

Announcement

Towards a path of future in pandemic time!

COVID-19

The Academic Association of University of Minho (AAUMinho) has assumed an active role in ensuring the defense of the rights of all students of Academia of Minho, in relation to the difficult social moment in which we are living, caused by the proliferation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past few weeks, the Academic Association has been promoting a closed contact, being attentive to the community of students and focusing on communication with the students groups and the elected representatives of the students, as well as the numerous contacts through our various platforms.

The result of this work represents the need to present a motion that considers, globally, the positions defended by AAUMinho and the measures that must be adopted in the context of University of Minho and Higher Education, considering a complex socio-economic situation of all Portuguese and, in particular, of all students and households.

Since march 15th, the University of Minho, has started the transition to a distance learning method, presented to the students community as a rapid, efficient process and extremely necessary. Despite the cooperation demonstrated by all entities involved in this complex process, the Academic Association maintained a collaborative, and, simultaneously, assertive attitude, in relation to the decisions made by the heads of our Academia. The institutional participation of AAUMinho ensured the fulfilment of several objectives that, at the present time, can be already observed, for instance:

- The **lack of penalties due to the delay in the payment of the tuition fee** and the guarantee that the functionalities of the academic portal will not be blocked because of the delay in the payment of the tuition fee – something that was necessary due to the decrease of the incomes of the students and their households.
- The extension of the **deadlines of dissertations, internship reports and Project work** to be defended in public testes to obtain the master's degree, to a trimester, according to the dispatch RT 31-2020. It became essential to ensure that modifications in the deadlines set out in the 2019/20 school calendar do not result in financial penalties for the students;
- The logistical support in the access **to essential equipment during the curricular activity**, such as computers, internet, scientific books, and other needs, in order to guarantee that University of Minho students do not be deprived or in disadvantage of accompanying the curricular activity. This matter is assured, in partnership with the Rectorate team of University of Minho, which provided computers and internet devices through a Computer Support Plan and, scientific books through Emergency Social Fund (FSE), a program open to all the students through the multiple platforms released by AAUMinho;
- That the **curricular activity** of the present semester, according to dispatch RT-33/2020, must be ensured in remote teaching until orders from health authorities and University of Minho. Among other specifications, this teaching method must:
 - a) Take place in the time period defined by the **class schedule**, and its eventual adjustment has to be articulated with the students and their elected representatives;
 - b) Include **communicative moments with the students instead of just releasing content in the platforms** in order to incentive the discussion of

ideas and questions about the subject, as well as personal attendance to the students;

c) Be held in the platforms recommended by University of Minho;

- Definition of new **dates to the final exams**, which will take place between June 27th (end of academic year) and July 18th. Every student will have access to the final exams. Consequently, the adjustment of the **dates of the special season of exams**, between 3rd and 12th of September.
- The participation and elaboration of guidelines by the Support to Inclusion Cabinet, especially focusing on **distance learning for students with special educational needs**;
- The possibility of the **Scholarships for School Social Action** provided by the State to remain active, as well as the UMinho's **Emergency Social Fund**, so that every student struggling with economic issues can continue to benefit from these mechanisms.
- The regularization of the payment of University Residences for scholarship students and for non scholarship students, ensuring that no harm will be done to students who have decided to return to their homes.

In spite of all marked progress, concerns remain on the part of the Board of the Academic Association of the University of Minho in several domains. Concerns for which we understand that should be granted special attention from the institutional and government officials. In this regard, we considered that should be implemented the following measures:

- Based on the study done by AAUMinho with the academic community, we verified that 80% of the First cycle and integrated masters Course Units were being taught at a distance, we understand that the conditions must be quickly created

for this transition to occur for all course plans, except for explicit or proven impossibilities, for logistical reasons;

- In the face of recurring complaints from the student community about the high temporal requirement that this new education regime has obliged, should be considered efforts for the correct adequacy of the workload required to UMinho students, with the weighting due to the difficulties associated with the complex habituation to the change of routines and formats of study and learning;
- Complying with the Rectoral dispatch RT-33/2020, that decrees the absence of presential classes until the end of the semester and also to the recent announcement from MCTES which delegates in the autonomy of universities the possibility of reopening a part of the presential activity, which access to it should only be made possible, when there are sanitary conditions for this purpose, as well as one or more of the following contexts:
 - a) Course Units or research activities with a practical, laboratory or artistic-performative componente;
 - b) Evaluation moments must be achievable on a presential model;
 - c) All final and special season exams;
- In the context mentioned in the preceding paragraph, should be created the conditions for:
 - a) displaced and foreign students can access these assessments in a non-presential format, considering that many have already cancelled their temporary residency contracts or simply do not have the means to return to the cities of Braga and Guimarães, on the present semester;

