

Regulations on the awarding of individual doctoral grants through the national MD-PhD grants program

20 October 2022

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, 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 national MD-PhD grants program is open to graduates in human medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry who are matriculated as MD-PhD student at a Swiss University and enrolled in one of its associated local MD-PhD programs. 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. Grant duration and amount

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

¹ A list of private foundations supporting the national MD-PhD grants program is available on the SAMS website: sams.ch/md-phd.

contact for the associated local MD-PhD Commissions and for the involved partner organizations. It provides scientific and administrative support to the National MD-PhD 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 grants, for the payment of annual instalments and for the evaluation of scientific and financial reports.

The local MD-PhD commissions of the University of Basel, Bern, Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich, as well as the local MD-PhD commission of the Università della Svizzera italiana, are associated to the national MD-PhD grants program. They are the first point of contact for applicants interested in applying for a national MD-PhD grant. They are responsible for the first evaluation phase and for the preselection of the applications to be recommended to the National MD-PhD 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 MD-PhD Expert committee is responsible for the evaluation of candidates preselected by the associated local MD-PhD commissions and for making a funding proposal to be approved by the individual funders, in accordance with their funding agreement. The committee is also responsible to make suggestions regarding the general organization of the program to the competent decision organs. The National MD-PhD 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. 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; the committee's members are confirmed by the SAMS Executive Board. The National MD-PhD 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 grants. Detailed information about the program and requirements for proposals submission are available on the SAMS website at sams.ch/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 associated to the national MD-PhD grants program at which the applicant intends to be enrolled as MD-PhD student. The deadline for submission is December 15. This date is relevant for assessing the personal and formal eligibility of the applicant.

Applicants preselected 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 grant must fulfil the following requirements:

- a. they have successfully completed their studies in human medicine, veterinary medicine or dentistry at a Swiss university by the time the grant starts. Applicants with a foreign medical degree must have been legal residents of Switzerland for a minimum of two years by the submission deadline;
- b. they have obtained their medical degree generally shortly before and no more than five years before the submission deadline;
- c. they are admitted as doctoral students in one of the local MD-PhD programs associated with the national MD-PhD grants program and comply with all the local requirements;
- d. they are accepted as doctoral student and have the support of a thesis advisor 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 advisor 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 5b 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.

6. 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 National MD-PhD Expert committee.

The evaluation procedure comprises two phases. In an initial phase, each associated 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 MD-PhD 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 grants program and the number of candidates preselected for the national competition. There are a maximum of 27 interview slots available in the second evaluation phase. The local MD-PhD commissions of the universities of Basel, Bern, Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich can each send up to 5 candidates; the local MD-PhD commission of the Università della Svizzera italiana can send up to 2 candidates. Should not each commission select the maximum number of candidates allowed, the freed-up interview slots can 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 preselected application which fulfils the formal requirements of the national MD-PhD grants program regulations is evaluated in writing by two members of the National MD-PhD Expert committee (referee and co-referee). Preselected candidates are then invited to an interview with the National MD-PhD 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. Grant administration, annual instalments and reporting duties

Following the award of a national MD-PhD grant, grantees must submit the documents relative 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 grant is on September 1st of the year following the December 15 submission deadline. The grant 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 financial and scientific reports to the SNSF at intervals defined in the decision letter. Financial reports, compiled by the grant administrative offices, must provide an account on the use of grants. The scientific reports must provide 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 advisor. Payment of the annual instalments depends on the approval of the intermediate reports by the SNSF.

Grantees must also submit a final financial and scientific report to the SNSF within six weeks of completion of the grant. The consolidated financial report must cover the entire grant period. 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. Grantees are required to update the output data relative to their grant in mySNF once

they have completed their MD-PhD. Depending on the funder of the grant, 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 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 national MD-PhD grant 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 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.

These regulations replace the «Reglement für das nationale MD-PhD-Programm des Schweizerischen Stiftungsverbands» from May 2002 (completed in 2005, 2009 and 2010). Approved by the SAMS Board on 1 November 2017 and by the SNSF Research Council on 7 November 2017.

Adapted and approved on 29 August 2022 by the SAMS Executive Board and on 13 September 2022 by the SNSF Research Council. These regulations remain in effect until the expiration of the multiannual funding period 2021–2024.