



POLICY BRIEF IN SUPPORT OF FUNDED EXTENSION

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Sub-Committee on Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The COVID - 19 pandemic has caused great disruption to CEU Doctoral Students' academic lives and calendars; while also exacerbating existing problems, especially for students who are in challenging financial and family situations. The CEU PhD Working Group and members of this Sub-committee acknowledge that CEU has attempted to address student issues and has come up with certain appropriate and swift resolutions. We especially welcome the measures set out by the Provost in the email dated 4 April 2020 which addressed many of our concerns, *inter alia*, on write-up grants, doctoral students on field research, and the DRSG. However, the longer-term impacts of the pandemic are, understandably, yet to be addressed.

Whilst we do not yet know the full scale of these impacts, it is clear that the pandemic has significant detrimental effects on doctoral research and researchers themselves. In consultation with over 133 CEU PhD students through the COVID19 impact on PhD survey conducted in April (**Covid-19 Survey**), we have identified how the pandemic impacts on income, research resources, progress in their academic careers, mental health, and quality of life. The impact of the pandemic on doctoral research at CEU is far-reaching - **81% of PhD students** expressed that the impacts of the crisis impacts on their research and academic plans will be detrimentally affected, that is **over 110 CEU PhD research projects that look set to be delayed**, derailed or even dropped all together.

In this brief, we outline some of the specific disruptions and difficulties which have been caused or exacerbated by the pandemic to Doctoral Student lives and research and provide reasons why a standard six-month extension to the 36-month stipend period is vital at this time. Seeing how other universities and academic institutions proactively respond to the expected impacts of the pandemic underscores the need to provide pre-emptive measures to ensure that CEU doctoral graduates remain competitive in the international academic job market and continue to produce research of the highest impact and rigor.

In Part I, we outline the main disruptions to the life and research of Doctoral Students during the pandemic. Part II provides a brief summary of practices across universities around the world in responding to doctoral students' funding concerns. Part III provides reasons why a 6-month stipend extension would go a long way to alleviate much of the fallout of these aforementioned pandemic induced disruptions and existing Doctoral issues.

PART I. DISRUPTIONS TO STUDENTS' WORK AND LIFE

1.1 Students' income

According to the PhD Quality of Student Life survey of 2019, Doctoral Students' income is comprised of four main sources: the 36-months stipend period, CEU additional funding programs (DRSG, GTF, Archival and Fieldwork Grant, Erasmus, etc.), external funding agencies, and non-CEU extra income activities.¹ Given a combination of these four sources of income Doctoral Students are guaranteed at least 3 + 1 years for their research at a minimum decent quality of life during that period based on standards of living and prices in Budapest.²

While the financial situation of many students is precarious already, the pandemic has disrupted any financial stability, affecting almost all the components of the overall student's income.

1.1a) Suspension of major funding programs

The short-term unavailability of CEU additional funding programs like the DRSG, Erasmus, and GTFP represents a major disruption to many students' plans who depended on the presence and arrival of these additional funding for the next 6 or 12 months. 69% of respondents in the Covid-19 Survey felt that the inaccessibility of funding had affected them adversely. We appreciate the effort of the University by introducing the Emergency Student Assistant Fund, but we consider the maximum amount of money a student can get from this fund is not enough to cover the minimum expenses in Budapest or elsewhere. Furthermore, the one-time nature of the fund makes it suitable for specific incidental expenses rather than a source of income for a number of months as opposed to the aforementioned programs.

¹ It is important to note that prior to the onset of the pandemic, 73.7% of survey respondents in the PhD Quality of Life Survey, on a scale of 1 to 5, indicated a satisfaction of below 3 with the current setup of financial support for research (in addition to the stipend), for example, e.g., for conferences, seminars, workshops, and summer schools.

² It should also be noted that the PhD Quality of Student Life survey indicated a staggering 86% of the respondents having faced one or more financial issues during the year, while 51.9% stated that they were unable to cover their living cost solely with the CEU Stipend. The Covid-19 Survey indicates that 47% of respondents rated 3 or higher (on a scale of 1-5) when asked to indicate whether pandemic has had any negative impact on their sources of income. 31% of respondents in the Covid-19 Survey indicated that they are unable to cover living costs solely with the stipend.

