

Guidelines of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program

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Guidelines of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program

on January 1, 2024

The Vice President for Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations

based on Art. 10a para. 4 lit. f of the Ordinance Governing the Organisation of ETH Zürich (ETH Zürich Organisation Ordinance)¹

hereby issues the following guidelines:

1. Chapter General Provisions

Art. 1 About

- ¹ The Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program of ETH Zürich empowers entrepreneurial ETH students and researchers in developing their research-based technologies into marketable products and services to successfully launch a scalable ETH Spin-off.
- ² The Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Acceleration Program is awarded to projects that serve people living with less than 10 USD per day in low- and middle-income countries. All countries on the OECD DAC List 2023 are eligible (see [OECD DAC-LIST 2024](#))².
- ³ The Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program is awarded to candidates whose projects have demonstrated Technology Readiness Level 4 (TRL 4).
- ⁴ The Pioneer Fellowship is granted to 1 or 2 recipients for a period of 18 or 12 months, respectively.
- ⁵ The Pioneer Fellowship is up to CHF 150'000 (gross) covering salaries, project related costs, tuition fees, travel etc.
- ⁶ The Social Impact Incubation Program provides the Pioneer Fellows with the essential tools they need to advance their projects and supports them on their entrepreneurial journey as future spin-off founders.

Art. 2 Guiding Principles

The ETH Zürich Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program is based on following guiding principles:

- ¹ **Vision:** to be the leading Social Impact Incubation Program, empowering ETH entrepreneurs to create scalable world-class ETH spin-offs with a social impact.
- ² **Mission:** to empower ETH entrepreneurs to exploit their research findings and benefit society at large and Switzerland³.
- ³ **Objective:** to bridge the public-private funding gap enabling ETH entrepreneurs to further develop their technology and business to reach market and institutional investment readiness.
- ⁴ **Values:** to embrace ETH core values, such as respect, excellence, responsibility, diversity, openness, curiosity and team spirit.

¹ RSETHZ 201.021en

² [DAC List of ODA Recipients for reporting 2024 and 2025 flows \(ethz.ch\)](#)

³ ETH Act, SR 414.110

Art. 3 Eligibility Criteria

- ¹ Eligible candidates are master students and fixed-term scientific staff members (doctoral student, postdoctoral researchers, established researchers I and II (see Appendix 1) of ETH Zürich whose projects wish to commercialize a technology or software that originates from research at ETH Zürich or that is associated with an intellectual property right such as a patent, a copyright, closed software code etc. of ETH Zürich, pursuant to Art. 36 para. 2 ETH Act⁴ (cf. also Art. 2.1 Exploitation Guidelines⁵).
- ² Further eligible candidates are master students and fixed-term scientific staff members, employed at EPFL⁶ or an ETH Domain Research Institution⁷ whose technology is based on their doctoral thesis at ETH Zürich or an intellectual property right (e.g. a patent) of ETH Zürich pursuant to Art. 36 para. 2 ETH Act (cf. also Art. 2.1 Exploitation Guidelines) solely owned by ETH Zürich or jointly owned by ETH Zürich and EPFL or an ETH Domain Research Institution⁷.
- ³ Scientific staff members (see Appendix 1) are eligible to apply if their consecutive fixed-term employments at ETH Zürich do not exceed the statutory maximum duration of employment according to Art. 17b para. 2 ETH Act³
- ⁴ For the sake of clarity, candidates whose projects commercialize a technology, software and/or know-how that is not based on research or originates from work performed solely at an industry partner, an ETH Domain Research Institution or another national or international university or if the intellectual property rights (e.g. a patent) are owned privately or solely by EPFL or an ETH Domain Research Institution or by another national or international university, are not eligible for the Pioneer Fellowship.
- ⁵ The Pioneer Fellowship is awarded for projects whose technology has demonstrated Proof of Concept (POC) for advanced engineering, ICT or Medtech projects or in vitro validation with hit compounds for Biotech projects, corresponding to Technology Readiness Level 4 (TRL 4), and who want to advance their engineering, ICT and Medtech projects technology into a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) or select drug candidates for clinical development for Biotech projects, corresponding to TRL 6, during the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program.
- ⁶ Candidates may submit their application by the respective application deadline of the Pioneer Fellowship
- a. no later than 6 months after either their graduation⁸ or the end of their employment⁹ from ETH Zürich.
 - b. no earlier than 9 months before either their graduation or the end of their employment from ETH Zürich.

