Dear Colleagues,
Dear Students,
Dear Members of Staff,

With the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, we are going through a situation that is new for us all. There is no cause for panic, but the situation is serious. Step by step, we saw and still see ourselves forced to take measures that had previously seemed inconceivable. We have taken these measures in order to contain the spread of infection and protect members and associates of our university, without losing sight of our statutory mandate of research and teaching and responsibility for society. I would first like to express my heartfelt thanks to all those university members who work in the field of patient care in Heidelberg and Mannheim for their enormous dedication, day after day, as they strive to keep a step ahead of developments. Our academic community is strong. Its driving force is founded on an intrinsic motivation and on intergenerational cooperation in research and teaching. That gives rise to creativity, dynamism and community spirit – important qualities that place us in the position to tackle and overcome the challenges that now lie ahead.

Dear students, I would like to assure you that we in Heidelberg will do everything in our power to ensure your academic progress. To the extent that you are affected, we will bring the winter semester to an orderly conclusion. We are doing our utmost to enable you to maintain your academic achievements scheduled for the summer semester 2020 and to ensure that you can continue studying. Since last week, lectures, classes and degree-related activities have been suspended in the whole of Baden-Württemberg. The Deans and Deans of Studies at our university are doing everything to make it possible for you to take remaining examinations online to conclude the semester. In all cases in which this is not feasible, the exams will be rescheduled as soon as possible.
The Rectorate has envisaged that they could take place in the first week in which on-campus teaching is resumed – from 20 April at the earliest. This will necessitate creative solutions, and we will also find such solutions.

At present we do not know whether on-campus teaching can be resumed on 20 April. Consequently, we are working at full speed, both in central and in decentralised areas, to devise new digital teaching methods, where they do not already exist. A central working group has been established for this purpose, which collaborates closely with the University Computing Centre. But also in the faculties and institutes, work is going on to find solutions appropriate to the respective subjects on the basis of existing skills and experience. A few days ago, a video lecture on the coronavirus was held in the Medical Faculty, followed by a one-hour live chat for the Heidelberg medical students. The number of listeners peaked at 1,200. We are on the way to establishing an overarching platform with tutorials and instructions for users, at the same time ensuring that the legal preconditions for confidential meetings are observed. Dear colleagues, every crisis also contains opportunities: We must use the coming weeks to convert our classes to digital formats in order, if necessary, to mainly teach online in the summer semester. That is a great challenge. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that we can meet it with commitment, creativity and team spirit.

I am very grateful to the staff and management of the University Library for the constructive way in which they have carried out the necessary changes, and come up with creative solutions with great dedication: After we first closed the smaller departmental libraries and restricted borrowing, the main library has now been completely closed to users since 18 March. Concepts are being implemented to also make documents and journal articles that are not online digitally available to students, and to set up a book delivery by post. That would enable as many members of the university as possible to access the fund of knowledge in our University Library, even without being physically present.

Dear colleagues and staff, besides the suspension of degree-related activities and the closure of the University Library initially until 19 April, we are gradually reducing the on-site activity of university employees in the interest of your safety. We will maintain everything that guarantees the adequate functioning of the university. For safety reasons, in order to keep up research infrastructures, to guarantee communicational and administrative structures, and to continue to enable research – although reduced or online – a minimum amount of work has to be performed on site and the contact persons for all institutions have to be named. In consultation with the Staff Council, we have decided to use flexible arrangements for ways of working and working hours, initially until 19 April. Those responsible in the respective institutions will determine, for their area, the form and extent of work that is appropriate. To assist with implementation, the Human Resources Division of the Central Administration has drawn up a guide, which can be found on the website on the coronavirus. It is our concern to
avoid disadvantages for all employees as far as possible. Our main focus is on the needs of employees who have children to look after or family members to care for. I would like to underline at this point that they deserve our special recognition and esteem.

Community spirit is called for now. In the interest of our students, researchers and all members of staff, we must aim to resume operations at our university soon and to reopen our buildings to all those who are linked with science and academia. In order to achieve this, we need everyone to take resolute action. I therefore urgently appeal to you to live up to your responsibility and take all necessary steps to protect your health and that of your fellow human beings.

It is my sincere wish that all of you – colleagues, students and staff – will keep healthy. Stay on track even in turbulent times and preserve your high motivation and your dedication to our Ruperto Carola, at whatever workplace, in university buildings or at home. Even though we are physically separated, we remain connected. Our university is a place where the future is created and you are all part of it. Thank you for your active contribution to our academic community and to our special role as a university at the centre of society.

With warm regards,

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Bernhard Eitel