1.1. b) Loss of external income sources

31% of respondents in the Covid-19 Survey indicated that they are unable to cover living costs solely with the stipend, while 17% indicated that they were able to cover living costs due to lower accommodation costs (like owning a home or living with relatives). 34% of respondents who were not able to cover costs on the stipend or respondents whose stipend period had ended stated that additional non-CEU occupations (like full-time, part-time, and temporary projects, etc.). Many students informed us that their external income has ceased due to the lockdown and general economic downturn (as they can **no longer access employment**) and no new opportunities are available.³ It is unclear for how long the lockdown and/or social distancing regulations will last, and what the long-term impact on non-CEU employment is going to be. In all likelihood, prospects of such employment are likely to be lesser or non-existent, thus exacerbating the financial stress Doctoral Students are already under.

In order to make up the inadequacy of the CEU stipend, 34.7% of survey respondents in the PhD Quality of Life Survey indicated that they were forced to either dip into their personal savings or seek help from family. These numbers were significantly higher at 69% in the Covid-19 Survey. This quite likely implies that due to the pandemic, these **additional personal resources are being eroded**, and it is unlikely they will be able to rely on it in the future.

Many doctoral students rely on grants from **external funding agencies** to finance a part of their study or fieldwork; or rely on them for project-specific funding. Many funding agencies have now delayed or shut down their grant and application processes as a consequence of the pandemic. 31% of survey respondents indicated that they were planning to apply to any external funding which have now stopped receiving applications (See **Annexure II. Lack of Access to External Funding Agencies (Illustrative)**)

1.1.c) Additional cost implications of the pandemic

- Students who are in **countries other than Hungary or their countries of origin** (primarily on account of fieldwork) are especially vulnerable in these situations since they are having to navigate healthcare and housing situations which they may not be familiar with, with varying levels of lockdown conditions and little predictability about when such lockdowns will be lifted, or when they will have access to additional financial resources as outlined below above, or research resources as described below.

³ Prior to the onset of the pandemic, 51.9% of survey respondents in the PhD Quality of Life Survey indicated that they were unable to cover expenses with the CEU Stipend. 52.6% stated that they had additional non-CEU occupations - e.g. full-time, part-time, temporary projects, etc. to cover their daily expenses.

1.2 Research Resources

Access to research resources is critical for the continuation of academic research. As faculty will be well aware, the loss of these resources is a major hindrance to research. Testimonials from students attest to how the pandemic induced abridgement of research resources will have an adverse effect on PhD completion⁴, and a knock-on effect on graduation rates. CEU has undertaken efforts to provide resource access where possible. Nevertheless, the pandemic poses some serious challenges for students' ability to conduct their research and writing which are discussed below in order of urgency:

1.2. a) No access to archives and field

This is especially relevant for students whose research is based on fieldwork and data collection: students who are currently in the field are only able to access a limited pot of funding to conduct field-based research, they may find they are 'wasting' their limited grants. Additionally, others have had delays in their fieldwork and data collection due to the lockdown. Therefore, it is expected that many students will have to **shift their project timelines and research plans**. To many it is still unclear how they should adjust their plans moving forward. According to Covid 19 Survey, 69% of respondents indicated that their research projects require empirical data collection/ fieldwork out of which, with 77% still in the initial phases of their data collection. 66% report that the pandemic has impacted their ability to collect data and/or conduct fieldwork (for student testimonies on data collection being adversely impacted by the pandemic, please see **Annexure-VI: Doctoral Student Testimonials on Pandemic Induced Impacts on Data Collection for Research**).

1.2.b) Major Disruptions to Research Services & Facilities

Major resources like ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and CambridgeCore **are often unavailable** through the CEU VPN (for evidence, please see **Annexure III - Lack of Access to Online Sources**). Students do not have access to the library, and Inter-library Loans, which are very essential to the research of many doctoral students. This implies a partial and, in some cases, a complete impediment to further research.

Doctoral Students **no longer have access to their workspaces**, PhD labs and offices, which impedes their ability to work in a quiet, yet communal environment. Many of these labs, especially in the Cognitive Sciences Department, are based at the physical spaces at CEU. The Covid-19 Survey indicates that close to 30% of Doctoral Students did not have access to appropriate work spaces in a quiet environment, 31% did not have access to specific software and databases, 10% did not have access to a reliable internet connection, while 2.2% of Doctoral Students did not even have access to a personal device to continue working on. This has an adverse impact on their ability to conduct the research necessary at the doctoral level. (For student testimonials on the

⁴ See **Annexure XI: Testimonials from Doctoral Students on not completing their PhD within the expected time framework**.

