

## STATEMENT

By Assoc. Prof. Katya Genova Mollova, DrPH  
Medical College, Trakia University – Stara Zagora

External member of the Scientific jury, according to Order No. P-109-318/24.07.2025 by the  
Rector of Medical University “Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov” - Varna

**Subject:** Procedure for the defense of a dissertation work titled: “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nutrition and physical activity of those involved in the educational process – trainers and trainees at the Medical College – Stara Zagora” for awarding of educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the field of higher education: 7. Healthcare and Sport, Professional field: 7.4 Public Health, Scientific specialty: “Health Care Management”, author: **Anushka Strahilova Uzunova**, a doctoral candidate pursuing an independent study under program “Health Care Management”, Department of Health care, Sliven Affiliate, Medical University “Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov” – Varna, enrolled by Order No. P-109-377 dated 23.08.2023.

Scientific supervisor: **Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Peneva Angelova, DrPH**

### **General overview of the procedure**

On the basis of Protocol No. 1/30.07.2025 from the first meeting of the Scientific Jury, I was assigned to prepare this statement.

The documents submitted by Anushka Strahilova Uzunova have been prepared in compliance with the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Implementation, and the Regulations on the Development of the Academic Staff at the Medical University – Varna.

### **General Characteristics of the Dissertation**

The submitted dissertation is structured in accordance with the contemporary requirements and the standards of the Medical University – Varna. The dissertation comprises 143 pages and includes: An Introduction; Chapter One – literature review; Chapter Two – objectives, tasks, methodology, and organization of the study; Chapter Three – results of the author’s own research; Dietary regimen model; Physical activity regimen model; Conclusions; Suggestions; Recommendations; Contributions; Bibliography; and Appendices.

The scientific work is illustrated with 33 tables, 51 figures, and 3 appendices. A total of 175 references have been used – 31 in Cyrillic and 144 in Latin script.

### **Relevance of the Topic**

The topic of the dissertation is both relevant and significant. The introduction of online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a number of consequences, affecting not only the restructuring of the entire educational process but also teaching staff and students. On the one hand, distance learning ensured the continuity of the educational process; on the other hand, under the conditions of social isolation, the risks of physical inactivity, unhealthy

eating habits, and psycho-emotional disturbances increased, thus making the issue a subject of scientific interest.

A valuable contribution of the doctoral candidate is the proposed comprehensive perspective on the interrelation between dietary habits, physical activity, and psycho-emotional well-being during the time of online learning. The study provides observations and practical guidelines for overcoming the negative health consequences for both teachers and students at the Medical College.

## **Literature Review**

In the first chapter, Anushka Uzunova presents an analytical review concerning the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity of restrictive measures, mandatory and adequate for safeguarding public health. In a logically consistent manner, the doctoral candidate examines the need for distance learning, outlining its advantages and shortcomings both for learners and for the educational institutions and the entire academic process.

A thorough analysis is provided of the most significant drawbacks of online education, namely social isolation, physical inactivity, and changes in physical activity patterns. Their impact on psycho-emotional health-leading to anxiety and elevated stress levels is competently explained. The candidate delineates possible approaches to overcoming the negative consequences of social isolation and a sedentary lifestyle.

The structured literature review demonstrates the candidate's broad competencies and in-depth analytical skills in the field of the studied problem.

## **Methodology of the Study**

In the second chapter, Anushka Uzunova presents the main aim, objectives, working hypotheses, and methodology of the dissertation.

The aim is clearly and precisely formulated: "By examining the impact of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on the physical activity and nutrition of students and their lecturers at the Medical College – Stara Zagora, to develop and propose a universal set of health-promoting practices aimed at reducing and/or overcoming the negative consequences affecting the physical and mental health of those engaged in online learning or work." The six stated objectives and the two research hypotheses are fully consistent with the defined aim.

## **Material, Methods, and Instruments**

The study population consists of lecturers from the Medical College at Trakia University, Stara Zagora, and students enrolled in the programs of "Rehabilitation Therapist," "Medical Laboratory Assistant," "Medical Cosmetician," and "Pharmacy Assistant" at the same institution. A total of 191 individuals were included, divided into two groups: lecturers (n=32) and students (n=159). The research toolkit comprises of two self-developed questionnaires for lecturers and students, as well as a diagnostic chart designed for the rapid and accurate registration of selected clinical indicators. The methodology is appropriately chosen, with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring the reliability of the results and conclusions.

## **Results and Discussion**

In the third chapter of the dissertation, Anushka Uzunova presents the results of her own research and the discussion, along with the findings from the applied experimental program of

dietary and physical activity regimens and health-promoting practices. The results are systematised and analysed in a clear and logical manner. The survey conducted among lecturers and students traces the impact of online learning on dietary habits, physical activity, and psycho-emotional state within the medical college. The discussion demonstrates an analytical approach and a critical evaluation of the identified interrelations. The doctoral candidate successfully highlights the most significant negative effects of social isolation and distance learning, namely reduced physical activity, deterioration of dietary habits, and increased psycho-emotional stress. The experimental approach is of particular value, in which comprehensive programs of physical activity and dietary regimens were applied. The presented results provide convincing evidence of the positive impact of these interventions on the physical and mental well-being of students, thereby conferring not only theoretical but also practical significance to the dissertation.

### Contributions of the Dissertation

The contributions of the dissertation are significant from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The author not only deepens the understanding of the consequences of the pandemic on the lifestyle and health of students and lecturers, but also proposes effective solutions for overcoming them through the integration of dietary and physical activity programs: a set of home-based exercises to compensate for reduced activity; an original dietary model for conditions of decreased activity; and an experiment applying the developed combinatory dietary and physical activity program.

### Publications

On the topic of the dissertation, two publications have been presented in the proceedings of international scientific conferences, reflecting the results of the research and promoting its contributions within the scientific community.

### Conclusion

The scholarly work of Senior Lecturer Anushka Uzunova provides me with sufficient grounds to confidently state that she is a researcher with clearly defined scientific interests and an innovative approach. The dissertation meets all legal and institutional requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor. Its content is comprehensive, well substantiated, and properly illustrated.

All the merits outlined give me reason to positively evaluate the dissertation on the topic “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nutrition and physical activity of those involved in the educational process – trainers and trainees at the Medical College – Stara Zagora” and to vote **in favor** of awarding the educational and scientific degree of “**Doctor**” in the Scientific specialty “ Health Care Management ”, field of higher education 7. Healthcare and Sport, professional field 7.4 Public Health, to **Anushka Strahilova Uzunova**.

18.08.2025

Prepared the sta  
/Assoc. Prof. Katya Ivanova, DrPH/

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