

Guidelines for the ETH Zurich Career Seed Awards

April 2024

Overview

Career Seed Awards are intended to promote the establishment of a record of independent research at the postdoctoral level to facilitate the challenging transition to a successful future academic or industrial career.

They are targeted at high-performing researchers in an early postdoctoral career stage and offer a funding opportunity for independent postdoctoral projects at ETH Zurich to explore and develop new ideas, research directions and/or collaborations. Thereby, applicants must already exhibit a compelling record of scientific achievements at ETH Zurich during their time as a postdoctoral researcher and demonstrate the capability to carry out exciting research. Examples for such achievements are data, manuscripts, publications, prizes (e.g., poster awards), or other.

Beneficiaries are postdoctoral, non-tenured researchers at ETH Zurich, who are employed on a fixed term contract. Career Seed Awards will neither cover the applicant's salary nor provide support for ongoing research, but they will promote small autonomous research projects and innovative work that can be carried out in a short period of up to one year with a total contribution of CHF 30,000.

Calls are issued twice per year and are open to all fields of science and engineering represented at the ETH Zurich.

Nature of projects

This funding instrument is intended to support a large array of projects, ranging from basic to applied research, including:

- pilot or feasibility studies
- small, self-contained research projects
- secondary analysis of existing data
- development of (new) research methodology or technology

Eligibility

Eligibility to submit an application for a Career Seed Award is limited to postdoctoral researchers¹ at ETH Zurich.

¹ This includes all ETH Zurich employees in the categories "Postdoktorand/in" and "Oberassistent/in I/II". Employees in the categories "Wissenschaftliche/r Assistent/in II" and "Wissenschaftliche/r Mitarbeiter/in I/II" are included if they have a doctoral degree.

Applicants must have been employed as postdoctoral researchers at ETH Zurich for at least six months at the date of the submission deadline. They must already have scientific achievements from their time as postdoctoral researchers at ETH Zurich.

Applicants must hold at least a 50% position, which must be guaranteed for the intended duration of the project.

Applicants must have obtained their doctorate (PhD) a maximum of six years prior to the submission deadline. The decisive date is the date of the examination or viva voce.

The host professor must be in agreement with the proposal and confirm that they will support the applicant in carrying out the proposed project.

Joint applications from two postdocs are possible. Both applicants have to fulfil the eligibility criteria.

Funding

Career Seed Awards amount to a lump sum of CHF 30,000, with a duration of up to one year. The duration of the project has to be scientifically justified.

The following costs may be covered through a Career Seed Award:

- running, maintenance and materials cost such as consumables, rental fees, animal purchase/experimental costs or field costs
- user/service fees for machine time/technology platforms
- short-term personnel support for research or field assistants/technicians
- targeted travel (e.g., for short courses and/or visits to a collaborating laboratory, including registration or bench fees, if applicable)
- small items of equipment
- Open Access publication costs (unless taken over by the ETH Library)

A Career Seed Award may **not** be used to fund:

- the applicants' salary or salaries of collaborators
- doctoral students
- personnel employed by institutions other than ETH Zurich
- secretarial or office expenses
- basic IT infrastructure
- other basic infrastructure (purchase of major items of new equipment or replacement costs of laboratory and field equipment)
- commercialising of technologies and products towards the market (support for the development of technology, products or services is available from the [ETH Pioneer Fellowships](#) programme)
- any other costs not related to the project, including expenses of the host

The funds are managed through the accounts of the host professor. Applicants are given the role of Budget Manager to be able to dispose of the funds.

Call for projects

There are two Career Seed Award submission deadlines per year (1 March and 1 September at 17:00 Swiss local time).

Application procedure

The proposal must be submitted independently by the applicant and must be accompanied by a letter of support from the host professor.

The **proposal** is to be written based on the template provided at www.seedprojects.ethz.ch and submitted electronically using the ETH Zurich grant application system (eResearch), which can be accessed via the same page. The proposal must not exceed three pages (five if there are two applicants) and must include the following information (see the proposal template for more detailed information):

1. Achievements as a postdoctoral researcher at ETH Zurich, max. 1 page per applicant
2. Scientific information: project rationale, research plan, expected output, budget in table format; max. 2 pages (or max. 3 pages if there are two applicants)

Preliminary data are not required but may be included as a supplementary but not to be evaluated appendix if available. (Data sets of limited size can be uploaded in the ETH Zurich application system (eResearch) via the upload option "Supporting Information".)

A **CV** must also be uploaded to eResearch. The format is free, but must not exceed 2 pages, must include a photo and must contain at least the following information:

1. Education and employment history (start and end dates of education and employment terms must be clearly stated and all dates must include at least the month and year)
2. List of own publications (alternatively, provide a link to an electronic list on your website)

In addition, a **statement of motivation** (how will the Career Seed Award help you take the next step in your career?) of no more than ½ page must be uploaded to eResearch.