⁵ For student testimonies about this, please see **Annexure V: Testimonials from Doctoral Students on the pandemic and its potential consequences impact on their research timeline, work priorities, and academic plans**.

disruptions induced by working from home, please see **Annexure- VII: Doctoral Student Testimonials on Impacts to Work-from-Home (WFH)**).

The **continuity of PhD supervision** has been mixed based on the survey data. Supervisory support has been significantly reduced or affected for many doctoral students. Online meetings may present issues for disabled students or students with Wi-Fi or digital access issues. Supervisors themselves may lack capacity due to caregiving responsibilities at home. We are pleased to note that the Covid-19 Survey data indicates that a majority of Doctoral Students are satisfied with the adjusted conditions for supervision. However, 11% stated that they were dissatisfied, while 15% stated that no adjustments had been for supervision during this time. It also bears noting that 23% of survey respondents felt that they were not suitably supported by their supervisors. Gaps in supervision have an adverse impact on the continuation of PhD research.

At the present moment, all of CEU's **classes have shifted online**, and we are greatly appreciative of the faculty, administrative and support staff who have adapted quickly and successfully to the changes induced by the pandemic. In the Covid-19 Survey, a majority of respondents rated 3 or higher (on a scale of 1-5) the level of difficulty in attending classes online, whether as a student or TA. The switch to online teaching often involves a scaling up of online resources and infrastructure that is often done by the TAs that is very onerous and far exceeds what may be required of them under normal circumstances. This has knock-on effects on TA-ing students' ability to do research and writing for their dissertation.

1.2c) Almost total pause to learning and networking opportunities

Most **academic conferences and summer schools have been cancelled for the foreseeable future**. These are a primary vehicle for networking and imbibing critical methodological training not offered by CEU among doctoral students. Conferences are key for the progression of doctoral work, particularly for latter stage students, and important for their competitiveness at a global level, and especially so because of a likely depressed academic job market.

1.3 Quality of Life

The other component of students' ability to continue and finish their research in good terms relates to their quality of life during and after the research work. As mentioned in subsection 1.1, student's income has a huge impact on how students live during their 3 + 1 year of research. We have shared our financial concerns, but there are some additional problems that the current crisis presents to student's quality of life:

1.3 a) Existing health conditions Impacted or Exacerbated

Many doctoral students' ability to do research and writing is heavily contingent on the receipt of adequate healthcare and therapeutic facilities to address existing physical and mental health conditions, with 11% of respondents in our survey stating that they had a disability or long-term health condition, and 73% stating that the pandemic has had an impact upon such disability or long-term health condition. The CEU Medical Centre is currently shut, and most hospitals and health clinics in Hungary are refusing treatment to conditions that are not considered life

threatening. We appreciate the steps which CEU has taken to address students' mental and physical health needs, but we fear that their inability to access other forms of therapeutic services and resources is likely to have an adverse impact on their ability to do writing and research (for student testimonials on the effect of the pandemic on disruptions to academic life and mental and physical health, please see **Annexure- VII: Testimonials from Doctoral Students on the impact of the pandemic their disability/health condition and its effects on their research work**)

1.3b) Many students in full-time care giving roles

Almost a **quarter of CEU PhD students⁶ have caregiving duties** - 23% of those who responded to our survey said they had to take care of children, parents, partners or family members. A number of CEU's **doctoral students are parents** (15% of our survey respondents), and in the absence of childcare and closure of schools and daycares, their ability to conduct uninterrupted research is likely to be severely impacted - a large majority of student parents said additional parental responsibilities have severely affected their ability to do work. The impact of parenting duties is especially significant for female PhD students, with statistics suggesting that fewer female students progressed from MA to PhD studies at CEU and that graduation rates for female PhD students is low - 53% of female students graduated.⁷

Student parents also struggle to attend or TA online classes (due to the lack of quiet workspace) and may fall behind with methods training, completing course requirements, fulfilling and accessing TA opportunities etc. The impact of childcare duties is especially marked for students who are single parents, sole carers whose partners are critical or continuing workers, and parents of disabled children who find themselves without care workers or specialist support. Additionally, many students may find themselves caring for family members as some countries, Hungary included, are sending home patients with existing health conditions.

