



MINISTRY OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Dear **Higher Education Students and Students' Association Leaders**

23 March, 2020

**Subject: Higher education students and the fight against COVID-19**

Tomorrow, March 24th, we'll be celebrating National Student Day in an unprecedented way, in a situation of demanding social isolation. Higher education students are meeting this demand as a moment of solidarity towards the general population, thus valuing the social responsibility of all those who participate in higher education.

The last few weeks have also required the academic and scientific communities to adapt quickly to an unprecedented time that impels us to a greater sense of civic duty, of commitment to public health and to the safety of all, particularly the elderly and vulnerable.

Massive adherence of higher education institutions to the adoption of collaborative and distance learning environments within their Contingency Plans to ensure the normal functioning of teaching and research activities, preventing the transmission of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), is an example of this rapid adaptation and social responsibility to face the present difficult circumstances.



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The operation of higher education institutions has indeed mobilised a collective effort of students, faculty, staff and managers, which should be acknowledged, as summarised in the annex to this letter. The suspension of face-to-face activities and their replacement by collaborative and distance learning environments requires an additional effort of concentration and learning which, we acknowledge, requires the greatest attention from us all.

In view of the challenges now facing us, we welcome the increasing willingness of all students to adapt to the full implementation of these work methods and to pedagogically prepare to use them.

This general mobilisation to ensure the full operation of the higher education system must not forget the thousands of foreign students who have chosen our institutions to invest in their training. In addition to the assistance provided by their embassies, it is also up to us, and particularly the student associations, to ensure that the protective measures are also adopted by these colleagues in a warm, friendly environment that is so typical of us.

Following the concerns that some student leaders have raised with us, we have also clarified that the payment of scholarships and research contracts, student welfare grants and other benefits as well as scholarships to support periods of study as part of mobility programmes is guaranteed.

Naturally, a period of possible new economic difficulties for families is in prospect, and emergency financial aid to students is therefore capable of being used within the legal and institutional framework in force. Other possible emergency situations will be analysed whenever necessary. The aim will always be to ensure that all students are able to pursue and/or continue their higher education studies.

We live in an unprecedented time which demands the mobilisation of the country for a fight that belongs to everyone and therefore we count on the



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responsibility and collaboration of all Higher Education students to fight for this cause.

Best Regards,

Manuel Heitor, Minister

João Sobrinho Teixeira, Deputy Minister



## **ANNEX: Summary of ongoing initiatives in Higher Education in the context of the fight against COVIDC19**

### **1. Fostering distance learning and teleworking**

Rapid generalisation of collaborative and distance learning environments has been possible due to a wide range of services provided by the National Scientific Computing Unit of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT-FCCN) and by platforms developed by the institutions themselves which allow students to follow classes and keep their academic activities moving, and of course our common aim is that no student is impaired in their academic performance.

The **COLIBRI collaboration platform**, made available by the National Scientific Computing Unit of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT-FCCN) for distance learning, continues to register a daily increase in the number of users. As an example, this platform registered last Thursday, March 19, 195,504 participants, who attended 8,895 classes and meetings remotely. Since the beginning of March it has registered more than 536,000 users (namely, with the registration of 536,276 participants in 32,266 lessons/meetings, for a total of 21,427,382 minutes between 1 and 19 March).

In addition to the COLIBRI platform, FCT-FCCN offers other support services for distance learning and teleworking, including the **NAU - Sempre a Aprender platform**, which supports online courses for large audiences in MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) format and which since January 2019 has seen 79,755 enrolments, 56,795 registrations and 36,862 certificates issued. In only seven days, NAU registered 1061 enrolments, 534 registrations and 609 certificates issued.



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FCT-FCCN also provides **EDUCAST**, which since the beginning of this month has registered 6,021 new users, 1,196 videos produced, 103,444 views, 592 channels created and 34,926 minutes published. From March 1<sup>st</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>, the **VIDEOCAST platform** registered 539 users who created 413 new sessions in a total of 69 hours broadcast.

FCT-FCCN will continue to work on maintaining and strengthening the capacity of the distance learning and teleworking services it provides aiming to support the academic and scientific community in the adoption of collaborative work environments, ensuring the maintenance of teaching and research activities and promoting teleworking in the unprecedented challenges faced by the country.

The support of the academic and scientific community through the reinforcement of the capacity of collaborative environment platforms has already considered doubling the number of COLIBRI processors, memory, disk and virtual transcoding machines and will have to continue to be done as appropriate.

## 2. Graduation, awards examination panels and public defences

However, all the legal conditions have been created for the meetings of **Master's and Doctoral awards examination panels** as well as all public examinations to be held by videoconference and through the use of electronic media. In such cases, the **mutual agreement** between the examination panel and the respective candidate must be recorded and adequate publicity of the public defences and results must be published on the HEI website. This will avoid constraints on the completion of studies by students in their final stages of training.



### 3. International mobility students

Through the competent services and in articulation with the Higher Education Institutions and the Foreign Affairs services, an effort has been launched to **contact all the national students** who are undertaking mobility periods abroad, in order to assess their individual situation and their desire to return to the country or to proceed with mobility training in the countries concerned. This effort, strongly supported by the diplomatic and consular network, has obviously given priority to contacting some 540 students who were undertaking mobility training in Italy.

Also in this context, more flexible rules have been adopted in the framework of the Erasmus+ Education and Training programme, **allowing students to interrupt ongoing mobility**, extend mobility up to 12 months or be reimbursed for additional costs, in accordance with the note to the guidelines issued by the European Commission.

### 4. Support for students and R&D fellows

The **normal functioning** of FCT's payments of grants and research contracts, of student welfare grants and their complements and benefits as well as of grants to support student mobility is guaranteed.

FCT has also secured an **extension of the application deadline** for doctoral research grants and the extension of all fellowship contracts directly funded by it.



## 5. Meals in canteens and accommodation in residences

Despite the suspension of all classroom activities in higher education institutions, it has been legally determined that the activities that ensure supply of meals in canteens and accommodation in residences and dormitories housing students who are unable to return to their homes in Portugal or abroad **shall continue to operate**.

## 6. Dissemination of scientific knowledge and adoption of good practices

Every effort is being made to disseminate science-based information to students and the general population, and in particular researchers, faculty and their R&D units and academic structures are being asked to treat and communicate appropriate technical information and to mobilise scientific communication efforts to the population. This is also an opportunity that requires the mobilisation of students, academics and scientists for the dissemination and enhancement of the population's scientific culture.

In this context, during the last few days it has already been possible to boost and guarantee the implementation of **new diagnostic initiatives** developed by companies, laboratories and national R&D units in close collaboration with health care units. Several initiatives are also underway to stimulate the **design and production of equipment for emergency situations**, including respirators.

The effort to mobilise many higher education and science and technology institutions, especially those active in the biomedical field, to **bring together and donate various types of equipment and tools to hospitals and health care units** should also be given particular recognition.



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Additionally, FCT will provide a **platform (SCIENCE 4 COVID19)** to **mobilise researchers** as well as a new competition to support R&D projects and ideas (RESEARCH 4 COVID19). ANI, the national innovation agency, stimulates the development of new scientific and technological based ideas developed by **companies operating in Portugal** as in <https://www.ani.pt/>. And *Agência Ciência Viva* is systematically disseminating **information for families and the population** of all ages produced by researchers such as in <http://www.cienciaviva.pt/home/>.