

## Statement : The costs of medical studies

### Introduction

The Swiss Medical Students' Association (swimsa) is the voice of over 10'000 medical students. We actively engage in the public discourse on our current and future role in the healthcare system. We would like to address the ongoing discussion regarding the public expenditures that society makes to fund the medical curriculum until the federal licensing exam. The current rhetoric observed in the media and political instances is unfair to medical students and is not representative of the real costs of their education. This statement is the result of swimsa's research, undertaken to bring a new perspective to this debate.

### Context

The supposedly high cost of medical studies at the university level is a recurring topic in the public discourse.<sup>1-6</sup> Regrettably, this matter is currently being misused in two areas of interest for swimsa while being backed by figures that merit to be questioned.

1. The primary concern for us is that it is **levied against medical doctors in their efforts to gain acceptable working conditions**. The typical idea is that the cost of medical studies is so high for the state, that medical doctors become deeply indebted towards society. This debt should justify almost any working conditions for them, exemplified by demanding requirements specific to medical doctors. Notably, the expectation for doctors to work at a 100% rate,<sup>7,8</sup> or the fact that resident doctors are typically hired on 50-hour contracts instead of the standard 42-hour contracts should be mentioned.<sup>9,10</sup> This clashes with young doctors' and medical students' increasing wish for more sustainable working conditions, including a better work-life balance. The latter is crucial for their own health and their patients' quality of care.<sup>11,12</sup>
2. Another important concern is that the insistence on the **supposedly high cost of medical studies could discourage the creation of new study places** in medicine, at a time when it is vital to train more medical doctors to ensure that the Swiss healthcare system can function properly and self-sufficiently in the future.<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon is particularly worrying in political instances, such as in the figures that the federal council communicates to members of the national parliament and the figures that the latter routinely use in their parliamentary work.<sup>14,15</sup>

## Development

swimsa wants the detailed cost of medical studies to be as transparent, accessible to the public and understandable as possible.<sup>16</sup> Official estimates exist, even though they struggle to be comprehensive and precise. While estimates related to the training taking place within the medical faculties present good accuracy, the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) explains that it is more difficult to achieve estimates of the cost of clinical training in hospitals.<sup>17</sup> This is due to both an incompatibility in accounting standards and to the inherent difficulty of estimating which exact costs are attributable to medical students in the hospital.

The FSO publishes estimates of the costs of medical studies yearly and was the only data available until 2018. Since then, the «Erhebung der Kosten für die Lehre und Forschung in der Humanmedizin» (EKOH) project was commissioned by the Swiss University Conference (SHK/CSHE) and publishes yearly estimates of the cost of medical studies as well. It aims at improving the integration of hospital data and provide more accurate estimates.<sup>18,19</sup>

FSO and the EKOH project achieve similar figures.<sup>17,20</sup> Using FSO data, several major Swiss medias have stated that the total cost of medical education per student amounts to around 720'000CHF.<sup>1,2,5,8</sup> This corresponds to 120'000CHF per student and per year. **Based on the same data, swimsa finds that the most accurate gross cost is around 30'000CHF per student and per year.** Furthermore, the net cost is not calculated, although medical students also generate value during their studies.

### *The most cited figures stem from the wrong cost indicators.*

The costs of all fields of study are estimated by the FSO using three cost indicators, which are also used by the EKOH project.<sup>17,18</sup> Each indicator aggregates data collected from the universities and provides a cost per student and per year (CHF/student/year), which you can find here for the latest year available:

Indicator I	Costs associated with medical education	FSO: 28'203 EKOH: 31'108
Indicator II	Costs associated with medical education + costs associated with medical research taking place within medical faculties	FSO: 124'358 EKOH: 160'844
Indicator III	Costs associated with medical education + costs associated with medical research taking place within medical faculties - research funded through third parties (e.g., grants, private investments).	FSO: 89'847 EKOH: 110'410

Table 1: sources for indicators and figures: FSO original indicators and EKOH figures from the year 2022<sup>17,21</sup>  
Figures in (CHF/student/year)

As explained in table 1, indicator I includes all the costs directly generated by the training and teaching of medical students, like staff or infrastructure. Indicator II, the one often cited in the media, factors in the cost of the teaching and training of medical students, as well as the integrality of costs arising from research conducted within medical faculties. **That entails not only the running costs of research, but also external research grants, although they are not an expense but rather an income for the faculty or hospital.** There is also indicator III, which is based on indicator II, but deducts research grants and other third party funded research. There is no evident reason why indicator III should be overlooked in favor of indicator II.