1.3c) Students abroad (outside of Hungary or home country)

According to our survey, 18% of respondents are currently on fieldwork/ DRSG/ GTFP/ or other CEU related visit abroad. The students we have contacted doing research, studying, or teaching at the time the pandemic crisis started, and currently **stuck in a foreign country**, have expressed almost unanimously the need for additional financial assistance - to cover allocation, costs of living, health insurance, and assistance for returning home. This for the eventuality - in which some students already find themselves - that the crisis continues when their grant period is over (For student testimonies attesting to the above identified problems, please see **Annexure- IV: Doctoral Student Testimonials on Being Outside of Hungary on the GTFP/DRSG or fieldwork**)

⁶ In the Covid-19 Survey, 23% responded Yes to the Question 'Do you have to take care of any children, parents, partner or family?'

⁷ See Policy Brief on CEU Support for Student Families (Student Family Sub-committee) (13 April 2020).

1.3d) Disabled students and those with medical conditions face additional health and access challenges

Disabled students or those with long-term health conditions compose a notable proportion of the student body - 11% of our survey respondents - and they overwhelmingly reported that the pandemic has had an impact on their disability or health condition (77% report that the pandemic has negatively impacted them), which in turn has affected their work. The CEU Medical Centre is currently shut, and most hospitals and health clinics in Hungary are refusing treatment to conditions that are not considered life threatening. We appreciate the steps which CEU has taken to address students' **mental and physical health needs**, but we fear that their inability to access other forms of therapeutic services and resources is likely to have a very adverse impact on their ability to do writing and research. Worryingly many students reported not being able to access medications or treatment, often because they were trapped in a third country (i.e. not their home country or Hungary). A number of students reported that the pandemic had impacted on their existing mental health conditions - augmenting anxiety disorders and other stress-related long-term conditions. Some disabled students reported that the pandemic has made them more socially isolated and hindered their ability to engage with others including supervisors, teaching etc.; online communication can be exceedingly difficult for those with communicative and neurotypical disabilities (For student testimonials on the effect of the pandemic on disruptions to academic life and mental and physical health, please see **Annexure- VII: Testimonials from Doctoral Students on the impact of the pandemic their disability/health condition and its effects on their research work**).

1.3e) Senior PhD students are facing possibly the most challenging job market in over a decade

The state of an already underfunded, uncertain **job market** is likely to be worsened as a result of the pandemic, with reports of hiring freezes and shutdowns of universities becoming common. An extension of funding for six months will be of great help to assist students in publishing more, planning their future, and to enable better preparedness for the academic job market.

PART II. SUMMARY OF UNIVERSITY PRACTICES

In this section we outline practices from universities in relation to doctoral funding as they relate to the global pandemic. We have seen a number of examples where universities have proactively responded to the emerging impacts of the pandemic. A list of representative practices can be found in **Annexure I: University and Funding Agency Practices**.

Overall, the broad trend among funding agencies is the grant of a period of extension ranging from six months to a year, with varying approaches to whether or not additional funding on the same terms are provided or not. As such, the approaches of external funding agencies are instructive in our case only so far as it is acknowledged that such funding is usually used by researchers in combination with other grants.

With respect to the funding provided by universities, there is varying practice in the action adopted, but the overall trend points toward providing extra funding or permitting paid leave to up to 60 working days (12 weeks) for circumstances directly related to Covid-19.

We believe it is imperative that CEU's approach is more generous and accommodative of Doctoral Students' unique and heightened needs and concerns, 49% of whom are from Non-EU countries. We are currently collecting further data to understand the different practices and responses undertaken by universities and academic institutions. Student unions across different universities are now consulting with their constituencies to identify their concerns and communicate them in a meaningful way to the administration. We greatly appreciate the very accommodative stance CEU has so far taken to help students in this unprecedented crisis. However, we believe that CEU has a chance to set an industry standard for providing support to doctoral students.

