
Academic Night at the Faculty of Arts

Academic Night at the Faculty of Arts – 25th April 2013

On the last Thursday of April, an academic night was held at the main Faculty of Arts building in náměstí Jana Palacha. The night aimed to promote awareness of student activism and to raise intellectual debate concerning the Czech government's proposed educational reforms, and other wider issues that affected Czech universities and students.

The event included: theatre shows, educational workshops, lectures from professors, open discussions, a presentation from Amnesty International and a photography exhibition of the last student protests in 2012.

The political issues of the last student protests were a hot topic in the lectures and discussions. The student protests that took place in early 2012 saw a huge turnout of thousands of students in náměstí Jana Palacha. The square was crowded with students protesting the government's proposed plans to bring in a board of professionals to oversee Czech universities. The board would have included politicians and businessmen, not just academics and students – as is currently in place in the Czech Republic – in order to control university funding and study structure. It could also have meant the introduction of fees to attend university, a proposal that was met with great uproar from the students. One of the most visually memorable protests was from students on the balcony of the Faculty of Laws, who threw ninety watermelons out of the windows. The word 'meloun' (melon) in Czech is slang for one million, and as the government had spent ninety million Czech crowns in preparing the education reform proposals, the students were demonstrating what a waste of money this had been.

The Czech student protests can be easily compared to other protests within Europe at this time. The British student protests in November 2010 (which have still continued into 2013, although less noticeably) set out to protest the rise of tuition fees in England from GBP 3290 (100,227 CZK) to ?9000 (274,177 CZK) per year and led to a whole month of student unrest: including sit-ins, occupations of university rooms, boycotts of lectures, marches on Westminster (the area of London where the UK Parliament is located), vandalism and arson of the Conservative Party Headquarters, disruption of transport and even the attack of the vehicle Charles, Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall were travelling in, all in Central London. The protests are very vivid in the minds of any London university student. For the week of November 2010 when the protest took place, helicopters swarmed the skies of Central London, police riot vans were everywhere, extra security measures were used on all universities, students were seen being chased by riot police in popular tourist destinations such as Covent Garden, nineteenth century university buildings were covered in chalk graffiti and previously naked Greek statues were made to wear jeans and hold demonstration banners. The atmosphere was exciting but unnerving. The previous peaceful march that had had the support of thousands of students all over England had become anarchic very quickly in London.

The Czech students concerns over avoiding what can be seen as the more financial and business like fashion of the management of British universities can be easily understood in this context. One lecture of the academic night held by Professor Jan Sokol, the dean of the Faculty of Humanities in 2000-2007, stressed the importance of keeping academia free and independent from the government. He argued that independence of the universities is important in order to continue to produce new thinkers and new ideas. He also argued that when money becomes the sole importance of universities, this will lead to students only studying subjects that guarantee a job and so will result in problems and lack of funding for study fields such as the humanities, which is studied because of interest not for financial or occupational gain. He stressed that universities should not become reliant on money and not become "intellectually cowardly", but maintain a high level of new thinking and study.

Amongst the political discussion and debate of the evening, there was also the promotion of the first ever student organised Majáles since the 1970s, which was previously organised by a business. The Majáles is a huge student celebration of Spring across all of the Czech universities. As part of the celebrations a King and Queen of students are elected. The first student Majáles was organised by Charles University students in the premises of the Karolinum on 1st May, as a rival to the commercial Prague Majáles open-air festival took place in Stromovka Park on the 30th April.