Research is essential to medical education. A significant part of medical research takes place within medical faculties and the associated teaching hospitals. It creates synergies, fosters innovation and improves patients' care. Students certainly benefit from this proximity with research. Yet research's core purpose is to advance science and not medical education. Medical research primarily serves society by improving the quality of healthcare and prevention.

This is important to note when looking at the costs of medical education. The two worlds of medical research and education are intertwined and coexist, but as the previous indicators show, they can be looked at separately in the costs they generate. Table 1 shows that medical research costs are three- to four-fold higher than those purely generated due to education. **As such, it is important to differentiate between costs stemming from research and those directly generated by the education of medical students.**

Consequently, an indicator focusing on the costs of teaching and training of medical students would be the best option to describe the cost of medical education. This is precisely what cost indicator I includes, amounting to around 30'000CHF/year/student.

#### ***Medical students generate some value during their studies.***

Cost indicator I indicates the costs medical students generate. However, they also produce value. As already noted in a FSO report from 2003, the **economic value of medical students' contributions during their studies is not accounted for when estimating the cost of medical studies.**<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, students contribute at least twice during their studies:

1. Firstly, medical students work in hospitals during their elective term for 6 to 11 months. They receive a monthly financial compensation of around 1'000CHF. This amount is notably low when considering the five years of academic training that students have acquired prior to those internships, meaning that money is spared on their compensations.

2. Secondly, medical students contribute through the writing of their master's thesis. Universities expect students to dedicate several hundreds of hours to their projects, and students do not receive financial compensation for this work. Through these research opportunities, medical students contribute to the development of medical research.

Thus, the figure of around 30'000CHF/student/year (indicator I) should be referred to as the **gross** cost of medical studies, while the **net** cost is unknown, and lower due to financial contributions of students .

*Medical studies have not gotten more expensive over the last twenty years.*

In a report published in 2003, the FSO estimated the cost of medical studies for the year 1999. The costs per student and per year were estimated to lie between 35'000CHF and 42'500CHF.<sup>22,1</sup> Their most recent estimate for the year 2022 lies at 28,203CHF/student/year. **This suggests that the total cost per student has decreased by about 30% in the last two decades, even more when considering inflation.**

## Call to action

swimsa calls on...

...all cantonal and national public decision-makers to...

1. ...start using cost indicator I as the standard indicator to estimate the cost of medical studies.
2. ...inform their audiences on the composition of the cost indicators they use, allowing everyone to form a fact-based opinion.
3. ...recognize their responsibility to society when reporting on the costs of medical studies, knowing that a contribution in the public discourse using contentious and suboptimal data can lead to a stalling in discussions of public interest and of importance to the medical students community.

## Conclusion

The current public debate on the costs of medical education is largely based on a misguided choice of data. The real gross cost of training medical students amounts to less than 25% of the most relayed figures. This misrepresentation is leaving a mark in the Swiss public opinion and is playing against medical students and doctors. In addition, the value that medical students generate is not considered in the current estimates. The most accurate estimates are given by **indicator I, with a figure of around 30'000 CHF/student/year.**

---

<sup>1</sup> This report estimated two different costs for the pre-clinical years and the clinical years. The average lies between the two estimations.

swimsa asks all concerned parties to keep this information in mind and to help us change the dominant rhetoric. There is a need for a constructive debate on topics such as the working conditions of medical doctors or the creation of new study places in medicine, which is continuously opposed by the misleading argument of the supposedly high cost of medical education.

