How to submit effective scholarship applications

If you have never applied for a scholarship before or would like advice on what makes a good application, then this guide is for you. It will help you understand how scholarship recipients are selected and provide you with some tips on how best to highlight your experience and motivation so that you maximize your chances of getting a scholarship.

Eligibility criteria: Who can apply for a scholarship?

The IAS 2025 Scholarship Programme is open to anyone who is at least 18 years old and working, volunteering or studying in the area of HIV. All interested candidates who meet these criteria are invited to apply. Priority is given to:

- Abstract presenters whose submission has been selected for the conference
- Applicants from low-income and middle-income countries
- Applicants who are part of key populations or people living with HIV
- Young people and early-career investigators below the age of 35
- Applicants who did not previously receive a scholarship for an IAS Conference

This is to ensure that people who are most affected by HIV and face significant financial barriers are given extra support to attend. However, everyone, regardless of whether or not they belong to a priority group, is encouraged to put together a strong application to increase their chances of getting selected. Every year, many thousands of people apply, and scholarships are limited, so it is worth investing time to make sure that your application is as good as it can be.

How are scholarship applications screened and reviewed?

Once all applications have been received, they are screened internally. At this stage, any application that does not meet four basic conditions is filtered out. These conditions are:

- The person must be involved in the area of HIV (as a student, volunteer or professional).
- They must have included an appropriate letter of recommendation.
- The application must be in English.
- The application has not been plagiarized or written with overuse of AI.

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Applications that pass the screening stage then move on to the review stage for the attention of two external reviewers. The reviewers are HIV professionals from different countries who volunteer to blind review applications for the programme.

Reviewers read and provide scores on applicants' written answers, focusing on the open questions, such as the applicant's experience in HIV, their motivation to attend the conference, and how their conference participation will benefit their community. **The reviewers do not look at such aspects as the financial support requested, attendance type or personal details.** We are careful not to assign applications to any reviewers from the same country as the applicant, and we do not share the name of the applicant, nor their organization, with the reviewer.

Don't worry if you are just starting your career in HIV or if English is not your first language. We always ask reviewers to be lenient when evaluating the experience of a young professional, and we do not judge applications based on writing style or correct use of English grammar.

How can I best highlight my expertise and motivation in my application?

Make sure you follow these tips:

1. **Get a good letter of recommendation**

It is important to get a good letter of recommendation. To be accepted, this letter must fulfil the following basic criteria:

- Written in English
- Include a letterhead of your referee's organization, company or institution
- Dated within two months of your application submission date and signed (original or digital signature) by the referee
- Explicitly references you and supports your scholarship application for IAS 2025, explaining why you would be a good candidate for the scholarship

The best letters of recommendation are those that go into detail about the applicant's experience, professional background and motivation in the area of HIV. So, it is best to choose a referee who is a manager or colleague familiar with your work and interests.

Please remember:

- Since the letter can take some time to obtain, make sure that you **contact your referee with enough time to spare** before applications close. We do not accept any late applications or reference letters.

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- The file types we accept for the reference letter are .pdf, .png or .jpeg. Please make sure that your file views and opens correctly after uploading it because if the file is empty when we open it or it does not open, we will consider your application invalid.

2. **Provide detail when describing your expertise in the area of HIV**

Keep in mind that the external reviewers do not know you, and so you will need to convince them that you are the right fit for the conference. You can start by outlining your professional background, including any relevant experience you've had in the area of HIV, and any accomplishments you are particularly proud of. Then describe your current role in detail. What tasks and responsibilities do you have now, and how does your role contribute to the HIV response? **If you are a student or a young person, we do not expect you to have many years of experience. You can still elaborate on what led you to be involved in HIV, your current role and its relevance to the HIV response.**

3. **Reflect on what you would like to learn at the conference**

The conference is an opportunity to learn and collaborate. Reflect on this when you describe your motivation and go into as much detail as possible. Explain *what* you are interested in learning at the conference and *why*. Instead of just saying that you are interested in the conference programme, specify **which topics, in particular,** you are interested in and how this would improve your own daily work, studies or volunteer activities in the area of HIV.

4. **Have a plan about how you intend to bring knowledge gained back to your community and improve services back home**

Reviewers are interested in the benefit that your conference attendance will bring to your community back home. We select candidates whose conference attendance will bring positive impacts not just for their own careers, but also for the overall HIV response. **For this question, again, it is best to be as detailed as possible.** Don't just say that you would like to share knowledge of the conference back home. Describe *how* you plan to do this and provide examples of new ways of working, projects or research you intend to implement based on the knowledge you have gained from the conference.

5. **Tell your story**

For many of us, HIV is a deeply personal issue. If this is the case for you, feel free to include how your personal experience has shaped your understanding and engagement in the HIV response and the changes you would like to see in your community and globally.

6. Don't worry about writing style, but be clear and personal in your answers

For most applicants, English is not their first language, so we do not judge grammar or writing style. However, it is important to be clear in your answers. To help, feel free to use a spell checker or an online translator. You could also ask a friend to read your answers before you submit your application. However, please remember that your final answers must be your own work and personal to you. Any plagiarized (copied and pasted) applications or those created with overuse of an AI tool will be discarded.

All of the open questions specify a word count: the minimum is 150 words and the maximum is 250 words. Make sure that you write responses that are detailed enough without going over the word limit.

How do I link a submission (abstract) to my scholarship?

After submitting your abstract, you may apply separately for a scholarship. The system will automatically link your submission(s) to your scholarship application. On the last page of the scholarship application form, you will find a list of your submissions. Please note: only the abstract presenter (maximum of one person) will be prioritized for a scholarship.

Each person must apply for their scholarship independently, using the same email address provided in their abstract submission.

Abstract presenters whose submissions were accepted for the conference will be prioritized in the scholarship selection.

If you don't have a submission, you can just skip this step.

Application deadline

Start your application early. Some documents (like the letter of recommendation) may take time to obtain, and it's a good idea to review your written answers before submitting your application.

Although you can submit an application only once, you can save your application as a draft until you are ready to submit it. For your application to be considered, it must be submitted **by 22 January 2025, 23:59 Central European Time (CET).** We won't accept any applications after this date.

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We will consider all applications submitted by the deadline equally. However, avoid waiting until the last minute to submit your application. If you have technical difficulties or poor internet connectivity close to the deadline, we may not have enough time to help you.

We hope that these tips help you. Good luck, and we look forward to reviewing your application!