

Candidacy concept for Dean of the 1st Faculty of Medicine, Charles University - 2024-2028

Dear Madam President of the Academic Senate, Members of the Academic Senate and the Academic Community, Colleagues and Students.

Joining VFN in February 1994, I was made an Assistant Professor in 1996. Qualified in both General Medicine and Dentistry, as is customary for Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, between 1998-2000 I gained work and professional experience in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. I have been working permanently – first at the 2nd Department of Stomatology, and then after the merger with the 1st Department of Stomatology, at the Stomatology Department of the 1st Faculty of Dentistry of Charles University and the General University Hospital. I was elected Department head in 2013. As the Guarantor for Dentistry, during its' last re-accreditation I made significant changes to the curriculum, rather than mere cosmetic changes, to ensure our students are best prepared for clinical practice post-graduation.

According to Czech law, a graduate of Dentistry must be characterised by the fact that, by graduation, they are fully prepared for independent professional practice. Their training must be practically oriented, so that by their final examination they are safe and competent to practise independently, without the need for further postgraduate training.

Currently, in the private sector there is an extremely high demand for experienced Dentists, which our teachers undoubtedly are. Their financial remuneration is orders of magnitude higher than not only our teachers but also the doctors in VFN. Maintaining teaching at an appropriate level is thus very difficult.

Even though the Department of Stomatology has one of the highest teaching loads, as we teach Dentistry intensively from the 1st to the 5th year, along with teaching all the 4th year General Medicine students, I am aware of the great importance of scientific work. Proof of this is in the high ranking of the Department of Stomatology for the past two years in the Ranking of Scientific Work of Clinics and Institutes of the Faculty.

Armed with this experience and fortified by having to solve practical problems of life with tangible results, I believe that I could help the 1st Faculty of Medicine in times when the gap between the salary of teachers and Doctors in hospitals is growing, and the ever emerging profile of the graduate shows the necessity of a greater degree of practical experience also for our graduates of General Medicine who are heading into practice. This is why, with a certain amount of humility and awareness of the great responsibility, I believe I could be a suitable candidate for the position of Dean of our Faculty during the increasingly challenging times ahead.

Why?

I decided to run for the position of Dean of the 1st Faculty of Medicine of Charles University, with the aim of moving our Faculty significantly, and more quickly, towards the future – towards excellence and innovation. My philosophy is to not just solve individual operational problems – for better or for worse – but to fundamentally focus on the development of the faculty with a vision for the future. The individual steps towards realizing the vision, in themselves, will inevitably lead to an improvement of the current situation.

I therefore also see my candidacy itself, as an opportunity to raise issues, and perhaps even approaches, that currently do not resonate across our faculty sufficiently, or at all, or that smoulder but are not being addressed.

Sadly, I have been observing the retreat of our faculty from the consciousness of the professional public, the entire CU family, and society for some time now. This is probably related to the fact that the faculty has resigned itself to the function of a corporate citizen, providing maximum expertise and cooperation to all relevant social institutions and partners, rather than proactively approaching current problems and proposing its own solutions. I would like to remind you that this approach has paid off in the past not only reputationally, but also economically, when we could still draw funds for a reasonable increase in the number of Medical students in past years, or the so-called “Mikuláš”, created by our management. The role of First faculty and active participation in social events can benefit the faculty from diverse partnerships. The reputation of our faculty is key to the interest of future students, as well as quality collaborators, to co-create our academic community. It also opens up the opportunity for us to more focus on quality within our selection process.

I am not biased against other medical faculties, but the 1st Faculty of Medicine has always been a leader. After all, our Deans have often been the top representatives of the Association of Deans of Medical Faculties of the Czech Republic. However, the position of leader is not automatic and certainly not historically given, on the contrary, it requires daily commitment, openness, credibility inside the faculty and externally, and work. Leadership is in our DNA, we have the potential, incredible human resources, and intellectual capacity to become one again. I would like to bring the role of the Leader back to the 1st Faculty of Medicine, so that we don't have to watch helplessly as problems are solved elsewhere, but actively propose and promote our own solutions.

Teaching

Teaching methods must also change during this information revolution that we are in. The archetypal role of the professor – the teacher – as the bearer of all knowledge, who passes it on to the students, has passed. No individual's intellectual capacity can compete with the amount of information that is freely available in the digital world. However, this pedagogical role does not just disappear. On the contrary, it is more important than ever, but just needs to evolve. Helping with the retrieval of scientifically relevant content, emphasizing the essential role of critical thinking, and instilling this *modus vivendi* in the mind of the student – is the new mission of the educator and medical school, even more so as we have a shared responsibility for the health of future patients.

Accelerating the promotion of modern forms of teaching such as simulation-based learning, case-based learning or “following the patient journey” is an integral part of my plan for a pedagogical paradigm shift. I would like the 1st Faculty of Medicine to abandon its’ no longer sufficient conservative pedagogical approach and ensure that it is once again perceived as an innovative institution.

The English parallel has become an integral part of our faculty, pedagogically, economically, and socially. One of the key points of my programme is to ensure equal access to teaching in both English and Czech. Emancipation of all aspects of teaching, as well as truly global access to admission, must leave no room for doubt or suspicion that one group of students is favoured over another.

We not only teach Medicine and Dentistry, but also a range of other “non-medical” Allied healthcare disciplines. It is my firm conviction to strengthen our efforts in the Allied fields where we are “first” or “best”, and to do so in a rational and economic capacity.

