

Conference Universities and Sustainable Development

Jana Dlouhá

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Abstract

The Charles University Environment Centre reminded this year 25 years since its founding. On this occasion, on November 21, 2017, a conference "Universities and Sustainable Development" was held at the Patriotic Hall of the historical building of Charles University. Conference focused on the current problems of the contemporary world and the involvement of universities in their efforts to correct them.

Keywords

Konference; sustainability science; universities

Abstrakt

Centrum pro otázky životního prostředí UK si letos připomnělo 25 let od svého založení. Při této příležitosti se 21. listopadu 2017 ve Vlasteneckém sále Karolina konala konference Univerzity a udržitelný rozvoj, jež se věnovala aktuálním problémům současného světa a zapojení univerzit do snah o jejich nápravu.

Klíčová slova

Konference; věda udržitelnosti; univerzity

In commemoration of its 25th anniversary and with a view to welcoming new opportunities for the Charles University Environment Centre (CUEC), the *Universities and Sustainable Development Conference* took place on 21st November, 2017, at Charles University's historic site. This conference aimed to explore emerging areas of sustainability education, science (especially at its policy interface) and university outreach which requires interdisciplinary cooperation in innovative education for sustainable development programs in higher education, evidence-based policy, and University cooperation with regional NGOs and businesses.

The Charles University Environment Centre was founded in 1992 as an independent institute at Charles University (Prague, CR). It focuses on conducting environmental research to provide expertise and information for students, university staff, and the general public. The Centre collaborates with parliamentary bodies, state administration, non-governmental organizations, and many academic and research institutions both nationally and abroad. The Conference Program provided an opportunity to reaffirm CUEC's commitment to sustainability and share the goals, principles and achievements in research and education with the University. Keynotes included a reflection on sustainability science and the role of universities by Maik Adomßent, an outline of sustainability challenges for research and education by Arthur Lyon Dahl, and consideration of the role of universities in sustainability research and education in an example from CUEC by Jan Frouz, director of the Environment Centre. Bedřich Moldan, CUEC's founder and former director, presented a summary of sustainable development goals from a higher education perspective. Panel and audience discussions at the conference were devoted to interdisciplinary cooperation within Charles University and other Prague universities who are signatories of the Agreement on Sustainability-Oriented Cooperation in Research and Education. Finally, employees of the Centre presented their research contributions to sustainability science in national and international arenas.

The Conference language was English the morning and Czech in the afternoon. [Here you can find the speech](#) of the Charles University rector, Tomas Zima (Original text of speech is in appendix). For more information and conference materials (presentations, photos, videos) please see the conference [website](#).

Appendix – Speech of the Charles University Rector

Check upon delivery

Dear colleagues,

Let me extend my warm welcome to you on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Charles University Environment Center. I am glad that this event, which focuses on the topic of sustainable development, contributes to the fulfillment of Charles University's Long-term Plan for the years 2016 - 2020. Charles University is a socially responsible university, so the concept of sustainable development is taken very seriously, as this theme touches all areas of our lives. The preservation of resources to sustain life on our planet and maintaining our well-being are issues to be addressed not only in the political sphere, but also by universities – which, by their very nature, are scientific and autonomous institutions.

We are fully aware that despite the fact that academia is protected from political influence, universities cannot stand on the sidelines of social events - or they too will be adversely affected by political events. We were reminded of this recently on the anniversary of the closure of Czech universities by the Nazi regime accompanied by the brutal clampdown on students in 1939. The same date also marked the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which, after several decades, liberated our higher education from the ideological clutter which prohibited numerous exceptional individuals from conducting their regular scientific, artistic and pedagogical activities. It is clear, therefore, that in the times of liberty, academic staff must engage, according to their strengths and opportunities, in shaping the social and political environment before it is too late to affect positive change and unfavorable developments become unstoppable.

However, political decisions are made differently today than in the past. Above all, they concern a much wider range of problems. For example, the experience of recent decades has shown that our contemporary culture simultaneously cultivates and devastates our natural environment. Regulatory natural processes have entered the defensive, arousing the need to closely observe, consider and intervene in them to ensure adequate regeneration and restoration of natural systems that make healthy human life possible. The inevitable task of monitoring, controlling and regulating these processes has been undertaken by science; but due to the complexity of the emerging problems, the established scientific disciplines appeared to no longer be sufficient, necessitating new scientific methods developed in the interaction between disciplines and practice.

Let me introduce here a metaphor from my own field of medical sciences. To ensure the health of the Earth, we need diagnostics, new healing practices, and prevention. We also need to ensure that healing procedures do not prevent the patient from nourishing his growing human family. The treatment for our planet is not only complicated, expensive, and complex, but it is we who must take responsibility for its successful results, in terms of selecting appropriate procedures and ensuring their application. This is a task for politicians: such decisions are beyond the capacity of "doctors" and "therapists" who heal illnesses caused by exceeding the Earth's limits. And believe me, seeing a patient suffer despite an available treatment just because nobody is willing to take responsibility for the accompanying social and economic expense is very frustrating. This example illustrates the importance of scientific truth in this "post-truth" world, and the need to convince society that the truth is still out there, that it is still valid, and that it can not only predict the future but also help us to face it successfully.

I have highlighted at least two new areas where research is under intense development: environmental sciences that provide diagnostics and suggest treatments, and the use of

scientific methods and data for political, or so-called evidence-based, decision-making. The Environmental Center is dedicated to both, and in the course of the 25 years of its existence, it has gradually evolved its focus towards the latter. Technical solutions are only part of the political decision-making process: based on certain principles related to the normative concept of sustainable development, and implemented by those who have the necessary knowledge and skills. The potential of this technical-political cooperation will be discussed later in the conference program – with our guests representing Prague’s universities that collaborate in the interdisciplinary field of sustainable development.

Alongside bearing the responsibility for the state of the society and environment in which we live, science itself is changing. We will hear more about these changes in today’s presentations. On behalf of the university leadership, we will strive to ensure that institutions with a long tradition such as Charles University are able to fully respond and actively contribute to these changes. At this point, I want to thank the Environment Center, its founding and current directors and employees for embarking on this journey, and for developing new scientific areas despite some initial distrust of their merits. I also very much hope that representatives of important social actors who are gathered here today to discuss not only the future of one this institute, but also Our Common Future, will support us in this effort.

Thank you for your attention.