

# Association of Libraries of Czech Universities

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## INTRODUCTION

From the communist putsch in February 1948 until the end of 1989, academic libraries in the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia) were little-recognized parts of their universities. Usually situated in unsatisfactory spaces, libraries were provided with insufficient budgets and served as textbook lending offices. Access to current scientific information and knowledge was very limited - for financial and ideological reasons.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, universities and their libraries were finally given the opportunity to develop freely and dynamically. In 1990 the Higher Education Act was passed, providing academic freedom, especially the right to do research and teach without restraints. Government funding for universities increased during the mid 1990s. The Council of Universities was established and, in early 1994, the Committee for Academic Libraries came into existence as a part of the Council. Representatives of academic libraries (most of them library directors) participated on the Committee. The main objectives of the Committee were to automate and computerize libraries, to implement modern library services, to support continuous education for librarians, and to introduce new forms of user education. In order to reach these goals, informal working groups were established specializing on particular issues. A new listserv was founded to improve communication between librarians. The work of the Committee has been summarized each year during the Czech University Libraries Annual Meeting.

The Committee initiated several activities during the 1990s that have helped many libraries to minimize the gap caused by lack of financing and 40 years of isolation from developed western countries. It has also been successful when negotiating with foundations and grant agencies to open additional funding opportunities to academic libraries. Many research and development issues pertinent to academic libraries were included among funding priorities, and writing grant proposals and working on projects became an essential part of academic librarians' everyday work. The Committee has also initiated several consortia in order to gain access to electronic databases for as many academic institutions as possible. Finally, the Committee served as a platform for integrative efforts, cooperation and sharing best practices.

## THE ASSOCIATION AS A PLATFORM FOR CZECH ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

In the late 1990s it became obvious that the Committee needed to be institutionalised in order to gain more influence and to undertake other activities. The first ideas about establishing the Association of Libraries of Czech Universities (ALCU) as a common platform for Czech academic libraries emerged at that time. Primarily, establishing the association would help libraries to step out of their dependent position within universities and share common interests and efforts. In 2001 this idea reached its final phase and led to distinctive support among Czech university administrators. On June 13<sup>th</sup> 2002 the constitutive meeting was held. Twenty-one out of 24 Czech universities existing at that time became the constituent members. As of June 2006, ALCU had 23 institutional members [1] out of 25 public universities established in the Czech Republic.

The main objectives of ALCU are as follows:

- to promote, develop and support academic libraries in the Czech Republic;
- to represent academic libraries during negotiations about State Information Policy and the national library system;
- to advocate for university libraries and facilitate their negotiations with information providers in order to improve opportunities for cost-efficient purchase and licensing of electronic information resources;
- to provide a platform for collaboration and partnership in various areas of interests on both national and international levels.

An elected Executive Board at the head of ALCU prepares an annual activities plan, manages the association's activities during the period of time between the annual conferences, generates a program for the Czech University Libraries Annual Meeting, and coordinates the activities of several working groups. The working groups are the actual platforms where the most of work takes place. At this writing, there are 3 working groups; each of them focuses its activities on one of the following issues:

- information education and information literacy,
- electronic information resources,
- electronic theses and dissertations.

During the four years of its existence, ALCU has achieved significant success, especially in the effort to establish consortia and coordinate subscriptions for electronic databases. Representatives of the Association have held memberships in expert committees that take part in reviewing grant proposals and applications. The Council of Universities invites ALCU representatives to its meetings, and so does the Central Library Commission, the advisory board of the Czech Ministry of Culture. Several projects were accomplished as part of the Working Groups' activities, e.g. an information literacy survey among university students and a database of electronic information resources available at Czech universities. ALCU has also been organizing or co-organizing numerous conferences and workshops, mostly focusing on the automation of processes and services in libraries, library architecture, accessibility of electronic resources, and issues related to digital libraries. The Association has contributed to increasing the level of Czech academic libraries. Many of them would now compare favourably with their counterparts in Western Europe or the U.S.A. in technologies used, collections available and services provided.

## **CONCLUSION**

ALCU has become a key player not only in the area of Czech higher education, but in Czech librarianship in general. It is an important partner for producers and providers of information and communication technologies and information resources as well. In the future, the Association of Libraries of Czech Universities would like to broaden its activities and to find partners for cooperation in the international context.

## **NOTE**

[1] There is not an individual membership available for ALCU. Libraries of member universities are available at: <http://www.akvs.cz/en/links.html>

## **WEB SITE REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT**

Association of Libraries of Czech Universities. <http://www.akvs.cz/en/index.html>