

HFSP Postdoctoral Fellowship Applications

Frequently Asked Questions 2010

“The exercise of writing a research description with a limited number of characters is good but difficult”. [From a previous applicant]

Q. Can I apply more than once?

A. There is only one deadline per year. Should your application not have been successful the first time, you may submit another application in the following round of awards, provided you still meet all eligibility criteria listed in our guidelines.

Q. Why did my host supervisor and my two referees not receive the email containing the access information for the online application portal?

A. Maybe you did not complete the contact section for the host supervisor and referees correctly (wrong email address?). There is also the possibility that the email was sent from the HFSP application server but the message went straight into the spam filter on the receiving end. Please make sure that the contact details are correct in your online application form and inform your host and referees to check their spam filter for messages with “HFSP” in the subject line.

Q. Why can applicants not format the proposal text in the different sections of the online forms?

A. The HFSP uses an online interface for all its competitions. Formatting (for example bold titles, page breaks or parts in italics) will be carried out automatically when converting submitted applications into pdf documents before sending them out for review. In this way, applicants for HFSP awards do not have to worry about formatting when preparing their proposal. The formatting style which is applied is identical to the style of the pdf that you can download yourself from the HFSP extranet (in the preview section of the online application).

Q. Why is it not possible to attach figures or tables to a fellowship application?

A. An outstanding fellowship application is a carefully crafted research proposal in which applicants put their innovative ideas and visions in writing. HFSP decided not to ask for any preliminary data and the assessment of the review committee members does not depend on figures or tables that rarely add significant insight to the proposed project.

Q. I have many contributions to scientific conferences (abstracts) but no lead or joint first author publication in a peer-reviewed international journal. Can I still apply for a LT or CD Fellowship?

A. No. However, if the scholarly tradition in your discipline puts more emphasis on publishing in conference proceedings you may submit your application by mentioning the different character of your publication record in your application. If you are not sure whether your publication record fits the HFSP requirements you may contact the HFSP Fellowship Office at fellow@hfsp.org prior to submitting an application form.

Q. I have only submitted manuscripts for publication. Am I eligible to apply?

A. No, you must have at least one manuscript accepted for publication. Submitted papers are not taken into account.

Q. Is it possible to have two host supervisors at two different locations?

A. Yes, but for practical and financial reasons we strongly recommend that both have their laboratories in the same city.

Q. Why do I have to upload my publications? Nobody will take notice anyway...

A. The availability of publications in electronic form is very important for the review committee members. In this way HFSP reviewers have a chance to collect further information about the quality of the past research carried out by the candidates. In addition, this is also helpful for the Fellowship Office to check your eligibility (as at least one lead author paper is required).

Q. What are my chances of success?

A. In the fellowship program we receive about 650-750 applications each year. In the preceding round the success rates were 17% for the Long-Term Fellowships and 28% for the Cross-Disciplinary Fellowships. Given budget limitations, only applications that clearly reflect the scientific objectives of the HFSP fellowship program and that receive excellent to outstanding marks by the reviewers will be funded.

Q. What criteria are used for selecting fellowship awardees?

A. The proposed fellowship project will be evaluated for its coherence with the scientific objectives of HFSP funded research. The review criteria are the applicant's background and accomplishments, the quality of the publications, the scientific excellence of the candidate's research project, and the change in research direction. These elements receive equal weight in the review; no weighting factors are applied to the criteria listed in the application guidelines. Successful HFSP awardees are outstanding researchers with a demonstrated record and a commitment to quality research. The review committee also considers opportunities applicants currently have or have had in the past.

Q. What exactly do you mean with "change in research direction"?

A. HFSP believes that for postdoctoral researchers to make significant contributions in a scientific field a broad training is necessary. Therefore preference is given to applicants who add new components to their research e.g. in learning new methods or changing to a new study system providing exposure to new theory or new literature.