A representation of the timing is shown in Appendix 3.

- ⁷ The application must be supported by a Host Professor of ETH Zürich. The Host Professor must have an ETH position for the entire duration of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program and must be willing to provide scientific support and access to his/her laboratories and infrastructure. In addition, the professor must agree to grant access to all intellectual property rights related to the project technology that are relevant for commercialization by an ETH spin-off.
- ⁸ In case of rejection, a one-time reapplication of the project by the applicants or other applicants is permitted, if the reasons for the rejection have been addressed and the project has made substantial progress compared to the original application.

⁴ SR 414.110

⁵ RSETHZ 440.4

⁶ École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL)

⁷ EAWAG, WSL, EMPA, PSI

⁸ Master and Doctoral students

⁹ Postdoctoral researchers and established researchers I/II

- ⁹ Pioneer Fellows may apply for and receive further commercialization funding such as from Innosuisse, Gebert Rűf Foundation, Bridge PoC, ESA BIC, etc., however no research funding, provided that the Pioneer Fellow(s)
- is/are employed full time at 100% at ETH Zürich pursuant to Art. 4 para. 2 below
 - use(s) the funds awarded to 100% for the salary and project expenses pursuant to Art. 5 below
 - the duration of the Social Impact Incubation Program remains at 12/18 month, Art. 1 para. 3
 - fully comply with these guidelines and the guidelines of the other funding agencies, and there are no conflicting requirements.
- ¹⁰ Pioneer Fellows must not engage in basic research or receive research funding; however the host professor or other members of the project team may do so.
- ¹¹ Candidates must not have established a legal entity / company prior to the start date of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program.

Art. 4 Conditions of Employment

- ¹ Pioneer Fellows are employed by ETH Zürich and must always observe the Personnel Ordinance for the ETH Domain (PVO- ETH)¹⁰.
- ² Employment is full-time at 100%, unless specifically approved by the responsible HR Partner to be part-time due to family reasons (only).
- ³ The employment category is based on the ordinance governing scientific employees of ETH Zürich¹¹ and is determined by the responsible HR Partner.
- ⁴ Salaries are generally capped at ETH standard salary level for the assigned function level. Within the capped ETH standard salary, Pioneer Fellows may define their own salaries which are generally lower than standard, as the Pioneer Fellowship is considered as an investment in the Fellows own entrepreneurial career.
- ⁵ Employment is flat rate with 12 monthly salaries per year. The contract may be issued for the entire duration of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program (12 /18 months). It is permissible to adapt the salary at any time of the program in case the budget of the fellowship allows for a decrease or an increase of the salary up the capped ETH standard salary.
- ⁶ Pioneer Fellows may not engage in the teaching, research, or other activities of their Host Professor.
- ⁷ If the Pioneer Fellowship is used to hire team members (e.g. internships) with an ETH work contract, their employment conditions should be as close to those of other ETH employees as possible pursuant to paragraphs 3 and 4 above.
- ⁸ The Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program may be started no earlier than 3 months and no later than 9 months after the respective application deadline (Mar. 1 / Sep. 1).
- ⁹ Employment is initiated by the Host Professor via an ETHIS workflow on request of the Pioneer Fellow(s). On request, the responsible HR Partner is available for further information and support.

Art. 5 Budget and Project Expenses

- ¹ Pioneer Fellows must always observe the Financial Regulations of ETH Zürich¹². Any misappropriation of funds may result in serious consequences under the civil or criminal laws.
- ² After deducting salary expenses, Pioneer Fellows may freely dispose of the residual funds for their project expenses. All expenses must be clearly dedicated to the Pioneer Fellows' project; allowed and not allowed expenses are listed in Appendix 2.

