

SSPH+ Inter-university Graduate Campus (IGC)

Study Recommendations

The SSPH+ recommendations aim to support IGC PhD students to pursue an internationally competitive doctoral track in public health sciences in line with the [WHO ASPHER public health competencies framework](#) and the principles of the [WHO Essential Public Health Operations](#). It is the responsibility of the PhD student and supervisor to observe these recommendations.

Please note: SSPH+ does not award doctoral titles or degrees. This is the sole authority and responsibility of the student's university. Each university awards the PhD degree according to its own regulations, which the PhD student needs to follow.

- The basic study recommendations of the IGC encourage and support students to graduate with a broad education across the various disciplines of public health. In line with the personal needs and academic background, specific tracks can be chosen on an individual basis if agreed with the primary supervisor.
- The IGC provides PhD students with:
 - A broad course program offered by national and international experts
 - Courses on basic and specialized knowledge in public health relevant disciplines
 - Theory and methods training in public health relevant disciplines
 - Courses on historical and current global public health topics
 - Training in teaching, advocacy, communication and other transferable skills
- To become a public health expert, each PhD student, together with his/her university-based doctoral committee, should plan PhD training activities that cover the broad topics of public health oriented fields, as defined in the [ASPHER core competencies](#). The content of activities and the number of ECTS planned should be determined according to the student's needs. The plans should account for the student's educational background, her/his current knowledge in the major domains of public health, and the specific requirements of the planned PhD project. In general terms, it is recommended to plan at least 18 ECTS and to engage in a minimum of 2 ECTS in each of the prime public health research relevant fields, namely i) epidemiology, ii) social and behavioral science in health research, iii) health systems research, as well as in iv) transferable skills and other public health relevant courses (see below for details).
- The IGC follows the Bologna Standards and the guidelines of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). 1 ECTS corresponds to an approximate student workload of 25-30 working hours. Course certificates are issued if students attend at least 80% of class hours, and pass the required assessments or assignments.

Study recommendations for public health students

PhD students in public health tend to acquire particular expertise often in only one specific field of public health research. IGC encourages its students to widen their interests and expects them to acquire at least a basic understanding of the following fields 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, public surveillance and monitoring, 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 disease 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 and health law.

Students should direct their studies towards achieving expert knowledge in one of the fields (the area most relevant to their major research project) and basic knowledge in the other areas.

At the start of the PhD studies, PhD students should agree with their supervisors about a schedule of trainings that fill the gaps and cover these fields with appropriate coursework.

- **Basic transferable skills** are part of the PhD training. In particular, students should be able to:
 - Conduct ethical and responsible research, adhere to all local, national and international rules and codes of ethically sound and responsible research.
 - Write scientific papers, submit grant applications.
 - Pose innovative and important research questions, based on a thorough knowledge of the literature, public health needs, and relevant theoretical and conceptual models; select the most appropriate study design to address a research question.
 - Work in a multi-disciplinary team, communicate the findings and implications of public health research effectively to scientific and lay audiences through multiple modalities such as scientific writing, teaching and presentations to wider audiences.
 - Show management and leadership competencies.
 - Describe the policy implications of their own research and present these implications to wider audiences.

In light of the fact that a majority of PhD graduates do not pursue academic careers later on, it is highly recommended to consider a non-academic internship to support career decisions and opportunities for non-academic paths. Ideally, such internships may be placed toward the end of the PhD studies or follow immediately thereafter. The SSPH+ Internship Program supports PhD students in such plans and supervisors are encouraged to discuss this with their students at the beginning of their studies.

Self-management of progress

PhD students are advised to maintain a portfolio so that they can closely monitor the development of their scientific skills and competencies together with their supervisors. The portfolio can serve as a basis for regular assessment of the student's progress.

- The student's self-assessment documents should indicate in detail their learning progress and describe 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 achievements in management and leadership competencies and other transferable skills. If gaps are identified, the working plan should be adjusted to fill these gaps. In case a student's university does not provide a PhD portfolio, students may use the SSPH+ template.

Doctoral committee

- In line with the respective university or graduate school requirements, a doctoral committee should be established to guide the student's PhD work. The committee should discuss the most appropriate training requirements with the student, carry out the annual assessments, and meet with the student to discuss and support her/his progress on the PhD project. At least once a year, students should organize a meeting with the members of their doctoral committee to discuss their progress on their PhD project and to adjust the training plan if necessary.