PART III. RECOMMENDATION: FUNDED EXTENSION FOR 6 MONTHS

In Part I and II, we outlined the great disruptions to academic life and the problems which had been exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as the measures some universities have taken to palliate the negative outcomes of the current crisis. It is becoming clear that some of the pandemic's deepest effects are on the students' quality of life, their ability to do research, as well as, their financial stability and the resulting challenges they are likely to face (For student testimonies on this, please see, generally, **Annexure XII: Testimonials from Doctoral Students on the loss of ability to work productively caused by the current crisis**).

It is well established in our recent survey that the pandemic has induced a set of conditions which are quite far from conducive to the ability of Doctoral Students to be able to do their research and writing at levels before the onset of the pandemic. It would be unreasonable to expect Doctoral Students to function at the same levels of productivity under conditions which have the capacity to induce severe physical, psychological, and financial stress.

In order for CEU Doctoral Students to be able to compete globally in terms of research output and academic and teaching training and experience, we think that it is critical for CEU to support them financially at a time when their capacity to engage in research and writing is severely disrupted. The Covid-19 Survey also indicates that 9% of respondents were considering dropping out from the program, primarily due to financial constraints (for student testimonials from survey respondents who were considering dropping out from the doctoral program see **Annexure- VIII: Testimonials from Doctoral Student Who are Considering Dropping Out of the Program**). We have good reason to believe at least at 16-17% of students' funded time may be spent attending to responsibilities they have had to assume as a result of the pandemic (see Part 1.3), and their research and writing is severely hampered due to the reasons set out in Part 1.2.

We believe that the best way forward is to grant a **six-month funded extension** to all doctoral students. This should be a standard extension granted to the stipend period for all Doctoral Students, irrespective of department, stage of completion, or year. This has support among the body of Doctoral Students, has precedent (having being done in the UK), while also helping protect students across the board. By doing so, students will be able to secure the financial resources necessary to make up for time lost during the pandemic, rescheduling or changes resulting in their field and research plans, and offer a reprieve for students that will struggle to find income or grant opportunities in the aftermath of the pandemic.

⁸ See **Annexure X: Testimonials from Doctoral Students on what would be the most beneficial intervention to help you get back on track**.

Why 6 months?

While the long-term temporal impact of the pandemic is unclear and the severe lockdown which countries are under may be lifted after a few months, the rules pertaining to social distancing are likely to remain in place for many more months, or even years to come. As we have indicated in this report, the disruptions which have taken place are likely to have long-term impacts, many of which are not presently foreseeable. We have also identified how financial stress forms a significant constraint on the ability of a Doctoral Student to perform their research – constraints that have only worsened after the onset of the pandemic. We believe that the fallout of the impact will span months and 6 months provides a reprieve for students enabling them to adjust their plans and secure their finances while also relieving the mental burden that the pandemic and its uncertainties has caused.

Why on a standard, and not case-by-case basis?

We caution against the adoption of a case-by-case grant of funded extensions since it would produce an amount of casework that will be difficult for CEU to process, and it would leave the students in a protracted state of uncertainty that would be even more detrimental to their mental health. The pandemic has also produced a raft of mental and physical stresses which are difficult to quantify, document or capture, and we believe that a case-by-case approach risks the necessity of adducing evidence of such stresses, which may not be possible. We therefore urge the adoption of a standard funded extension for six months.

CONCLUSION

We greatly appreciate the steps that CEU has taken so far in terms of granting unconditional extensions till the end of the year to students on write-up grants. However, we believe that this would not be able to address the great disruptions which have occurred and will continue to occur to the research schedules of doctoral students who may be at different stages of completion of their doctoral project.

In such times of crisis, we believe that students and academics should prioritize mental and physical well-being, while being given the resources (both financial and otherwise) to stay on their academic career paths. This extension would guarantee that students would be able to work on high quality research and participate fully in the University's activities and their programs during and post COVID-19, without missing out on future opportunities or putting themselves at risk.

In order for CEU graduates to remain competitive on the international job market, it is imperative that they remain supported by the institution at this very difficult time. The results of the Covid-19 survey convey the great disruptions to their academic life which has occurred, as well as the effects on mental and physical well-being that is attendant to the financial uncertainty that Doctoral Students experience generally, but which have been amplified as a result of the pandemic. It is therefore recommended that CEU grant a six-month funded extension to palliate some of the negative effects of this pandemic. The CEU PhD Working Group and this Subcommittee is also willing to set up a joint project team to further map out the impact and help with the implementation of such a solution.