
Charles University celebrated its 662nd anniversary

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On April 7, 2010, during a ceremonial plenary meeting, Charles University commemorated the 662nd anniversary of the foundation of the oldest Central European university. During the celebrations, the traditional Charles University's awards and medals were awarded, new members of the Rector's Collegium were introduced and professor Walter Pape received a doctorate honoris cause.

The meeting began with a speech by the Rector of Charles University, professor Václav Hampl, in which he contemplated the relationship between science and education. In his speech, he promoted the Humboldtian ideal of higher education as a close communion of research and education, during which both students and professors are supposed to take part in both research and educational activities. "At Charles University, we have no so-called research-free subjects. The graduates, however, gravitate toward academic, or non-academic careers, based on their focus and skills. That doesn't mean that the students who lean towards leaving academia are any worse than those who choose it", he said. At the same time, he stressed that the ethical aspect of the personality of an intellectual with higher education background should never lag behind his scientific or practical expertise.

The Rector's speech was followed by the one by professor Jiří Pešek on the evolution of the relationship between the state and the university. He pointed out that the university requires from the state, which acts as an organizational and self-governing structure of the society, important impulses and great challenges which define the current problems in the society. "At the same time, the university has to be granted a certain state of stability of its existence and a certain measure of peace that would let it focus on the important topics and analyzing of their effects. Both these impulses on one hand, and time, peaceful environment and respect to our work on the other, are what we are lacking today, along with research funding and education of sufficient quality", Mr. Pešek said.

The anniversary is also the occasion on which the Award for Representation and the Creativity Award, as well as the Charles University's medals are being awarded. This year's recipients of the Award for Representation are Lukáš Perůtka, first year student of the doctoral programme in Mathematics, and Imrich Živčák, graduate of the Information Science Master's programme, both from the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics. In the three subsequent years, from 2007 to 2009, both of them fought their way into the finals of the prestigious and challenging technological competition Imagine Cup. Last year, Lukáš Perůtka won the Robotics and Algorithms category, becoming the first Czech student to earn a medal at the event.

The Creativity Award was granted to professor Petr Pyšek for his outstanding contribution to the understanding of the causes and effects of biological invasions worldwide, and his remarkable discoveries in ecology of invasive plants, which resulted in 17 papers in high-impact journals, including three in the Science journal. Professor Pyšek is a member of the Department of Ecology of the Faculty of Science and also works at the Institute of Botany of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

The ceremonial atmosphere was rounded out by the act of awarding the Doctor Honoris Causa of Philosophy title to professor Walter Pape from the University of Cologne on the grounds of his outstanding contribution to the Czech-German relations in the fields of culture, science and education. It is the second honoris causa to be awarded this year. The first one was received by professor Anne Hudson from the University of Oxford for her contribution to the understanding of the roots of European and Czech Reformation, the relationship between the Wycliffian and the Hussite traditions and the history of the University of Oxford and Charles University.

April 7, the day on which Charles IV founded the university with its four faculties (the Faculty of Arts, Theology, Law and Medicine) in 1348, is celebrated not only by the Charles University's academic community, but also by the general public, as since 2005, the day has been officially declared the Education Day by the government of the Czech Republic.

Translation: Jaroslav Švelch