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VSS | Verband der Schweizer Studierendenschaften
UNES | Union des Etudiant-e-s de Suisse
USU | Unione Svizzera degli e delle Universitari-e

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Information Sheet on Students At Risk and the StAR Scholarship

The Students at Risk (StAR) program provides scholarships in Switzerland to students whose right to education is denied or severly hindered in their country of origin or residence by providing them with a scholarship in Switzerland.

About Us

The Students at Risk (StAR) program aims to offer students at risk worldwide, who are denied or hindered in their right to education in their country of origin or residence, the opportunity to take up or complete their studies in Switzerland. The idea for StAR was launched in Norway in 2012 by two student organizations, SAIH and NSO. Germany followed in 2021 with the “Hilde Domin Program,” which was based on a similar idea.

The project of the Swiss Student Union (VSS) now enables Switzerland to contribute to international academic freedom in teaching and research. It complements the existing “Scholars at Risk” program, which focuses on postdoctoral researchers. The pilot phase of the project began in January 2025 and will run until the end of 2027. During this period, the StAR program aims to enable its first students to begin or complete their studies in Switzerland.

For at risk students, the StAR program aims to create a safe environment enabling them to complete their studies and exercise their right to education. With a university degree and an international network, students are well-prepared for their professional futures and can contribute significantly to the society, for example in their country of origin.

Who is eligible for a StAR scholarship?

Applicants must meet the following cumulative criteria to be eligible for a StAR scholarship:

1. Student: Candidates must be prospective students (at the bachelor's or master's level) or doctoral candidates[1] .
2. At Risk: Candidates face endangerment or an inability to pursue studies in their country of origin or residence:

- due to advocacy for fundamental or human rights
- due to belonging to a marginalized group, or
- due to other external factors that de facto make it impossible or extremely difficult to complete their studies safely.

[1] By 'prospective students' we mean applicants who who need academic credentials to begin a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral program and thus meet the respective admission requirements of Swiss universities.

The following points must be taken into account

Student Status	The required degree for the desired program of study must be presented no later than the admission deadline. Funding for a second degree (i.e., a second bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree) is not provided.
Country of origin	Individuals from countries of origin or residence where certain groups are denied the right to education due to political repression, or where widespread violence severely restricts access to education, are eligible to apply. Students who already live in a country where their right to education is guaranteed are generally not eligible for the scholarship.
Language Skills	Applicants must have sufficient language proficiency to be admitted to their desired study program in Switzerland[2] .
Threat	Applicants must provide evidence that they are at risk due to their belonging to a marginalized group, their political or social activism, or other external factors, which prevent or significantly impedes their right to education in their country of origin or residence.
Travel Documents	Applicants must possess valid travel documents (passport or similar)

[2] In general, a B2/C1 level in the language of instruction is required. However, the exact requirements vary depending on the study program and can be found on the university's or institute's website.

	that allow them to enter Switzerland.

Nomination Process

Until now, StAR fellows have been selected through an open application process. Students could therefore apply on their own. To reduce the administrative burden and ensure better preliminary screening and support for candidates, starting in 2026, students will no longer be able to apply for a StAR fellowship on their own but must be nominated. The following objectives are pursued in the nomination process:

- Ensuring a thorough preliminary screening of candidates
- Focusing on students in proven at-risk situations
- Preliminary assessment of eligibility for admission to the study program
- Involving the nominating institutions/individuals
- Involving the universities

Nominating bodies

- Legally recognized organizations based in Switzerland (international organizations, NGOs, or associations)
- Individuals residing in Switzerland

A connection to Swiss universities is advantageous.

Procedure

Step 1: Nomination

The nominating organization or individual assesses whether the student meets the criteria for receiving a StAR scholarship and submits the following documents:

- Signed nomination form with the required attachments
- A signed letter of commitment confirming support for the nominated student.

Step 2: Preliminary Review

The VSS reviews the submitted nominations for:

- Completeness of the documents

- Formal criteria of the program

The complete dossiers are forwarded to the members of the admissions offices.

Step 3: Academic Readiness

If no official confirmation of admission from a Swiss university is available, members of university admissions offices assess the candidates' eligibility for the desired study program based on the submitted documents.

The preliminary review does not guarantee subsequent admission to the desired program of study. It serves exclusively as a basis for decision-making by the experts during the selection process.

- Candidates for whom admission is unlikely will not be considered further; the nominating office or person will be informed accordingly.
- The nomination documents of candidates with a potential prospect of admission are forwarded to the members of the selection committee. Specific feedback from the admissions offices (e.g., regarding missing documents) is communicated to the nominating institutions or individuals.