## Sources

1. So viel kostet ein Medizinstudium in der Schweiz [Internet]. [cited 2023 Oct 31]. Available from:  
<https://www.medinside.ch/so-viel-kostet-ein-medizinstudium-in-der-schweiz-20220927>
2. La formation complète d'un étudiant en médecine coûte 720'000 francs [Internet]. rts.ch. 2023 [cited 2024 Apr 3]. Available from:  
<https://www.rts.ch/info/suisse/14531356-la-formation-complete-dun-etudiant-en-mecdecine-coute-720000-francs.html>
3. praktischArzt. Medizinstudium in der Schweiz: So viel kostet es [Internet]. praktischArzt. 2022 [cited 2024 Apr 3]. Available from:  
<https://www.praktischarzt.ch/magazin/medizinstudium-in-der-schweiz-so-viel-kostet-es/>
4. Was ein Medizinstudium den Staat kostet. Neue Zürcher Zeitung [Internet]. 2003 Dec 16 [cited 2024 Apr 3]; Available from:  
<https://www.nzz.ch/article9AMJM-Id.283260>
5. Formation: Un étudiant en médecine coûte plus de 100'000 francs par an. Le Matin [Internet]. 2022 Sep 27 [cited 2024 Apr 3]; Available from:  
<https://www.lematin.ch/story/un-etudiant-en-medecine-coute-plus-de-100000-francs-par-an-225287657523>
6. Wanner A. Ärztemangel - Medizinstudium ist viel günstiger als behauptet. Aargauer Zeitung [Internet]. 2015 May 6 [cited 2023 Oct 31]; Available from:  
<https://www.aargauerzeitung.ch/schweiz/medizinstudium-ist-viel-gunstiger-als-behauptet-Id.1691015>
7. Sollen Studenten die Uni-Kosten zurückzahlen? [Internet]. 20 Minuten. 2023 [cited 2024 Jul 4]. Available from:  
<https://www.20min.ch/story/sollen-studis-uni-kosten-zurueckzahlen-so-teuer-ist-ein-studium-wirklich-684736130714>
8. Russi EW, Steurer J. Wer in Teilzeit arbeiten will, dessen Medizinstudium sollte nicht subventioniert werden. Neue Zürcher Zeitung [Internet]. 2024 Jan 3 [cited 2024 Apr 3]; Available from:  
<https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/mediziner-vom-traumberuf-zum-teilzeitjob-Id.1769874>
9. Statistik B für. Übliche Arbeitsstunden [Internet]. [cited 2024 Jun 19]. Available from:  
<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/arbeit-erwerb/erwerbstaetigkeit-arbeitszeit/arbeitszeit/uebliche-arbeitsstunden.html>
10. Arbeitsrecht [Internet]. VSAO. [cited 2024 Jun 19]. Available from:  
<https://vsao.ch/arbeitsbedingungen/arbeitsrecht/>
11. Scheiwiller V, Ehrenzeller C, Laager R, Serban L, Reynaud de la Jara M, Lutz L, et al., editors. Survey on Expectations of medical students towards their future profession. Bern: swimsa; 39 p.
12. Niederberger M. Umfrage mit 4500 Assistenzärzten: Burnouts, Fehler und

überbordende Bürokratie im Spital. Neue Zürcher Zeitung [Internet]. 2023 Feb 17 [cited 2023 Oct 31]; Available from:

<https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/umfrage-mit-assistenzaerzten-burnouts-und-buerokratie-im-spital-ld.1722170>

13. Aeschlimann P. Ärzte-Präsidentin warnt vor Lücke in der Gesundheitsversorgung [Internet]. Blick. 2023 [cited 2024 May 18]. Available from: <https://www.blick.ch/wirtschaft/aerzte-praesidentin-yvonne-gilli-warnt-vor-luecke-in-der-gesundheitsversorgung-es-zeichnet-sich-ein-drama-ab-id19041770.html>

14. 23.3889 | Lutter contre la pénurie de médecins. Quid de la création d'une haute école de médecine en Suisse? | Objet | Le Parlement suisse [Internet]. [cited 2024 Jun 17]. Available from:

<https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaeft?AffairId=20233889>

15. 22.7804 | Combien coûtent les études de médecine en Suisse ? | Objet | Le Parlement suisse [Internet]. [cited 2024 May 13]. Available from:

<https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaeft?AffairId=20227804>

16. swimsa. Policy Paper on the Working Conditions of Medical Professionals [Internet]. Zurich; 2023 Nov. Available from:

[https://swimsa.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023\\_Policy-Paper-on-the-Working-Conditions-of-Medical-Professionals\\_E-1.pdf](https://swimsa.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023_Policy-Paper-on-the-Working-Conditions-of-Medical-Professionals_E-1.pdf)

17. statistique O fédéral de la. Finances des hautes écoles universitaires: tableaux de base - 2022 | Tableau [Internet]. Office fédéral de la statistique. 2023 [cited 2024 Apr 3]. Available from: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/fr/28945150>

18. Studinger S, Grünig A, Keune H, Seiler P, Tschantré G. Projet « Relevé des coûts pour la formation et la recherche en médecine humaine EKOH ». 2019 May;

19. Publications [Internet]. [cited 2024 May 18]. Available from: <https://shk.ch/fr/documentation/publications>

20. statistique O fédéral de la. Domaines d'études aux HEU: Coûts par étudiante et étudiant (formation de base) - 2022 | Diagramme [Internet]. Office fédéral de la statistique. 2023 [cited 2024 Apr 3]. Available from:

<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/fr/28945085>

21. EKOH. Relevé des coûts pour la formation et la recherche en médecine humaine (EKOH) : résultats du relevé des données 2022.

22. Coûts des études de médecine en Suisse [Internet]. Neuchâtel: Bundesamt für Statistik (BFS); 2003. 97 p. Available from:

<https://dam-api.bfs.admin.ch/hub/api/dam/assets/337867/master>