



# CHARLES UNIVERSITY

## STATEMENT OF THE CU OMBUDSPERSON

ON COMPLAINT 55/2023

Submitted by: X, originally from xxx, student of the PhD programme at the xxx, Charles University

Date of receipt: 18 October 2023

Subject of the submission: X, a student, submits a complaint to the CU ombudsperson stating that he has experienced the worst discriminatory behaviour during his studies, in many areas of his life in the Czech Republic. In particular, those experiences which are directly related to the ongoing or currently completed studies are relevant to the Ombudsman's investigation. The student complains about the circumstances in which his doctoral studies at the xxx CU were terminated and the support he received during his studies. The payment of the remaining scholarship is also the subject of the complaint. Last but not least, the student complains about the accommodation in the university dormitories.

Contact persons: The complaint was solved in cooperation with the ombudsman of the xxx Charles University, xxx, head of the doctoral study programme xxx, supervisor of the student, xxx. Partial comments on the matter were provided by the Head of the xxx, and another member of this department, xxx and also the director of the dormitories and canteens, xxx,

Materials and other evidence to be examined:

The student submitted a brief complaint to the Ombudsperson with no additional attachments. The faculty member (see above) provided their statements, supplemented by records in the Student Information System and authentic email communication with the student. A written statement from the Director of dormitories and canteens was also provided.

Description of the situation:

X is a PhD student in the xxx program starting in October [REDACTED] (currently undergoing finishing his studies). He has been admitted to a programme in the xxx CU called xxx, he did not go through the ordinary admissions process but only through an interview for this programme.

In his complaint, the student describes a number of problematic areas of his stay in the Czech Republic and his studies at the faculty. Some of them are beyond the control of Charles University (e.g. the behaviour of Czech citizens towards the student). Other areas of his complaint, such as the support provided to him during his studies, the termination of his studies and his accommodation in the halls of residence, are discussed in detail below.

According to the statement of the head of the programme, xxx, the student's entry into the study went smoothly, the student prepared his individual study plan, which was approved by the departmental board and the student started working on his PhD project at the xxx. According to the enclosed correspondence, he contacted the supervisor with obvious confidence (matters of foreign cooperation, changes to the individual study plan). Her response was always helpful, patient and very supportive. For the first year of the study (year [REDACTED]) the student was evaluated with a grade "A" with a recommendation to concentrate more on his own doctoral project.

In July [REDACTED], the student again asked for help from xxx, which eventually resulted in a joint meeting ([REDACTED]). It became clear that the student was suffering from psychological difficulties that prevented him from continuing his doctoral studies. For this meeting, xxx was carefully prepared to provide the student with suggestions for possible solutions (consultation with the supervisor, with the study department staff). XXX outlined various options for solving the student's situation - a) interruption of studies for health reasons (of course, this also entails the end of scholarship support during the interruption, possible visa problems, etc. ), b) the possibility to start working on another project under another supervisor (which would, however, result in the loss of the xxx scholarship, which is tied to a specific project and constituted a significant part of the funding the student received from the faculty), c) the possibility to agree with the supervisor on a type of work that would not require the student's personal presence in the xxx.

All options were thoroughly discussed with the student. XXX also pointed out to the student the possibilities of free psychological consultations at the xxx at Charles University itself. Unfortunately, none of the options were satisfactory for the student and under these circumstances the situation was solvable only by termination of studies. However, it was the student who came to this decision on his own on the same day as the meeting. It was also agreed with the student that the regular monthly stipend for the academic year [REDACTED] would run until the end of the academic year. Subsequent communication with the student in response to his queries was again by the parties of xxx, xxx (supervisor) and the study department staff extremely supportive and fully compliant with the rules of doctoral studies. According to xxx, the programme supervisor, the student did not contact her with any other problematic issues. It is clear from their communication that the student was taking medical care and using the services of a psychologist. From the documents received (especially the communication with xxx and xxx), these circumstances, or the student's medical condition, were always taken into account and the student was accommodated.

Supervisor xxx goes on to discuss her relationship with her student X. She states that the student came to a largely international xxx environment that embraced the student with all the respect, humanity and support. For example, the supervisor facilitated contact between X and a postdoctoral fellow in a xxx (also originally from xxx) and her colleagues to facilitate X's

adaptation to the conditions here. He also received support from the supervisor in arranging accommodation. A student from the xxx picked him up at the airport upon arrival in Prague, and again assisted with accommodation. XXX herself offered to help with escorting him to the doctor, which was eventually arranged by another colleague - a student from the xxx xxx support was also evident in the fact that the supervisor granted X's request to increase his remuneration, even twice. The xxx even provided him with a private loan from its savings in December [REDACTED] to pay for his housing (from dormitory to private accommodation), but the student did not move and was to request another loan. The student has also been plagued by numerous health problems since his arrival, which the supervisor has always been very understanding and considerate of (evidenced by authentic communication). Overall, the supervisor perceived the student to be quiet and reserved, only communicating with his xxx mates when he needed something from them.