Selection Process

Complete applications are forwarded confidentially to independent experts from the fields of higher education, migration, and human rights. A selection committee reviews the nominations individually and decides on the awarding of scholarships. Prioritization is based on the risk situation, admission to a higher education institution as well as on practical considerations regarding visa acquisition and the support network. Even after selection, the actual disbursement of the scholarship remains conditional on the student being admitted to the study program and obtaining a visa to legally enter Switzerland. Experts consider the following points during the selection process:

1. Urgency of the situation: The individual's risk profile is analyzed. This assessment considers whether the person is in an acute situation of threat, such as political reprisals, violence, or structural exclusion in their

country of origin or residence. A lack of or limited educational prospects is a central component of the urgency analysis.

2. Multidimensional risk: Categories of discrimination such as age, gender, sexual orientation, or disability can further increase vulnerability. These intersectional aspects are considered in the assessment of the need for protection.
3. University admission: A key factor is whether the intended educational goal is clearly articulated and realistically achievable. This includes the planned field of study, language proficiency, prior academic background (e.g., degrees already earned), and the overall coherence of the study plan. In this context, it is advantageous if the nominating person or entity submits an admission decision or an assessment of eligibility for admission from the relevant office at the university or university of applied sciences.
4. Visa: Relevant factors such as marital status, family members, previous visa applications, and potential risks or opportunities associated with visa issuance are evaluated. In this context, future career plans and the societal relevance of the planned course of study are also taken into account. In particular, it may be viewed favorably if the intended professional activity can make a recognizable contribution to society in the country of origin or residence.
5. Support Network: Since the VSS can only provide selective advice and support to students regarding departure or visa applications due to capacity constraints, existing social or institutional networks, both in the country of origin or residence and in Switzerland, are considered with regard to their potential for social, logistical, or financial support. In this context, concrete support provided by the nominating entity or individuals may have a positive impact on the selection process.

The StAR Scholarship

Scholarship Benefits

Preliminary Note: If the nominating bodies or individuals have already identified other sources of funding for the scholarship recipient, the VSS reserves the right to award the scholarship as a supplement to these funds and in accordance with the existing financial needs.

- Scholarship: CHF 1,750 per month to cover living expenses during the study period (including housing, health insurance, and other basic expenses).
- Duration: The scholarship is generally awarded for the standard duration of the selected degree program (e.g., 24 months for a master's program).
- Payment: The scholarship is paid monthly, on the 25th of each month, directly to the scholarship recipient. Upon request or as needed, the scholarship may alternatively be paid to the nominating institution or individual, who will ensure the monthly disbursement to the scholarship recipient.
- Support Fund: For exceptional situations (e.g., psychological counseling or other necessary support services), a support fund of CHF 1,200 per person per year is available. These funds are provided only upon request and are therefore not paid directly to the scholarship recipients.

Payment

To continue receiving the scholarship, the following documents must be submitted to the VSS at the end of each semester:

- Confirmation of enrollment for the following semester.
- Proof of academic progress (e.g., ECTS credits earned).
- A report on the previous semester using the VSS template (semester report).

Exceptions

In justified exceptional cases, the following provisions may apply:

- Early first payment: If an early departure from the home country or country of residence is necessary, the first scholarship payment may be made before the start of studies.
- Extension of the scholarship: An extension may be granted upon a justified request (e.g., for health reasons). The request must be submitted to the VSS no later than six months before the scholarship expires.
- Temporary interruption of studies: In the event of a justified interruption of studies, the scholarship may, in exceptional cases, continue to be paid. If it is not possible to resume studies within a reasonable period of time, the VSS reserves the right to suspend scholarship payments.

Support Services Provided by the VSS for StAR Scholarship Recipients

After being selected for a StAR scholarship, the program offers scholarship recipients the following support services as needed:

- Advice and representation in connection with the visa application before the cantonal migration authorities and the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) after signing a power of attorney.
- Cost sharing for a stay in a third country to submit a visa application, provided this is necessary and the nominating institution or individual does not have sufficient financial resources.
- Issuance of the scholarship award letter and a letter of recommendation for authorities and universities, including the selection committee's rationale for the selection.
- Drafting of a scholarship agreement that sets forth the rights and obligations of the scholarship recipients as well as the terms of the scholarship (in particular, the amount, duration, and other conditions).
- Provision of informational brochures to assist with orientation and integration in Switzerland.
- Assignment of a mentor, preferably from the same faculty.
- Organizing exchange meetings with other StAR scholarship recipients (twice a year).
- Financial support in emergency situations, such as for psychological counseling or other unforeseen emergencies.
- Review and, if necessary, renewal of the scholarship based on demonstrated need.
- Individual support toward the end of the program, particularly to assist with the transition to further academic or professional pursuits.