

Opening speech by Michal Uhl, Director of the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research, at the sixth annual conference CZEDUCON 2024 conference

Prague, Prague, 19 November

Dear ladies, dear gentlemen, colleagues from universities, from ministries, dear Sara, dear friends and colleagues, let me welcome you most warmly to this year's Czeducon.

"Our country is not flourishing."

That's how Václav Havel opened his New Year's speech 35 years ago. It was an honest and severe reflection. This inconvenient truth was refreshing and necessary - unless we wanted to fool ourselves, stagnate, and fail to move forward. The uncomfortable truth at the time set off the fundamental social changes that Czechoslovakia, later the Czechia, experienced. Some were successful, others less so, but every societal transformation is inherently challenging.

Today, as I follow European debates and public discourse, I feel compelled to say: **“Our Europe is not flourishing.”**

Social media and the news paint a picture of a society more divided than ever. We face disinformation, the war in Ukraine, inflation, and economic stagnation. Meanwhile, populist and anti-European forces are gaining ground across the continent. The sense that we are on the brink of a collapse, that Europe might fall apart, feels stronger than ever.

But is the reality really that horrific?

When we look at data collected by Eurostat, we see a different Europe. For 20 years in a row, the share of people who feel like citizens of the European Union has been rising, reaching 74% today. Trust in institutions like the European Parliament and the European Commission has been steadily growing over the past decade.

So why this cognitive dissonance? The issues of societal division and marginalization have always existed; they were simply hidden. Today, previously silenced groups have raised their voices—they have gained the opportunity to be heard and have stopped being afraid to express their thoughts. This is not a moment for outrage or resignation. It is a time to embrace reality in all its diversity, to understand it with humility, and to seek tools that will foster dialogue and strengthen social cohesion.



Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS)

Na Poříčí 1035/4 | 110 00 Prague 1 | Czech Republic

Tel.: +420 221 850 100

E-mail: info@dzs.cz

www.dzs.cz

This will require great effort. Education—especially education with an international dimension—will play a crucial role in this process.

In Europe, we have diverse lived experiences—generational, social, and cultural.

Respecting these differences is the foundation of democracy.

Democracy and freedom are core values embraced by both EU member states and the European Union itself. These values are also enshrined in our European constitution, the Lisbon Treaty.

Universities play an irreplaceable role in democratic societies. Let's not forget their "third role"—to engage in public life as active contributors, shaping and enriching public debate.

In post-communist countries, this mission still presents challenges. Twenty years of so called "normalization" in Czechoslovakia left a mark. It stifled critical thinking and disrupted the culture of public discourse. This legacy is still felt today.

It's hard to imagine a democratic society without universities and educated people.

Over the past century, higher education has transformed from an elite privilege to a path for nearly half of each generation. This shift has profoundly shaped our society.

Knowledge, skills, and competencies, now held by a much larger share of the population than a hundred years ago, have changed both our society and democracy at their core.

We often hear that public investment in education is an investment in the future. It's a repeated truth, but sometimes it loses its urgency. Yet it's clear: the most valuable resource any society has is its people.

And this is the key difference today—the true **game-changer**. In a world of constant change, the success of a society depends on whether it can build a knowledge-based economy or not.

The importance of education is undeniable. With digitalization and societal changes, the need for further expansion of higher education has become more urgent. But this expansion is far from over. We must be ready for all possible future scenarios, because only an educated society can face the challenges of tomorrow. Other countries are already preparing—and we cannot afford to fall behind.

Let's take South Korea as an example. According to OECD data, 70% of people aged 25–35 hold a university degree. The European Union set a target of 40% by 2020, which we have already achieved. But this is not enough. We need new goals, and internationalization must be a core part of this discussion.

The future of education requires innovation: micro-credential, new teaching formats, and deeper cooperation within the European Education Area. Expanding access to higher education must go hand-in-hand with a commitment to excellence. European university alliances are a key policy—we must continue to strengthen them and improve how we share best practices.



Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS)

Na Poříčí 1035/4 | 110 00 Prague 1 | Czech Republic

Tel.: +420 221 850 100

E-mail: info@dzs.cz

www.dzs.cz

Education as we knew it in the 20th century is no longer sufficient. Today's societal changes demand a broader range of competencies, with global competence being essential. Internationalization is no longer optional—it is a fundamental requirement for a comprehensive education.

In today's interconnected world, we cannot succeed without an international dimension or experience abroad. Global competence—the ability to understand the world we live in—cannot be learned from textbooks. It is gained through deliberate exposure to international experiences.

Europe faces significant challenges. Although Eurostat data shows positive trends, we cannot ignore the fact that public debate has shifted. Disintegrative forces have their representatives in decision-making roles, and structural issues are coming to the forefront. Europe is a political project. And no political project in a democratic environment can survive without public support. If we want to continue the legacy of Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer and move the European project forward, we must focus on expanding internationalization— internationalization for all.