¹⁰ SR 172.220.113

¹¹ SR 172.220.113.11

¹² RSETHZ 245

³ According to Financial Regulations of ETH Zürich¹²

- a. The Host Professor is the Budget Owner (Budgetverantwortliche/r) and the Pioneer Fellow is the Budget Manager (Budget Manager/in).
- b. The Pioneer Fellow(s) must transparently document all expenses requested for reimbursement.
- c. The Pioneer Fellow(s) must hand in original receipts / invoices of suppliers, including date of purchase / service, detailed schedule of costs and supplier information.

⁴ Any material and assets, such as prototypes, equipment, tools, software and hardware acquired with Pioneer Fellowship funds, are the property of ETH Zürich. If the Pioneer Fellow(s) wish/es to acquire these assets at the end of the Program, they, or their ETH Spin-off, if any, may request to purchase these assets from ETH Zürich at book value (acquisition cost minus depreciation).

⁵ At the end of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program, Pioneer Fellow(s) must return any remaining funds to ETH Zürich.

Art. 6 Application Process and Supporting Documents

¹ Applications are only accepted electronically in the web-based ETH Zurich grant application system 'eResearch' using the application templates provided on the Pioneer Fellowship webpage [ETH Pioneer Fellowship](#)¹³.

² The application must include the following information (either provided directly online in the application tool 'eResearch' or by completing the provided templates and uploading them to 'eResearch':

- a. a financial plan for the project, giving details about salary and project costs;
- b. a summary of the project which gives an overview of the planned project in non-expert language; the project summary should not contain any confidential information;
- c. a detailed project description including the technology, market analysis, competitor analysis and benefits to customer, a time plan with work packages and milestones and expected outcome after the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program and an explanation of the project costs. Expected results are outlined clearly and comprehensibly;
- d. a detailed description of the Intellectual Property Situation, such as patent applications, software and freedom to operate;
- e. a CV of the candidate(s);
- f. a disclosure of potential conflicts of interest (if any) of both the candidate(s) and the host professor;
- g. a signed letter of support by the host professor and further support professors, confirming his/her full support to the candidate(s) by offering his/her expertise, giving access to his / her laboratories and infrastructure and agreeing to give exclusive right to any and all patents pertaining to the technology;
- h. a list of relevant publications by the candidate(s) and the ETH host professor
- i. a 2 minutes video clip showcasing the project and the motivation of the candidate(s). The video shall be submitted using a Polybox link and be in MP4-format.
- j. for candidates re-applying, a statement of resubmission;

Art. 7 Deadlines and Start Dates

¹ Submission deadlines are twice a year on March 1 and September 1.

² The start date of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program is no earlier than 3 months and no later than 9 months after the application deadline, otherwise the Pioneer Fellowship is forfeited in full.

¹³ <https://ethz.ch/en/industry/entrepreneurship/find-offers-programs-space-grants-for-entrepreneurs/pioneer-fellowship.html>

A representation of the timeline is shown in Appendix 3.

Pioneer Fellowship start dates are for the

- Mar. 1 application deadline between June 1 and Dec 1
- Sep. 1 application deadline between Dec 1 and June 1 of the following year

³ Invitations to interviews in front of the evaluation board (see Art. 8 below) and rejections of applications that have not passed the pre-evaluation, will be announced within 1 month after the application deadline.

⁴ Final decisions on the award of the Pioneer Fellowship and admission to the Social Impact Incubation Program will be announced no later than 3 months after the application deadline.

2. Chapter Evaluation Criteria and Process

Art. 8 Evaluation Process

¹ Applications are evaluated in 3 steps:

1. Pre-screening of the applications for formal criteria by the Pioneer Fellowship administration.
2. Pre-evaluation of the applications for scientific soundness by the pre-evaluation board which is reassembled for each project individually.
3. Final evaluation and selection are performed by the evaluation board. The evaluation board takes part in all interview sessions and evaluates the candidates and their applications according to the evaluation criteria shown in Art. 10. The evaluation board makes a final decision on which candidates are awarded the Pioneer Fellowship and are accepted to the Social Impact Incubation Program.

Art. 9 Pre-Evaluation Board and Evaluation Board

¹ The pre-evaluation board is composed of at the least 4 experts, including a member of the Pioneer Fellowship Administration (PFA), a Professor of ETH Zürich, a Technology Licensing Manager (TLM) of ETH transfer and an industry expert.