- b) to students that belong to group risks or that are complying with social distance recommendations and do not have the conditions to travel to UMinho's teaching complexes;
- The adequacy of evaluation models according to the following recommendations:
 - a) The diversification and/or increase in evaluation elements, without them meaning a work overload for students;
 - b) The readjustment of evaluation with a practical component, so they can be replaced by similar assessments under existing possible conditions;
 - c) The existence of a greater tolerance on the part of professors for the possibility of logistical failures on the part of students in carrying out the assessment tests, considering the current circumstances;
 - d) The reinforcement of communication between professors and students, in order to elaborate evaluation formats, suitable for both parties;
- The definition by the A3ES of the mandatory practical components for obtaining professional approval in the respective orders and, therefore, make the right correspondence with the qualifications of the course they integrate possible;
- The opening of the special season of exams to all students of the University of Minho, so as not to prejudice the assessments arising from social confinement;
- The adjustment of the application calendars for the Master's degree at the University of Minho, ensuring that the current established deadlines do not prejudice the applications to the 2nd cycle of studies, either at the University of Minho or at the other Higher Education Institutions, for all the students who intend to do so;

- The increase of the periodicity of the meetings of the course committees, with the representatives of the students for that purpose, in order to facilitate the articulation of the course direction with the difficulties and suggestions presented by the students;
- The creation of a School Social Action helpline for students who have not had the opportunity to cancel their housing contracts and who, given the current situation, may not be able to afford it;
- Given the impossibility for students to have access to the facilities of the University of Minho since the beginning of March, AAUMinho appeals for the compensation of the park service of the percentage corresponding to the time that students were deprived of the use of this service;
- Given the inexistence of activity that justifies extraordinary administrative costs on the part of the University's service units, maintaining the position defended by AAUMinho in all institutional instances, we also request that all fees and emoluments charged to students be suspended;

With regard to the amount of tuition fees, the Academic Association of the University of Minho will continue to consistently express itself in favour of their reduction, under the terms of Article 74 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic. We believe that Education is the main tool for the development of a country and, therefore, should be accessible to all, regardless of the social context experienced. It is under these principles that we understand that no formal relationship should be established between the context we endure, for which all institutions should promote a consistent and high social responsibility position, and the context experienced before the pandemic. Nevertheless, it might be encouraged the creation of social emergency measures, such as the one already done by the University of Porto, which may help in

the sudden reduction in the incomes needed to pay for a higher education. All students from UMinho may apply to these financial benefits, those who are enduring a difficult economic situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, who are not benefiting of the direct social action, and may have seen their academic journey affected.

Finally, we call on the academic community to maintain an ethical and a great social responsibility towards the curricular activities, in order to correspond according to the expected principles, in one of the most complex moments of our life in society.

This position should be guided by interpersonal understanding, in every moment, and the unequivocal concept that we all have an individual responsibility in this crisis. Therefore, we should be attentive to all injustice and difficult social situations, either caused by economic difficulties, mental health aspects, social exclusion or special educational needs. Moreover, we encourage remote communication and “a get-together”, and in cases of more sensitive situations, the individual support or, if necessary, forward the concerns to the responsible entities and support programs.

The Academic Association of University of Minho has been managing its efforts to make sure that every student can continue their higher education in the best possible conditions, ensuring that everything has been done to support the students of our Academia. Nonetheless, there are a few cases for which we appreciate the contact with us, through the email covid19@aaum.pt or our social platforms.

Convinced that, day by day, we are getting closer to the moment when the academic life will once again fill our Academia with energy, we call on everyone to continue to follow the recommendations of Directorate General of Health (DGS), as we have responsibly done, since the beginning of this pandemic. We will continue to prove, today and always, that we are the best Academia in the Country!

From the Board of Academic Association
of University of Minho