

SSPH+ PhD Program in Public Health

Guidelines (Version 6, November 2018)

What this program involves

The SSPH+ PhD program is a structured **training and networking program** for PhD students who are working on a PhD thesis relevant to Public Health and are registered in one of the eight foundation universities of SSPH+. Students and supervisors should familiarize themselves with the guidelines governing the program. The key elements of the program are as follows:

- The program offers a structured learning environment for students. Students maintain a **portfolio** so that they and their supervisors can monitor the development of their scientific skills and competencies. The portfolio is a basis for regular assessment of the student's progress.
- The SSPH+ PhD program office organizes **courses** taught by national and international experts. The courses cover basic skills in public health research, advanced research methods, and thematic workshops. They are designed to allow students to develop a broad Public Health perspective and to acquire specialized skills.
- PhD students enrolled in the SSPH+ PhD program have free access to SSPH+ PhD courses (beside a processing fee of 30 CHF), and reduced fees to postgraduate SSPH+ network offerings such as the seasonal schools (Spring School and Summer School in Geneva, Summer School in Lugano and Winter School in Wengen). These internal SSPH+ offers are listed on the website and are subject to change. Students may apply for financial support to attend other external courses that are relevant for their studies. Students must consult the separate **guidelines for financial support of external courses**.
- The program awards an **SSPH+ PhD program certificate** which supplements the PhD degree awarded by the participating Swiss universities according to their regulations.
- The SSPH+ PhD program has been implemented according to the Bologna Standards and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

Admission requirements

- Students must be accepted by a qualified supervisor at one of the participating Swiss universities, and must be registered as a PhD student at the respective university.
- Students should register for the SSPH+ PhD Program at the beginning of their PhD project. Requests for registration are considered up to the end of the first year of studies.

- Registered students must comply with all rules and regulations set by the local university providing the PhD title.
- Doctoral committees must be established and must comprise at least three members.
- Applicants must submit a structured abstract (about 250 words) describing their research project and outlining its relevance to Public Health.
- Each PhD student, together with their doctoral committee, must submit a signed list of planned PhD training activities that cover the broad topics of Epidemiology, Social and Behavioral Science in Health Research, and Health Systems Research (with a minimum of 2 ECTS in each of the three fields). The content of activities, and number of ECTS, should be based on the PhD student’s knowledge of Public Health and educational background, and on the requirements of the planned PhD project (see study requirements below).
- PhD students and their supervisors must sign a written statement confirming that they accept the minimum standards and the requirements of the SSPH+ PhD program (see below). In order to be eligible to attend the SSPH+ PhD courses and courses of the SSPH+ Seasonal Schools at special conditions during the course of their PhD work, PhD candidates must complete the agreed-upon number of ECTS before the defense takes place and report the amount of ECTS earned as well as the date of the defense within two weeks after the defense has taken place.

Study requirements

Public Health is an interdisciplinary domain, and students from many different backgrounds enroll in the program. The program organizers have defined the following study requirements to ensure that students will graduate with a broad education across the various disciplines.

Training

The total number of required ECTS training credits depends on the student’s previous training and educational background in Public Health. The following table provides an overview of the minimum number of basic credits required. For each applicant, the final number of credits required will be determined on an individual basis.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with a Master’s degree in Public Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 ECTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with a Master’s degree in one of the core disciplines of Public Health (epidemiology; social and behavioral science in health research; health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 ECTS

systems research; or MDs with additional Public Health training	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students with a Master’s degree in a field related to Public Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 22 ECTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students with a Master’s degree not related to Public Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26 ECTS

The SSPH+ PhD program is implemented according to the Bologna Process and follows the guidelines of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). 1 ECTS credit corresponds to an approximate workload of 25-30 working hours. Course certificates are issued if students attend at least 80% of class hours, pass the required assessments, and turn in successful assignments.

A maximum of 20% of the required credit points can be earned through courses that do not grant official ECTS. However, these credit points need to reflect a workload similar to the one defined for official ECTS and must be approved by the supervisor and by the program directors. During work on the PhD, a maximum of 1 ECTS in total can be credited for active participation at an international scientific conference, including acceptance of an abstract as first author and an oral or poster presentation.

Public Health knowledge

PhD students in Public Health are expected to become experts in a specific field of PH research. They should also become familiar with the following fundamental concepts of Public Health:

- **Epidemiology:** determinants of health and illness, epidemiological study designs, sources of error and bias, causal inference, risk factors, statistical concepts for analyzing and interpreting data, etc.
- **Social and behavioral science in health research:** social conditions of health, health inequities, cultural and psychosocial factors that affect health and health behavior, theories and interventions in health promotion and prevention, and methods of quantitative and qualitative health research.
- **Health systems research:** effectiveness, efficiency and equity of health care systems; outcome research; basic knowledge of health economics; health policy.

Students should direct their studies towards achieving expert knowledge in one of these three fields (the area most relevant to the research project) and basic knowledge in the other two areas. Supervisors and PhD students must prepare a study schedule that covers the three fields with appropriate coursework.

- **Basic research skills** are part of the PhD training. Students should be able to:
 - Write a scientific paper, submit a grant application, and resolve ethical issues.
 - Pose innovative and important research questions, based on a thorough knowledge of the literature, public health needs, and relevant theoretical and conceptual models;

select an appropriate interventional or observational study design to address a research question.

- Work in a multi-disciplinary team, conduct ethical and responsible research, communicate the findings and implications of Public Health research effectively to scientific and lay audiences (through multiple modalities such as scientific writing, presentations, and teaching).
- Describe the policy implications of their own research and describe these implications for a broad audience.

Portfolio

SSPH+ PhD students will assess their progress themselves through their portfolios. They must meet annually with the members of their doctoral committee to discuss their progress on their PhD project and to adjust the training plan if necessary. After these annual meetings the supervisor sends a short note to the SSPH+ PhD program coordination office confirming that the meeting took place. If local institutions (e.g., graduate schools) also require these kind of meetings, they will count for the SSPH+ PhD portfolio.

The student's self-assessment documents should indicate in detail their learning process and demonstrate their competence to conduct research in their specific research area. Self-assessments also detail the process by which broader Public Health competencies were acquired, the development of personal and soft skills, and improvement in management and leadership competencies and other transferable skills. When gaps are identified, the working plan should be adjusted to fill these gaps.

Doctoral committee

A doctoral committee in line with the respective university or graduate school requirements and consisting of at least the thesis supervisor and two additional experts should be established to guide the student's PhD work. The committee discusses training requirements with the student, carries out the annual assessments, and meets with the student to discuss and support her/his progress on the PhD project.

SSPH+ PhD program certificate

Each university awards the **PhD degree** according to its own regulations.

After the PhD candidate has received the final PhD diploma from her/his university and all formal SSPH+ requirements have been met, **the SSPH+ PhD program certificate** is awarded. The student must have earned the agreed-upon number of ECTS, participated in annual meetings, and listed teaching activities and conference visits, including scientific presentations. In terms of scientific publications, the student needs to have a minimum of two peer-reviewed articles accepted for publication and one article accepted for peer review at a scientific journal. At least two of these three articles need to be first-authored by the doctoral student.

These activities are summarized in the final application document for the certificate, which is to be submitted to the SSPH+ PhD program coordination office along with a PDF file containing all course certificates, the final PhD diploma, and the thesis. The SSPH+ PhD program certificate will be awarded only if the signed final document is complete and approved by the academic directors.