

## When Change at a University Grows from the Bottom Up

Less than a year ago, a new organization called Junior Faculty was founded at the Faculty of Science, Charles University. It was inspired by a concept widely adopted in Sweden and, in various forms, present at many universities around the world. In the Czech academic environment, however, this is the first initiative of its kind. One of its founders and its current chair is the author of this commentary.

When universities talk about change, discussions often remain confined to abstract strategies and committees. The Junior Faculty concept takes a different approach — it is a voluntary association of early-career researchers who work together to ensure that their institution best serves science and education. Its members support each other in professional development and jointly design constructive administrative reforms and other proposals for university leadership; all aimed at improving the research environment.

The Junior Faculty format varies depending on the national academic culture. Examples include Germany's *Junge Akademie* and Sweden's *National Junior Faculty* (which connects smaller local organizations), the institutionalized *De Jonge Akademie* in the Netherlands, or the *Early Career Researcher* (ECR) network in the UK. In the United States, the term "Junior Faculty" typically refers to researchers at the pre-tenure career stage (most often assistant professors) who organize into local associations to communicate with university leadership.

All these initiatives share a commitment to connect and support early-career group leaders, often combined with advocacy activities — especially at the local, university level.

### Founding the First Czech Junior Faculty

At the Faculty of Science, Charles University (PřF UK), the Junior Faculty brings together researchers who are within ten years of obtaining their first independent grant. Its organizational structure is intentionally flexible: leadership roles, including chair and activity coordinators, rotate annually. This prevents power from becoming concentrated and ensures continuity through chair-vice-chair pairs.

The Junior Faculty operates entirely in English, integrating international research group leaders and drawing on their diverse experiences. It views the research group as the basic unit of academia and openly addresses internal imbalances, including gender inequality. Its goal is to foster an environment where new ideas and collaborations can flourish — across disciplines, generations, and nationalities.

Currently, the steering group consists of 13 members and coordinates four working groups (which include additional volunteers) focused on career development, research support, teaching, and the emerging *Biocentre Albertov*. Altogether, the organization has about 25 members.

The creation of the Junior Faculty was catalyzed by discussions surrounding the dean's election in late 2024 and took clearer shape at the beginning of 2025, when the group first met to define its

goals and principles. A broad membership base and rotational leadership have proven key to the long-term sustainability of its activities. Founding a lab is demanding work — most members also have young children — so knowing that one can “pass the baton,” recharge, and later re-engage is genuinely important.

## **Dialogue with the Dean’s Office and the First JF Conference**

One of Junior Faculty’s most visible activities so far was a conference held at the end of September 2025, aimed at connecting the Faculty’s diverse research fields and discussing the role Junior Faculty should play. More than 100 participants attended — representing all academic sections: Biology, Chemistry, Geography, Geology, and Environmental Science. Participants included undergraduate and PhD students, postdocs, early-career and established group leaders, members of the dean’s advisory board led by Dean Vladimír Krylov, as well as administrative staff. These groups rarely have the chance to meet and exchange views in one place.

Through short talks, participants gained an overview of research across the Faculty, discovering many colleagues they hadn’t previously known. The conference also featured a lecture by Matouš Glanc, Director of *Czexpats in Science*, who presented findings from a survey of Czech scientists abroad — highlighting that one of the main barriers to returning home is the insufficient international nature of Czech academia.

Among the invited international guests were Ramesh Vetukuri, former chair of Sweden’s National Junior Faculty, and Frank Bradke, a world-renowned neurobiologist and author of *Key Attributes of Successful Research Institutes*. Together with Klára Hlouchová and Roswitha Schmickl, they discussed how Junior Faculty can contribute to the Faculty’s development and how to best harness the potential of the emerging Biocentre Albertov — especially through reforms fostering collaboration between researchers, administration, and core facilities, as well as through active recruitment of new research groups from abroad.

Most of Junior Faculty’s work, however, happens behind the scenes — in meetings with the dean’s office and Faculty Senate committees. Among the first (and soon tangible) outcomes of these discussions is the creation of a shared childcare space, allowing scientists with young children to work more flexibly at the Faculty. This initiative was driven by a group of researchers (Kateřina Jandová, Tereza Novotná Jaroměřská, and Petra Špačková), with participation from both the Senate and Junior Faculty. In this case, the idea has already progressed to concrete planning, including potential cooperation with the neighboring First Faculty of Medicine.

How Junior Faculty’s feedback will ultimately influence grant support, teaching, and the structure of Biocentre Albertov remains to be seen. Yet the fact that communication between the dean’s office and Junior Faculty has taken off is encouraging — it enables the Faculty’s leadership to draw far more effectively on the experiences of its international members and those who can still view its inner workings with a valuable “outside” perspective.

Let’s hope they won’t shy away from the mirror now being held up to them.

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