The world is challenging and often unkind. If we want not just to survive but to succeed—or even to lead—we must stand united. Only a united Europe can play a significant role in a world dominated by major geopolitical players.

Today, however, we face a crisis of trust in many European countries, and disintegrative forces are growing in nearly every EU state. If we want people to believe in Europe, they must first understand it. And the best way to understand something is to experience it. The best way to experience Europe is through Erasmus.

Erasmus is not just an exchange program—it is a formative experience that enriches lives and opens minds, as its official claim states. I often say, we have Erasmus because of Europe, but we will have Europe because of Erasmus.

These are not just empty words. Research conducted by national agencies, including us, the German DAAD, Austrian OeAD, Polish FRSE, and Slovak SAAIC, provides clear evidence. International experiences not only develop skills but also profoundly influence participants' values.

Erasmus is the most iconic program of the European Union. For millions of people, it is synonymous with Europe. This importance must be recognized during negotiations for the EU's next multiannual financial frame, which will determine Erasmus funding for the next seven years. The demand for a tripling of its budget is not excessive—it reflects the needs of both institutions and society.

Our goal should be to involve the majority of each age cohort in the program, with a strong focus on inclusion. We must ensure that Erasmus benefits not just the privileged



Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS)

Na Poříčí 1035/4 | 110 00 Prague 1 | Czech Republic

Tel.: +420 221 850 100

E-mail: info@dzs.cz

www.dzs.cz

but also those with fewer opportunities. By engaging these groups, we achieve the greatest societal benefits.

Internationalization in education is a key element of a successful Europe and intercontinental cooperation. Colleagues, you are working in an absolutely critical field.

Internationalization is not just about Erasmus and other exchange programs. A key dimension is full degree students—those who pursue entire study programs abroad. These students impact universities, serving as part of the “internationalization at home” concept, but their influence goes far beyond academia. Full degree students have a structural impact on our economies. In Europe, our population is shrinking, and the workforce is not growing fast enough to replace those retiring. Last year in the Czechia, the gap between births and deaths reached more than 20,000 people. By 2039, the difference between those leaving and entering the workforce in the Czechia is expected to be 82,000 people in a single year.

The demographic outlook is not favorable. Migration, especially through retaining international students, offers a clear and effective solution. By attracting and integrating talented individuals, we can strengthen the labor market, drive economic growth, and secure a stronger future.

According to our new and unique analysis, these students contribute significantly to the economy. In the Czechia alone, their annual economic impact is estimated at half a billion euros. Focusing on highly educated—or highly educable—populations to build a knowledge economy makes perfect sense. From an integration perspective, it is also the optimal choice.

However, attracting students must not become a new form of colonialism or lead to a “brain drain” from non-European countries. Social responsibility is a critical challenge in planning these policies. We must remember that some students will return home, contributing to “brain circulation,” and that we are providing opportunities for those who might not have had access to education in their home countries.

As Europeans, we carry a heavy and difficult history of colonialism. These painful lessons should guide us. However, sensitivity to these issues is often lacking in Central Europe due to an absence of direct historical experience.

Our economies cannot thrive without international students, and most countries are now developing retention strategies. Let us strive for balance and equity.

The themes and questions we are addressing today are shared by all European countries. That is why I am delighted that we are not organizing this conference alone, but in collaboration with other nations and partners. Czeducon, in its current form, would not be possible without the German DAAD, Austrian OeAD, Polish FRSE, and Slovak SAAIC.



Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS)

Na Poříčí 1035/4 | 110 00 Prague 1 | Czech Republic

Tel.: +420 221 850 100

E-mail: info@dzs.cz

www.dzs.cz

This conference, built on the collaboration of these nations, is immensely valuable. It underscores the European idea and the importance of integration.

The cooperation between former Eastern and Western countries on internationalization helps break down the remains of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain—barriers that still affect European society today.

The differing historical paths, the deep traumas we in Eastern Europe carry, the feelings of neglect and being overlooked by the West, and persistent wage disparities—including in the education sector—are legacies of the past that still shape our identity and challenges today.

Breaking the Iron Curtain, closing the gap between East and West, and bringing Europe together is the mission of our generation—a challenge that will last our whole lives.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe this year's conference will play a crucial role in advancing internationalization in Central Europe. With participants from the Czechia, Germany, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, and other international guests, we have a unique opportunity to share experiences, seek new solutions, and move forward together. The program is rich and focused on practical issues that directly impact the future of education and collaboration in our region.

But there is one more thing.

After six years of Czeducon, we have decided to take a significant step forward. To highlight the broader, Central European scope of this conference and the partnerships behind it, we are introducing a change that reflects our ambition to become a strong part of European and global education.

Let me invite you next year to the **Central European Education Conference—CEEDUCON.**

Ladies and gentlemen, enjoy the conference!

Michal Uhl, Director of the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research



Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS)
Na Poříčí 1035/4 | 110 00 Prague 1 | Czech Republic
Tel.: +420 221 850 100
E-mail: info@dzs.cz
www.dzs.cz