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To the Executive Board and the Crisis Committee of TU Berlin

Statement on the current situation of junior research group leaders in reduced presence mode

The current coronavirus pandemic generates considerable distress for everyone and the new situation is challenging in many ways. We understand that drastic measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic are necessary and that the decision to set TU Berlin into the current essential-only presence mode has certainly not been an easy one. We also understand that the current situation with lower infection numbers than in March and early April is rather fragile and that we still need to act with great caution. However, the eight weeks of full lockdown of the TU and the rigorous banning of all researchers from their offices and research facilities have reduced research output, also for TU Berlin's young academics.

We would like to draw the attention of the TU Executive Board to a growing concern, which we have extracted from a recent survey among our members regarding the current lockdown situation. The majority of our members are facing a situation where “the clock is ticking”, meaning that they hold limited-time positions, which they need as a qualification for the next step in their careers. This situation applies to various researchers in similar positions, be it for junior professors with or without tenure track, junior research group leaders, or habilitands, and it even extends to doctoral candidates in their first qualification phase.

The current essential-only presence mode at TU Berlin has generated pressure in addition to the challenges associated with a home office situation, mainly because few to no new research results could be obtained. This is obviously true for all the research in experimental fields, but also holds true for less obvious cases. For example, working from home with archival or confidential data is often excluded in contracts with co-operating partners or even prohibited by law.

We acknowledge that this considerably hampers everyone at the TU in generating new research results and in refining existing ones, e.g. during review-processes with deadlines. However, the retardations pose a comparatively high burden on junior professors and junior research group leaders. We have to prove our qualification as project or team leaders and student advisers in third-party funded projects with deadlines. We are now concerned that we may not be able to deliver in time due to the restricted access to our offices and resources.

Furthermore, we would like to emphasize that only those with tenure track options may benefit from accommodating regulations within TU, which the Executive Board and the Crisis Committee may develop to mitigate the consequences of the essential-only presence mode. All others will eventually be out on a highly competitive job market, where research outcomes are the key “currency” in applications to the next level of academic jobs.

Most of the YAN members will have to compete with researchers from other universities and research institutions to achieve their goal of a permanent position in academia. The longer the essential-only presence mode is maintained – so the growing concern of the YAN members –, the less will they have a chance against candidates from other institutions in the competition for open positions: A large portion of the German universities did not “lock down” research activities at all (e.g. Freiburg university, WWU Münster) or to a much lower extent (e.g. Cologne university). Universities that went into lockdowns like the TU Berlin are already in the process of re-opening (e.g. RU Bochum). An end to the essential-only presence mode at TU Berlin is still not in sight. This, however, means an growing location disadvantage for the young academics at the TU Berlin.

In the light of the new regulations in Berlin, the opening of other public and private facilities and the now learned hygiene measures (distancing, masks, hand-washing, avoiding meetings in buildings and gatherings outside, ...), we feel that it may be time to consider a low-threshold access for the staff and to trust us with a responsible handling of the situation, such as a co-ordination of our staff in a way that offices are never used by more than one person at a time.

Therefore, we would like to discuss possible measures with TU Berlin’s Executive Board to support junior research group leaders with fixed-term positions, who are hit particularly hard by the current situation. Possible supporting measures that we would like to discuss include:

- Prioritization of members and leaders of junior research groups including junior professors and their teams after the end of the essential-only presence mode.
- Extension of positions of junior research group leaders and junior professors for the time of the essential-only presence mode to compensate for the disadvantage they currently face compared to other universities.^{*1,2}
- Support with potential financial strains caused by the essential-only presence mode and the coronavirus pandemic in general.
- Support through extra research personnel, for example through fixed-term postdoctoral positions for one year, to compensate the current disadvantage as far as possible.

The YAN network fully understands the importance of containing the coronavirus pandemic and the concerns that led to the full closure of TU. We understand that any relaxation of the essential-only presence mode must be decided with great caution and in the light of the actual risks and developments. We absolutely value the health of all persons involved and guarantee that we will give highest priority to protecting ourselves and our co-workers, and to keeping the risk of contagion and further spread of the virus to a minimum. We therefore commit ourselves to

- adhering to the hygiene and distance regulations,
- avoiding gatherings both on the way to and from and in TU,
- coordinating our staff to avoid any meetings in person wherever possible,
- coordinating “shifts” in home-offices and our laboratories/TU workplaces such that rooms are never used by more than one person at a time.

We would be very pleased if you would consider the concerns and suggestions brought up in this letter. We would like to invite and encourage you to discuss potential possibilities to support TU’s young academics in these difficult times and to join forces to develop solutions to the increasingly pressing consequences which the pandemic and the containment measures have for us.

- *1 This is in analogy to the recent amendment of WissZeitVG to open up the possibility to extend contracts of scientific co-workers by 6 months, if needed. This should also be extended to junior professors (see this [note by DHV, the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers](#)).

In a similar vein, we ask you to consider to postpone the intermediate evaluations for junior professors and clearly state that the current situation places a strong burden on them, which should be taken into account during evaluations. The above-mentioned time span of six months seems reasonable to compensate some of the described problems.

- *2 Many junior research groups are supported by third-party funding. This raises even more difficult issues in terms of possible prolongations of contracts. We would therefore like to strongly encourage “unconventional” measures to support these group leaders in particular.