Q. On what grounds were applications ineligible?

A. In award year 2009, 30 out of 709 submitted applications were ineligible. Of these about 2/3 failed due to formal eligibility criteria; the remaining were rejected because the projects were outside the scientific scope of HFSP. Common reasons for eliminating or rejecting applications in award year 2009 were:

- Applications to return to a former host supervisor or scientific collaborator.
- Candidates with no first author publication.
- Candidates who had already spent more than 12 months in the host country before or worked for more than 12 months in the host lab.
- Other formal reasons were: applications to stay in the same country, time since Ph.D. degree longer than 3 years, applications to return to the Ph.D. country.
- The description of the project was unfocused with poorly described objectives and/or clear lack of clarity with regard to the experimental plan.
- The most common reasons for eliminating applications on scientific grounds were that these represented research areas outside the scientific scope of HFSP such as clinically oriented research, projects with the sole emphasis on searching for new compounds with a potential impact for drug development, environmental projects or projects related to disease and/or drug development, projects in agriculture or ecology.

Q. Are there examples of successful HFSP fellowship applications?

A. Abstracts of funded fellowship projects from previous years are available on the HFSP web (see <http://www.hfsp.org/awardees/AwardeesLTF.php> for the Long-Term Fellowships and <http://www.hfsp.org/awardees/AwardeesCDF.php> for the Cross-Disciplinary Fellowships).

Q. What characterizes an outstanding fellowship application?

A:

- Successful completion of the previous research project as evident by at least one first (co-) author publication in an international peer-reviewed journal to which the candidate has made a significant contribution (the reference letters should elaborate on this aspect)
- Supportive reference letters by host supervisor and two referees
- The research plan is feasible and described in sufficient detail
- A successful project...
 - is an original study that marks a departure from the previous research (change in research direction)
 - exposes the applicant to new theory (literature) and methodology
 - contains new elements (e.g. developing or learning new methods) that open a completely new approach to the research problem even if risky
 - is deemed to make a major contribution to the research field

Q. In relation to the research project, what are common reasons for failure?

A:

- Application stands in sharp contrast to fellowship guidelines
- The research plan is only vaguely described and/or other important sections are simply too short
- Poor choice of project because
 - it is considered „standard“ despite its high level of sophistication
 - it merely represents a continuation of the Ph.D. project (no change in research direction)
 - it „was given“ to the applicant by the host supervisor (lack of originality)
 - it is part of a larger consortium (EC type network) that would make it difficult to appraise the fellow's individual contribution
 - the fellow's contribution is not considered to be intellectually challenging

Q. I have a Ph.D. degree in Experimental Physics. I did my thesis work in a life science research institute although I was working on a fundamental physical problem. I intend to switch completely to the life sciences during my postdoc. For which type of fellowship should I apply?

A. The distinction between Long-Term Fellowship (LTF) and Cross-Disciplinary Fellowship (CDF) is based on the discipline of the Ph.D. degree and the previous research. As long as it is evident by your degree and past research (publications) that you did work on a basic problem in physics, the name of your degree awarding institution does not play a role. You should submit an application for a CDF.

Q. I have a Ph.D. degree in Experimental Physics but was working on a biological problem during my thesis work. I intend to continue working in the life sciences during my postdoc. For which type of fellowship should I apply?

A. Even though the choice between LTF and CDF is largely based on the discipline of the Ph.D. degree, in borderline cases the previous research carried out by the candidate is important. Therefore, and in spite of your Ph.D. in Physics, you should submit an application for a LTF.

Q. My supervisor and my potential host supervisor encouraged me to continue with the same research subject because the results were a big success in the scientific community. Do I have a chance to get an HFSP fellowship despite a lack of change in research direction?

A. You may submit your application to HFSP but be prepared that due to the lack of change in research direction your application will be marked down by the reviewers. On the basis of the objectives of the fellowship program, HFSP instructs the reviewers to specifically evaluate the degree of change in research direction proposed by the candidates.

Q. I believe that my university degree is equivalent to a Ph.D. and in addition I have written several publications. Can I submit my application anyway?

A. No.

[For Europeans: if you are not sure whether your degree is equivalent to a Ph.D. you should consult the online database of EURYDICE at <http://www.eurydice.org/>. This is the official database of European Higher Education Degrees and you can access the online glossary on education to check if your degree qualifies as a Ph.D. equivalent. This database is also used by HFSP.]

Q. I have an M.D. degree. What does equivalent level of experience in research mean?

A. Individuals who have doctoral level degrees in the medical sciences (clinical context) must have an equivalent level of research experience as expected from a research based Ph.D. recipient prior to applying. This should be stated clearly in the online application by listing years of experience in basic research and/or publications in international peer reviewed journals.