² The evaluation board is composed of at least 7 members, including ETH Professors, venture capitalists, founders of Social Impact start-ups and industry experts.

Art. 10 Evaluation of Applications

¹ Applications are evaluated and rated based on the following 11 criteria:

1. How does the application fit in with the vision, mission and objectives of the Pioneer Fellowship?
2. How significant is the Pioneer Fellowship for the realization of the project?
3. What is the innovation degree of the technology compared to the State-of-Art?
4. Does the Technology Readiness Level meet the program requirements?
5. What is the Intellectual Property situation and freedom to operate?
6. Are the planned project objectives comprehensible and realistic?
7. Does the market readiness level meet the program requirements?
8. What is the project's impact to society?
9. Is the serviceable obtainable market large enough to sustain a future company?
10. What is the quality of the application and the entrepreneurial mindset of the candidate(s)?
11. What is the quality of the interview session (i.e. presentation and Q&A)?

3. Chapter Social Impact Incubation Program

In addition to the Pioneer Fellowship, which covers salary and project-related expenses, Pioneer Fellows participate in the Social Impact Incubation Program to advance their projects and support them on their entrepreneurial journey as future spin-off founders. It includes the following elements:

Art. 11 Business Coaching

¹ Pioneer Fellows get professional business coaching from experienced serial entrepreneurs with substantial venture capital and start-up experience. Further support by external mentors may be arranged on request.

Art. 12 Support by Host Professor

¹ Pioneer Fellows receive full support by their host professor, offering his/her expertise, giving access to his/her laboratories and infrastructure and giving exclusive rights to all patents pertaining to the technology.

Art. 13 Entrepreneurial Education

¹ As an integral part of the Social Impact Incubation Program, the Pioneer Fellow, or in case of a team of 2 recipients, at least 1 Pioneer Fellow, must participate in the ETH Certificate of Advanced Studies in Entrepreneurial Leadership in Technology Ventures (CAS ELTV).

² For a team of 2 recipients of the Pioneer Fellowship, the participation in the CAS ELTV for the second Pioneer Fellow is optional.

³ The tuition fees are reduced by 30% for the first Pioneer Fellow and by 50%¹⁴ for the second Pioneer Fellow from the standard tuition fee and may be paid in part or in full from the Pioneer Fellowship, another fellowship, personal savings or any other source of funding.

Art. 14 Project Reporting and Early Termination

¹ The Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program combines the agile project management framework "Scrum" with the "Lean Start-up" framework. Formal Sprint Meetings are held at months 0 (start), 4, 8, 12 (final for 2 candidates) and 18 (final for 1 candidate) of the program to discuss the progress of the project and plan the next Sprint, see Appendix 4.

² At the final Sprint Meeting, Pioneer Fellows must submit the final Sprint Meeting document including a final report and lean canvas, a business plan, lean, and a financial statement exported from ETHIS for the entire duration of the program.

³ The Program may be terminated early for serious reasons such as

- a. unforeseen reasons that make the project unfeasible, such as freedom to operate, market potential, technology not ready for commercialization.
- b. the project progress does not meet expectations.
- c. the personal entrepreneurial development of the Pioneer Fellow(s) is insufficient.

⁴ A decision on early termination will be made by the Vice President of Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations based on the recommendation of the Head of the Pioneer Fellowship in which case a 3 months' notice with the possibility to take corrective actions will be given to the Pioneer Fellow(s).

⁵ Pioneer Fellows get the opportunity to present their project at the annual Pioneer Pi (3.14 min) Pitch Competition (3Pi Competition) to a large audience, peers, investors and other invited guests.

¹⁴ The maximum allowable reduction on the standard price stipulated on ETH's regulation on Continuing Education is 50%, RSETHZ 330.71, Art. 25.

Art. 15 Access to Office and Laboratory Spaces

¹ For the duration of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program, office and laboratory spaces at the professorship and at ETH Entrepreneurship locations are available to the Pioneer Fellows, their ETH-employed staff and their students, free of charge. Applications for office and laboratory space are submitted directly to the professorship and to ETH Entrepreneurship. The maximum number of spaces available is depending on the current occupation level and must be discussed directly with the respective entity.