For some time now, the Faculty has been facing a significant shortage of teaching space. Waiting for some form of subsidy or support from the Rectorate or the State is regrettably foolish. It is obvious that we must take care of ourselves in this matter as well. I suggest that we open a real debate about renting or even buying space in our local area – depending upon the number of students being taught. I cannot accept passively waiting for some grant or support from the Rectorate, which will probably never come anyway.

Of course, with the search for new resources, comes the debate about where to get the money. However, I am sure that I need not remind you that we have long been net contributors to the CU Common Development Fund.

When thinking about teaching capacity, we must also think about teacher numbers. In the past, we had the best student to teacher ratio amongst all the Medical Faculties. Nowadays, we tend to "massify" teaching, and our teacher job evaluation has moved to be the worst ranking amongst comparable faculties. This is a serious threat at a time of a widening gap between teacher and physician pay.

Simultaneously, it is quite legitimate to open a debate on how to institutionalize and professionalize our work with donations from sponsors – so that this process is transparent, both internally to the faculty and externally to society. There is probably no need to "recreate the wheel", perhaps we can just adopt the methodology that the Ivy League universities in the US or Great Ormond street Hospital in London have for working with donations.

Science

Scientific activity is a key area of our faculty's work, inseparable from teaching work, especially in the DSP segment. It also represents a significant economic contribution. The quality of scientific work and its productivity have long placed our faculty amongst the "top-ten" scientific research institutions in the Czech Republic and in first place amid the other medical faculties in the country.

It is crucial to provide exceptional support for the high quality and large-scale prestigious projects that our scientists manage to obtain for the faculty. The setup of evaluation and related team funding, with effective administrative support, must be directed towards supporting our nationally and internationally competent teams – "science schools". Our work with the results of our scientific research, in the form of the intellectual property generated, also deserves special attention.

Economy

Attracting and keeping quality scientists and teachers at the faculty, who need not be concerned about their material security, is one of the most important economic tasks of the faculty management. Furthermore, we must not allow the wage gap between doctors employed by hospitals and academics to further unravel.

It is essential to start investing in the faculty's common future, subject to a thorough faculty-wide discussion that identifies clear priorities in everything that will lead to the improvement of core activities, i.e. pedagogy, science, and an overall friendly environment for members of the academic community. Not only will this improve the functionality of the faculty, but it will also significantly improve our image in the eyes of both the professional and lay public.

There is a need for targeted channelling of precise money to the various units of the faculty and at the same time a thorough scrutiny not only of its use but also of the benefits of these investments to the faculty as a whole.

Cooperation with hospitals

A broad clinical base for practical teaching has always been one of our greatest strengths. Collaboration with various clinical sites is proving to be not only a necessity, given the number of our students, but I also see it as an advantage for scientific work and a broad expert portfolio of leading authorities in the field. The relationship between the clinical bases and the faculty needs to be in the form a true partnership - this will benefit both parties and all participating institutions. Here I see great opportunities for improving the current situation. A facility that might be geographically located on the periphery, does not mean that they are peripheral of faculty interest.

Even though many clinics and institutes in other hospitals are part of our family, VFN is our most important sister-institution by virtue of its location and staffing. Again, for some time now I have felt that we have not developed all the potential that the synergy between the largest medical school and the second largest hospital in Czechia could bring. Clearly defining our goals and the pathways leading to their realization is the first and critical step towards this collaboration. Coordination of our efforts not only at the level of individual Departments but also directly with the VFN management is a necessity in this case, combined with a strong joint approach to the State representatives in many areas that concern both institutions.

PR

We all feel that a change in communication toward prospective students is necessary. However, I do not believe that it will be possible to change some of the narratives about us immediately; intensive and strategic work is and will be required from a communications and PR perspective. We cannot deny our greatness, on the contrary, we need to take advantage of it and shift the discourse to a level where our greatness does not mean burden, but rather great diversity and a range of new opportunities that present our faculty as the place of choice and friendliness.

Our PR activities must visibly cover the full breadth of our target audiences, starting with parents of prospective students, all students, staff, academics, government and other authorities, and the media. We must build the name of our Faculty permanently; by having our excellence visibly associated with it, appearing in alliances with prestigious partners, and by not being the subject of adverse interests.

For numerous years we have been waiting to develop the Faculty's website. In many cases it is the first "calling card" of our institution and an elementary means of communication within it. This needs to be completed as a priority.

Dean's Office

Improving the functionality of the Dean's Office as a service organisation for staff is key for me, as is the true internationalisation of study and research. Individual departments must serve as professional support, sometimes with executive powers, for teachers, students, and researchers. The effort to find solutions to problems that benefit the faculty must prevail over a purely bureaucratic approach that is based on a rigid and alibi-like adherence to rules which often no longer reflect current realities and also themselves require changing.

In addition to professional management practices, the dynamic of interpersonal relationships between academics and administration needs to be improved with 'pro-client' solutions actively sought.

My vision is for a future where we are not only a respected educational institution, but also an active player in social debate, scientific research, and international cooperation.

I believe that only by working together - after all, the Dean is only the first among equals in my mind - can we achieve these goals and move our faculty to a new level of excellence. Thank you for your support and trust in my candidacy for the position of Dean of the 1st Faculty of Medicine of Charles University.

Prague 1. 3. 2024

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'René Foltán', with a long, flowing horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Prof. MUDr. René Foltán, Ph.D.