Q. Can I submit my application while still finishing my Ph.D. thesis?

A. Yes, but fellows must have finished their Ph.D. at the start of the fellowship.

Q. What does this sentence in the application guidelines mean “Accomplishments and potential of the candidate relative to previous and current opportunities in terms of career stage and field of research”?

A. Applicants may be granted an exception regarding certain eligibility criteria (e.g. an interruption of the scientific career due to a parental leave or military service). In the selection process however, they will be treated similarly to all other candidates because exceptional circumstances do not translate into privileges during the review.

Q. I received my first doctoral degree 6 years ago and last year I finished my medical degree (M.D.). In addition I have published more than 15 papers in international peer reviewed journals of high impact providing proof that I have already research experience even though I have worked as a clinical researcher. I would have an opportunity to join a laboratory in another country to continue my research. Am I eligible for a Long-Term Fellowship?

A. Formally, you may be eligible because you have published and you received your most recent doctoral degree last year. However, your chances of getting a fellowship award are not particularly high. In the selection process the fellowship review committee follows the principle of "review for opportunity". This can mean that e.g. a highly accomplished applicant is not awarded a postdoctoral fellowship award because he or she may be better suited for an independent group leader position rather than starting another postdoctoral project. The goal of the HFSP fellowship program is not to prolong the "postdoctoral dependence" any longer than necessary. HFSP wants to support recent Ph.D. holders who are within 3 years of receiving their degree. At the same time the program wants to open an avenue to scientific independence after return to the home country through the Career Development Award. Therefore it may not be appropriate to submit an application for a Long-Term Fellowship.

Q. Since I received my Ph.D. degree after 1 September 2006 I am now applying for my second postdoc. Will this fact reduce my chances of getting an HFSP fellowship?

or:

I just finished my Ph.D. and therefore have only one publication in an international peer reviewed journal. Do I stand a real chance of getting a fellowship at all?

- A. Candidates who submit an application for a second postdoc are not privileged because they may have more publications versus recent Ph.D.s. Selection for HFSP fellowships is exclusively based on scientific merit of the candidate's accomplishments and the proposed research project (degree of change in research area). All candidates have to provide evidence of their achievements regardless of their current career stage and will receive equal consideration in the review process. However, a candidate applying for a second postdoc with no obvious track record may not be regarded as 'accomplished'; equally a recent Ph.D. recipient with a mediocre publication output (in terms of content) may also not rank very high.

Q. I received my Ph.D. degree prior to the deadline of 1 September 2006. After my thesis work I taught courses at a university. Can I claim this teaching period as a personal exemption and still be eligible to apply for an HFSP fellowship?

A. No. The fact that you worked as a university lecturer did not prevent you from submitting an application to HFSP at the time when you were still eligible to do so. Exemptions can only be claimed because of personal circumstances such as child birth and/or child care, military service, illness, etc.

Q. I am a national of a non-member country of HFSP. Can I apply for a LTF or a CDF?

A. Yes, you may apply for a fellowship, but you must select a host laboratory in one of the HFSP member countries.

Q. To what extent are journal impact factors taken into account when selecting the fellowships?

A. Journal impact factors do not play a role in the selection of HFSP fellowship awardees.

Q. Who reviews the applications?

A. Members of the HFSP Fellowship Review Committee are listed on our website at <http://www.hfsp.org/how/ReviewProc.php?type=LT> but you should not jump to conclusions about who will review your application on the basis of the published list of reviewers.

Q. Is an HFSP Short-Term Fellowship (STF) applicant/awardee eligible to apply for a LTF or CDF?

A.

- A former STF awardee can apply for a LTF/CDF to return to work in the same host institution or with the same host supervisor provided he/she remains within the 12 months limit of previous research experience in the host country.
- An applicant cannot submit parallel applications for an HFSP STF and a LTF/CDF to work with the same host supervisor or at the same host institution.

Q. Can I submit parallel applications for a LTF and a CDF in the same round of awards?

A. No, you have to decide for one program.

Q. I intend to apply for a LTF. Can my host supervisor endorse a parallel application from another applicant for a CDF in the same round of awards?

A. No, your host can only endorse one single application each year.