Art. 16 Networking and Community Events

¹ Pioneer Fellows benefit from various networking and community events, information sessions, workshops and round tables etc. organized by ETH Entrepreneurship.

² Pioneer Fellows will be invited to the ETH Founders Community on LinkedIn.

Art. 17 Pioneer Fellowship Certificate

¹ Upon successful completion of the Program, Pioneer Fellows are awarded a certificate acknowledging their successful participation in the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program.

4. Chapter Spin-off Companies by Pioneer Fellows

Art. 18 Establishing and Operating an ETH Spin-off

¹ Establishing a Spin-off company during the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program is permitted.

² The Spin-off company, or the Pioneer Fellows on its behalf if the company is not yet registered, may apply to ETH transfer, Spin-off Licensing, Equity and Compliance (SLEC) Team, to be accredited as a Spin-off company of ETH Zurich and to receive the ETH Spin-off label.

³ Pioneer Fellows are full-time employees of ETH Zürich, see 1. Chapter Art. 4 para. 2., and as such may additionally be employed up to a maximum of 10% (i.e. 4 hours / week) at their Spin-off company (secondary employment regulation), see guidelines for conflicts of interest and secondary employment¹⁵

⁴ Expenses for the establishment and operation of a Spin-off company must not be paid from the Pioneer Fellowship, such as legal and consulting fees, payment of start-up capital, licensing fees, etc. A more detailed list of allowed and not allowed expenses is provided in Appendix 2.

⁵ A Spin-off company is a legal entity, independent of ETH Zürich and, as such, is responsible for its own business, such as operating the company, hiring employees, engaging with suppliers and customers, engaging in partnership with other companies etc.

⁶ If the Pioneer Fellow(s) incorporate an ETH Spin-off and wish to have its domicile at ETH Zürich already during the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program, the spin-off company must pay rent for at the least 1 office desk or lab bench. Provided availability, accredited Spin-off companies may rent office- and lab space at ETH Zürich for up to 3 years from incorporation date, see Spin-off Guidelines¹⁶.

⁷ Pioneer Fellows may at any time prematurely request to resign from the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program to join full-time their Spin-off company. Resignation must be executed in writing and must be mutually agreed with the host professor and the head of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program. Any unused funds of the Pioneer Fellowship must be returned in full to the ETH Foundation.

¹⁵ RSETHZ 501.2

¹⁶ RSETHZ 440.5

⁸ When spinning-off companies from ETH Zürich, the present guidelines, as well as other relevant acts, ordinances and guidelines, in particular the Spin-off guidelines¹⁷, the guidelines for conflicts of interest and secondary employment¹⁸ and the exploitation guidelines¹⁹, must be observed at any time.

Art. 19 Licensing Terms for Intellectual Property

¹ Based on Art. 36 of the ETH Act and their employment as Pioneer Fellows at ETH Zürich, Intellectual Property (IP) generated during the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program is owned by ETH Zürich.

² The use of Intellectual Property or intangible assets of ETH Zürich by ETH Spin-offs requires a license agreement^{20, 21}. It is irrelevant whether this IP was created by the founders themselves in the context of their employment at ETH Zürich.

³ The detailed terms of the license are subject to negotiations with the Spin-off Licensing, Equity and Compliance (SLEC) team of ETH transfer.

5. Chapter Final Provisions

Art. 20 Entry into Force

¹ These guidelines enter into force on January 1, 2024 and replace the guidelines of the Pioneer Fellowship dated July 15, 2023.

Prof. Dr. Vanessa Wood
Vice President for Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations

¹⁷ RSETHZ 440.5

¹⁸ RSETHZ 501.2

¹⁹ RSETHZ 440.4

²⁰ Art. 36 para. 2 ETH Act SR 414.110

²¹ Cf. Section 2.1 Exploitation Guidelines "ETH Inventions"

Appendices

Appendix 1 Eligible Scientific Staff Members²²

Eligible fixed-term employees:

Academic function	Project function	Code	Function level
Doctoral student (Doktorand/in)	Scientific assistant I (Wissenschaftliche Assistenz I)	1011	06
Postdoc (Postdoktorand/in)	Scientific assistant II (Wissenschaftliche Assistenz II)	1022	08
Established researcher I (Oberassistent/in I)	Scientific collaborator I (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeitende I)	1023	09
Established researcher II (Oberassistent/in II)	Scientific collaborator II (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeitende II)	1024	10

