they have completed their MD-PhD. Depending on the funder of the scholarship, additional reporting duties might apply.

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 the scholarship funder. In the event of premature termination of the MD-PhD project, the remaining amount of the scholarship must be returned to its funder. In case of non-compliance with the present regulations, part of or the entire scholarship amount can be reclaimed.

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

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 scholarship account. The scholarship 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.

These regulations replace the «Reglement für das nationale MD-PhD-Programm des Schweizerischen Stiftungsverbands» from Mai 2002 (completed in 2005, 2009 and 2010). Approved by the SAMS Board on 01.11.2017 and by the SNSF Research Council on 7.11.2017.