
A journey into the world of knowledge

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The events of November 1989 brought about a number of changes at Charles University

The foundations of a free and proud university, upon which Prague's education stands to this day, had to be built in just a few months.



During the November strikes, the leadership of the faculties behaved in different ways toward the students. The dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics supported the students, the dean of the Faculty of Arts stood against them and the dean of the Faculty of Education even issued a ban on "posting any materials on Faculty premises, including the access path in front of the Faculty".

University rector Zdeněk Češka decided to resign at the beginning of December under pressure from the student and civic movements. At the faculties, a preparatory academic council was created to bring together students, teachers and employees; they sent four representatives – two students and two teachers – to select a new rector. The election took place on 19 January 1990 between two candidates – Zdeněk Lojda, a professor of pathological anatomy at the Faculty of General Medicine, and Associate Professor Radim Palouš – and Palouš was chosen as rector. Following his proposal, on 26 January the Academic Council elected five vice-rectors.



The university gets back on its feet

A number of difficult tasks awaited Charles University's new leadership. A free academic life had to be created from scratch and a sense of belonging began to be built. The role of the university at the time was quite negligible because before 1989 the faculties had considerable powers. The professional level in many fields, especially the humanities and social sciences, was poor and research activities at a number of workplaces were largely neglected.

Other personnel issues also had to be resolved. The university sought to quickly purge institutions and teachers tied to the totalitarian regime – it abolished the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and rehabilitated unjustly persecuted students, teachers and employees.

Prague education also had to regain its position in the international university community, which was very accommodating to representatives of the oldest university in Central Europe.

"In 1990, a world rectors' conference was held in Helsinki with more than 500 participants, and Charles University was honoured with the first place alongside the Finnish rector who organised the event," recalled Radim Palouš, the first post-November rector 10 years ago, for Forum. The university was also viewed positively at dozens of other universities around the world. "It was enough to say, 'I never guessed, never dreamed I'd see you face to face' and I, a representative of a university that until recently was cursed behind the Iron Curtain, was immediately welcomed," he added. Palouš, along with Czech Technical University Rector Stanislav Hanzl, were at the creation of the Rectors' Club of Czechoslovakia, later renamed according to international convention to the Conference of Rectors of the Czech Republic.



A very long and bright history. “We have had this charter drafted and ordered that it be confirmed by the seal of our Majesty. Done in Prague, on the Seventh Day of the Month of April of the Year of Our Lord Thirteen Hundred and Forty-Eight, in the second year of our rule (King Charles IV.),” states the Foundation Charter of the Charles University.

Property returns to universities

From the very beginning, the Prague university owned dormitories and faculty buildings. But a fundamental change came with the Higher Education Act of 1950: university buildings and student club property were nationalised and the universities became users only. The property, including real estate, was returned to universities after an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1998.

In the 1990s, the university was forced to leave a total of 12 buildings due to restitution (for example in Prague, buildings on Dlouhá, Reznická and Černá streets, the Svatava villa, the Lobkovic chateau in Neratovice, a building in Hradec Králové – Třebeš and a building of the deanery in Plzeň). On the other hand, it managed to gain the area of the former College of Political Science of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in Prague 6, the so-called Sorbonne in Vokovice. Today it is the location of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, which until then had previously operated in the Tyrš House in Malá Strana.

The university acquired other buildings through purchase, such as a building on Černá street, buildings in Jinonice and the deanery of the Faculty of Medicine in Plzeň. The university also cared for smaller buildings as well, such as greenhouses in the Botanical Garden of the Faculty of Science at Na Slupi, an animal facility in the hospital area on Karlovo náměstí and a laboratory on Viničná street. A number of sports facilities have also been rebuilt.

A reconstruction was also carried out at the Carolinum on the occasion of the university's 650th anniversary. The modernisation focused on the technical safeguarding of the building and the establishment of barrier-free access to the first floor; in the basement areas a permanent exhibition of the university's history was installed, the new Emperor's Hall was added to the building's ground floor, and several Carolinum monuments were restored.

More varied, open and modern

The atmosphere at the university changed significantly and today, with 17 different faculties, Charles University draws far more international researchers and students. The number of foreign students increased tenfold over three decades, going from just 913 in 1989 to more than 9,000 today! They bring new ideas, a fresh outlook and a cosmopolitan approach that we could only dream of during the turbulent days of the Velvet Revolution. Thanks in large part to investment and EU structural funds, the school laid the foundation for new infrastructure, including new laboratories, serving not only Charles University but society as a whole.

Modern Facilities are attractive for Scientists

Charles University prides itself as a research university emphasising excellence in science. Over the last several years for example, CU opened new state-of-the-art facilities at faculties in Plzeň and Hradec Králové. Charles University, together with the Czech Academy of Sciences, is now a leader in basic research, ranking higher than any other Czech university on the prestigious Nature Index, measuring publication output in top scientific journals.



Now there are 17 faculties

1990 brought a change in the names of the Prague medical faculties resulting from significant changes in their focus. According to the new faculty statutes, they use the following names: 1st Faculty of Medicine (formerly the Faculty of General Medicine), the 2nd Faculty of Medicine (formerly the Faculty of Pediatrics) and the 3rd Faculty of Medicine (formerly the Faculty of Hygiene).

The new Higher Education Act of May 1990 confirmed the incorporation of the theological faculties as part of Charles University. The ceremonial admission of all three faculties to the university took place on 24 September 1990 at the Carolinum.

After a series of negotiations, the Faculty of Journalism was closed in May 1990, and the Faculty of Social Sciences was established in its place.

The Faculty of Humanities, founded on 1 August 2000 from the Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities (IZV), is the university's youngest faculty.

In numbers:

Number of students in 1989: 21,091

Number of students in 2018: 48,475

**Number of foreigners studying
at Charles University in 1989: 913**

Number of foreigners studying at Charles University in 2019: 9,094