Appendix 2 Allowed / Not Allowed Expenses

Allowed running expenses are for example:

- Salaries for Pioneer Fellows
- CAS ELTV tuition and related fees
- Project related expenses such as
 - Prototyping
 - Software
 - Remuneration of consultants for outsourcing of for example technical-, legal-, business-, marketing-, regulatory services
 - Purchasing equipment, instruments, consumables, material
 - Expenses for measurements in facilities such as FIRST, ScopeM, EPIC, etc.
 - Software licenses for special software, not yet covered by the research group
 - Expenses for pre-clinical trials
 - market research report
- Traveling to (potential) customers, investors, partners, etc.
- Attending or exhibiting at trade fairs, however not scientific conferences.
- Attending industry or partner events.
- etc.

Not allowed expenses are for example:

- Personal / private expenses such as private trips, accommodations, or private meals
- Expenses of your spin-off company or for its preparation or founding
- Use for incorporation capital
- Transfer of funds from the Pioneer Fellowship to a spin-off company
- Consulting fees to ETH employees and the host professor
- Pay for company equipment
- Pay for spin-off company services such as legal / financial services by lawyers, tax accountants etc. or negotiating licensing terms
- Pay for spin-off patent costs
- Pay for licensing fees
- Pre-payments of future expenses to be incurred after the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program
- etc.

The Financial Regulations of ETH Zürich²³ in its valid version must be always observed!

²² Ordinance for scientific employees SR 172.220.113.11 / RSETHZ 516.1

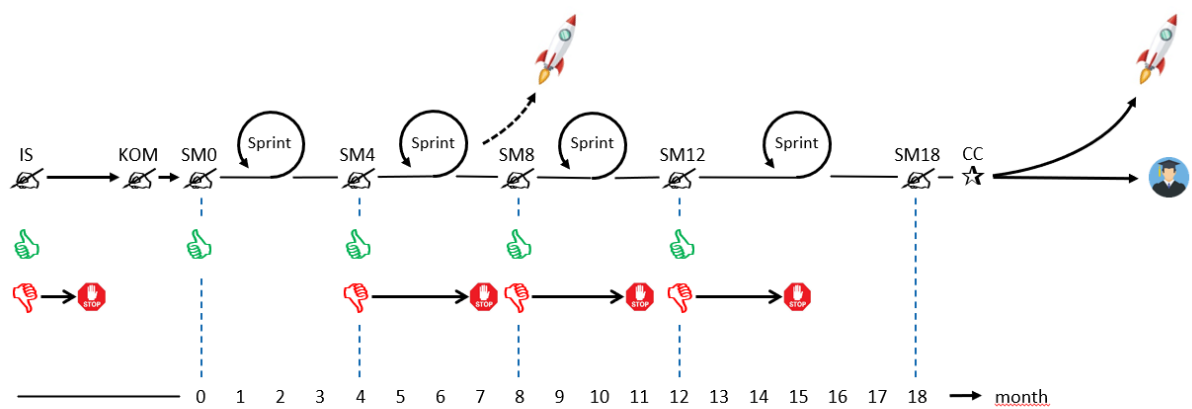
²³ RSETHZ 245

Appendix 3 Timing of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program

The following graph illustrates the relation between the application deadline, the candidates' graduation date / end of employment and the start date of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program.

Application deadline March 1																											
Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	
End of Employment / Graduation Date																											
Evaluation										Start Date																	
Application deadline September 1																											
Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	
End of Employment / Graduation Date																											
Evaluation												Start Date															

Appendix 4 Lifecycle of the Pioneer Fellowship Social Impact Incubation Program



- IS Interview Session
- KOM Kick-Off Meeting
- SMx Sprint Meeting x
- SM12 Final Sprint Meeting for two Pioneer Fellows
- SM18 Final Sprint Meeting for one Pioneer Fellow
- CC Certificate Ceremony ☆
- Meeting
- Go / No-Go
- Stop
- Entrepreneurial ETH Graduate
- ETH Spin-off