The supervisor strongly objects to the student's accusation that he was not treated well in a situation where, due to post-covid syndrome, his depressive symptoms deepened, and he was bedridden and unable to perform his assigned work. As a result, he failed to meet the obligations set out in his individual study plan. She describes the development of his condition, the nature of which she, as head of xxx and his supervisor, has been informed of only sporadically since December [REDACTED]. Throughout this time, she did not request sick leave for the student and provided assistance with finding a suitable hospital. From March [REDACTED] onwards, he came to the xxx less and less frequently. During this period, he was asked at least three times by his supervisor to tell her what was wrong with him, to which she never received an adequate response. Therefore, on [REDACTED], she made a formal written enquiry, copied to xxx as the head of the study programme. Following this challenge, the student shared information about his medical condition with his supervisor. On [REDACTED], the supervisor received his decision to discontinue his studies. The grade C was awarded to the student as an objective assessment of his performance for the academic year [REDACTED].

Regarding the payment of the remaining scholarship support, X contacted his xxx colleagues in October [REDACTED] to ask to use their bank accounts for the transfer of the remaining funds, as he had cancelled his Czech koruna account before he left the Czech Republic. However, on the same day, he again contacted his colleagues with a very abusive email in which he referred to them as disgusting people with no self-reflection and urged them not to contact him again. At the beginning of November this year he contacted his former supervisor, xxx, again to provide him with a recommendation for another workplace where he intends to study.

The supportive approach of the xxx led by xxx in relating to the student is also described by xxx, the former head of the xxx, who herself helped X to secure accommodation in the dormitories. Later, she repeatedly asked him if everything was all right and received positive responses to her questions from the student. Communication with xxx, Head of the Department xxx, revealed that she herself had put the student in contact with other xxx students who were ready to assist X.

The student also states in his complaint that he was intentionally housed at the xxx dormitory - allegedly all students from xxx are primarily housed there. The other Europeans, along with the Czechs, are in the xxx dormitory, which is supposedly better equipped. In the student's eyes, non-European students have no chance of getting into xxx College, even though CU halls of residence and canteens announce that it is possible on a first-come, first-served basis. The student also states in his complaint that he was robbed in his dormitory and that he later learned

that this was common. He also mentions that he was treated disrespectfully by the dormitory staff.

Xxx director of CU dormitories and canteens, described the way students are accommodated in the dormitories. A student allegedly experienced a robbery of his room, which he did never report. Regarding the alleged disrespectful treatment by staff, Director xxx noted that there may be communication noise due to the language barrier of the housekeeping staff. At the same time, the dormitory staff is just about to start staff training for crisis communication with students. As for the thefts themselves, the director denies that their occurrence is a daily occurrence, as the student notes.

#### Statement of the ombudsperson:

The subject of the CU Ombudsperson's opinion is an assessment of whether it is likely that the X student experienced differential treatment during his studies at the xxx, that he was not supported in his academic performance by the programme providers and that his individual needs related to his impaired health were not taken into account.

From the evidence the ombudsperson disposes of, the above conduct cannot be substantiated; on the contrary, it is quite evident (supported by countless communications between the student and the staff) that the student received exemplary treatment during his studies, which patiently, committedly and over a fairly long period of time took into account all his needs, to a level that can be perceived as quite above standard.

It is clear from the material and information available that it was the student himself who repeatedly claimed help and support that went beyond the standard or average workplace or study relationship. Nevertheless, these requests were always met. However, even this did not lead to the student's satisfaction; on the contrary, he did not hesitate to address his colleagues in a group email with a significantly offensive content, and eventually to ask his supervisor for a referral to another workplace.

#### Recommendation:

On the basis of the above assessment of the content of the complaint and the relevant supporting documentation, the CU ombudsperson recommends that the parties consider taking the action set out below.

#### To the xxx Charles University

- by adequate means, acknowledge and praise the professionalism of the two female academics, xxx and xxx, who have at all times supported the student in an exemplary manner and in a number of respects quite above standard, meeting his needs and taking into account his medical limitations throughout his studies.

#### To the student

- in his future career to review his current patterns of behaviour, avoiding offending members of their work teams or other behaviour that may be perceived as inappropriate.

Processed by: PhDr. Kateřina Šámalová, Ph.D., CU Ombudsperson