

## OPEN LETTER

### CZECH CONFERENCE OF RECTORS AND COUNCIL OF UNIVERSITIES

In Prague on December 3, 2020

Dear leaders of universities,

in the context of the current pandemic situation and the constraints resulting from it, we would like to appeal to you 1) so that the effects of this unprecedented situation are taken into account in the assessment of the fulfillment of Individual Study Plans (ISP) of students in doctoral study programs (DSP), 2) to ensure that all students in the DSP, including those in the foreign language programs, are informed about all possibilities to help to solve problems related to the pandemic situation on university grounds and 3) to ensure equal rights for students in foreign language study programs with students in Czech ones when it comes to the possibility to apply for social and accommodation scholarship.

Plans for the fulfillment of ISP set up before the pandemic outbreak become difficult or even impossible to complete considering governmental restrictions (conferences abroad were postponed or canceled due to travel restrictions, primary schools were closed, which affected doctoral students who are also parents, etc.)

We, therefore, call for a revision of the ISP, specifically for a) an extension of deadlines for fulfillment specific obligations; and (b) the possibility to substitute one obligation for another if it will not be possible to satisfy the original one (e.g., to recognize virtual mobility instead of an internship abroad, or substitution of this internship by participation at one or multiple international conferences including those organized online). In this context, we also advocate for taking into account doctoral students' active involvement (mainly, but not only of those from the medical sciences) in the fight with the pandemic in the evaluation of ISP performance.

Related to this point, we would also like to appeal to not reduce doctoral scholarships in this academic year in cases of failure or delay in fulfilling of ISP duties. Similarly, we appeal to reevaluate decisions already issued and to return back the cut scholarship to the students. The period from March 1 2020 to August 31 2020, was recognized as "a period of study disruption" as specified by the legislative Act No. 188/2020 Coll. and does not count to the standard or maximum length of study. Doctoral students in the full-time form of study who are not employed at the same time, meaning they only have student status, are not entitled to any support from government Anticovid programs neither the standard unemployment benefits, and reducing their scholarships not only prevents them from completing their studies

successfully but may also put them in a serious living situation where their basic existential needs cannot be met.

Secondly, we would like to emphasize the need to inform all DSP students about the proposed aid options to solve problems related to the pandemic, especially the fulfillment of study obligations and possibilities of support in the situation when one does not have sufficient income to secure basic living needs through their own efforts (e.g., accommodation scholarships, etc.), including the indication of contacts to specific people whom students may contact with their problems. Regarding this issue, we want to draw attention to the need to ensure that even doctoral students who do not speak Czech are informed, and therefore communication of all relevant information is provided in English as well. Otherwise, those not speaking Czech are disadvantaged, which goes against the current declarations of efforts to strengthen Czech higher education's internationalization.

The last, third point of our letter concerns the conditions of students in foreign language programs. Compared to students in the Czech language programs, these students are often excluded from opportunities to apply for social and accommodation scholarships, which we consider discriminatory. We appeal so that all students can apply for these scholarships regardless of the language of their study.

We are aware that the pandemic has affected almost everyone and represents a significant challenge for academics and other university staff and the universities as an institution. The situation of doctoral students, given their status as students and at the same time, early career researchers is so specific that we consider it important to draw attention to it.

With respect,

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Chair of the Czech Association of Doctoral Students