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.