The format for the **letter of support** from the host professor is free. The letter must be requested by the applicant via the ETH Zurich grant application system (eResearch) from the host professor in due time. The host must register/log into the ETH Zurich grant application system (eResearch) and upload the letter himself/herself. The following points must be covered:

- approval of the proposal
- confirmation that the proposal was conceived independently by the applicant
- the terms of employment²
- the commitment to provide enough protected research time during the prospective award period as well as the necessary research infrastructure
- any other support given to the applicant such as funding, technical support, or scientific guidance
- appraisal of past achievements of the applicant as a postdoctoral researcher at ETH Zurich
- comments on the merit of the planned research

By signing the letter of support, the host professor acknowledges to have read the current guidelines.

Support letters by collaborators and/or partners are not required but will be taken into consideration if they are relevant for the implementation of the planned project. (Support letters can be uploaded in the ETH Zurich application system (eResearch) via the upload option "Supporting Information").

Applicants may only submit one application per submission date. It is not possible to resubmit a given project if the decision is negative, but a new proposal by the same applicant may be submitted at a subsequent submission date. Researchers may only hold one active Career Seed Award.

² In case the award period exceeds the period of employment of the applicant, the host professor must declare their commitment to extend/renew the employment relationship. If the award duration exceeds the maximum period of employment as a postdoc at ETH Zurich, the host professor should confirm that the postdoc will be promoted to Senior Assistant (Oberassistent/in).

Applications will be rejected for formal reasons if they are not complying with the guidelines, in particular, if they are not supported by a letter from the host professor.

Evaluation and selection

Applications will be evaluated by the ETH Zurich Research Commission, which will include ETH Zurich Postdoctoral Fellows in its Career Seed Awards evaluation panel. The evaluation will be based primarily on scientific quality and how well the application meets the goals stated above.

Specific review criteria for the evaluation process are:

- What have been the achievements/breakthroughs of the applicant as a postdoctoral researcher at ETH Zurich so far? In line with DORA³, achievements will be assessed on the base of qualitative evaluations of a diverse range of research outputs and activities.
- Has the project proposal been conceived independently of the host and how does it discern itself from the host's work and the applicant's own previous work?
- Is the proposed project creative, novel and potentially opening up new research avenues? How will scientific knowledge and/or technical capability be improved?
- How well is the proposed activity conceived and organised? Are the theoretical concepts and approaches/methodologies well-reasoned, appropriate and state-of-the-art?
- Will the scientific environment in which the work will be done contribute to the probability of success?
- Are the institutional support, equipment and other physical resources available to the applicant, as well as the requested resources, adequate for the project proposed?

The recommendations of the Research Commission will be communicated to the Vice President for Research, who makes the final funding decisions. Selection (approval/rejection) will be based on the overall assessment of the likelihood that the project will facilitate the establishment of a record of independent research by the applicant and help in promoting a successful academic or industrial career.

Notification of decisions made by the Vice President for Research will normally be sent to the applicant within four months of the respective submission deadline. Career Seed Awards can start immediately after formal approval, but no later than two months after the reception of the decision letter.

Use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

The use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies such as large language models, chatbots, and image creators in the preparation of an ETH Fellows proposal is permitted in principle, but at the applicant's own risk. It must be disclosed in the cover letter by providing detailed information about which generative AI tools were used, for what purpose, and to what extent, whether in writing the proposal, creating illustrations, or collecting and analyzing data.

Please note that the use of generative AI tools may raise concerns regarding intellectual property and scientific misconduct. Applicants are fully responsible for the content and accuracy of their research proposal. They must adhere to the principles of research integrity that apply at ETH Zurich. Since this extends to any and all parts of a proposal produced by an AI tool, applicants must ensure that all sources are cited appropriately and correctly, and that the documents do not contain factually incorrect, misleading, falsified, plagiarized, or fabricated information.

³ The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, <https://sfdora.org/>

The Research Commission therefore advises applicants to exercise maximum caution when using generative AI or AI-assisted technologies in the development of their research proposals.

Ethical issues

The research carried out in the framework of the project must comply with ETH Zurich's scientific integrity and research data management regulations. The applicant must state in the ETH Zurich grant application system (eResearch) if the intended research requires authorization or notification. By filling in the form the applicant confirms that they are aware of the legal regulations at the federal and cantonal levels that are relevant to the research project.

Furthermore, in the grant application system there are instructions on how to proceed if the intended research needs authorization or notification. This applies in particular to research on humans, research on human embryonic stem cells, research on animals, research on GMO or pathogens and research in developing countries.

Post-award processes

Open Access should be granted to publications resulting from a Career Seed Award, as per ETH's Open Access Policy. Publication fees (APC) are taken over by the ETH Library for the most important journals. Otherwise, the granted lump sum may be used to cover them.

The IP rights belong to ETH Zurich. ETH Zurich must be indicated as institutional affiliation for all publications resulting from research conducted within the framework of the project. The programme must be mentioned in publications, for example, in the form "This work was supported by an ETH Zurich Career Seed Award".

Career Seed Award holders are expected to submit a short report within six weeks after completion of the project to the Grants Office (seedprojects@sl.ethz.ch) using the template provided on the webpage. It should include the advances made in the course of the research project, reasons for not achieving the original goals (if applicable) and a list of outputs (for example: publications, patents, presentations at international conferences), as well as a statement on the benefits of the award to the applicants' professional development.

Christian Wolfrum
Vice President for Research ETH Zurich

Uwe Sauer
President ETH Zurich Research Commission