Edict Introducing the University-Entrance Examination [*Abitur*] in Prussia (October 12, 1812)

Abstract

This text aptly illustrates the Neo-Humanism that animated the Prussian educational reform program, as formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and his associates and institutionalized in the new state-funded secondary schools [*Gymnasien*] established during the reform era in Prussia. It describes the high standards set for *Gymnasium* students, especially in the study of Greek and Latin. Successful passage of graduation examinations soon became the prerequisite for university study in Prussia.

Source

Edict Regarding the Examination of Students Entering University

We, *Frederick William*, by the grace of God King of Prussia etc. etc. etc. have, with the intention of promoting the most diligent education of students in Our territories, and in consideration that the Circular aimed at this end, dated December 23, 1788, concerning the examination of pupils advancing to university, requires considerable modifications and more comprehensive provisions, commissioned Our Department of Cultural Affairs and Public Education within the Interior Ministry to draw up the following new instruction on this matter. We approve and confirm the same in all of its parts in such a way that it shall be instituted in place of the abovementioned circular and the orders based on it, and we order everyone that it concerns to comply with it punctually […].

Instruction.

The object of preventing university attendance by studying youths who have not adequately prepared has resulted in examinations for pupils before their release to university, an arrangement ordered by the Circular dated December 23, 1788. The experience gained in this respect since then and the recently granted freedom also to be able to attend foreign universities necessitate new and more comprehensive provisions regarding these examinations, which are provided by this instruction.

§ 1. Just as it had not been the object of the earlier decree to forbid absolutely the graduation to university of a youth not mature at the time, if his parents or guardians feel compelled to that by any reason left to their conscience, such free choice shall continue to be unrestricted, except that by means of appropriate examinations and diplomas, the quality of the pupils advancing to university in each case shall be established.

§ 2. Partly, these diplomas shall serve the parents and guardians of the youths as a notification of the latter's educational status, thus providing the final advice by the school in view of these evaluations and preventing any hasty decisions regarding advancement to university; partly the envisaged diplomas and the examination proceedings whose results they contain shall put the church and school deputations of the provincial governments and even the supreme school authority in a position to observe continuously how the institutions and persons devoted to the important business of preparing studying youths for university fulfill that responsibility.

§ 3. For this reason, the necessity of a leaving certificate or diploma – received and issued in a manner to be stipulated forthwith – is hereby made universal for all youths advancing to university from the grammar schools and learned schools of the Prussian state, and with this, graduation exams are

therefore ordered, without exception, for all of those schools for which they had not yet been instituted by the Circular dated December 23, 1788.

§ 4. Generally, those students who wish to enroll in a university must report three months prior to leaving school to the headmaster or principal of their school, requesting the leaving diploma necessary for university registration. It is then incumbent on the headmaster or principal, if he does not deem the pupil mature enough for enrollment in university, to raise objections about this both with the pupil himself and his parents or guardians and relatives. If these are to no avail, the headmaster or principal must nevertheless admit the pupil to the examination, in which the objective is to determine the degree of his ability and the grade of the diploma to be issued based on that ability. Only pupils who are not taking any major subject in the final school grade of the learned school may be denied this diploma outright. However, the meticulousness and conscientiousness of the teachers regarding promotion must aim to prevent anyone from reaching the final grade too early; and in order that neither pupils nor parents have reason to complain about lack of frank advice in good time, they ought to receive the well-meaning judgment by the teachers on his natural talents for scientific studies, directed only at the pupil's best interests, as early as the marks issued in the second to last grade, and from then on even more decidedly the nearer graduation draws. This will take the place of the provisional preliminary examination that is too elaborate for the larger institutions.

However, since maturity of character is no less important than maturity of mind and knowledge, since the dignity of the tone prevailing at the universities depends on the harmony of both, and since the Department wishes most earnestly that the studying young Prussians, who will supply the future teachers, advisors, and leaders of the people, may distinguish themselves in this respect, and since the determination of character cannot be subject to rules and examinations, the Department established it as a sacred duty for the heads of the higher educational institutions to look specifically to these characteristics as well in pupils signing up for the final examination. To make clear to the parents and guardians, however, who rush too early to university with their wards, the alarming consequences of proceeding thus, if they, solely aiming at having those wards reach a livelihood and outward honors a bit earlier, drive their charges, perhaps equipped with the necessary knowledge in a pinch, though with still vacillating character, into relations whose freer independence their age, as yet requiring the loving regimentation by the father, teacher, or friend as well as their entirely impressionable soul cannot yet bear.

§ 5. The graduation diplomas are divided into three grades, according to the unconditional competence, the conditional competence, and the incompetence of the individuals […].

§ 6. The benchmark for issuing these diplomas is the following:

1. For the first designation, the following features are required:

A. With respect to languages,

a) to understand in Latin easily and as a whole Cicero, Livy, Horace, and Virgil (which includes sureness in quantity and, with respect to the poets, also knowledge of the meter), and to explain Tacitus, however, properly after a certain period permitted for deliberation; to have command over one's own mode of Latin expression without grammatical errors and serious Germanisms, not only in writing but also verbally in regard to appropriate subjects;

b) in Greek, the examinee must understand Attic prose, which also includes the easier type of dialogue by Sophocles and Euripides as well as Homer even without prior preparation; to be able to explain, however, a tragic chorus that is not critically difficult with the help of lexical assistance. Moreover, he must be able to prepare a short translation from German to Greek without breaking the rules of grammar

and accents;

c) in French, the examinee must be able to write a short essay without error, translate a poet or prose writer presented to him with ease and to read him with the proper pronunciation; as well, knowledge of at least some of the nation's most important writers must exist;

d) in German, the written mode of expression must not only be free of grammatical errors but also of vagueness and confusion of the poetic with the prosaic. Likewise, the candidate must succeed in giving a coherent oral presentation. Moreover, a requirement is familiarity with the major epochs of the history of German language and literature and the nation's most pre-eminent authors.

B. With respect to the sciences:

a) in history and geography, the examinee must be able to demonstrate that he has acquired a clear and sure general idea of the entire field of ancient, medieval, and modern history, having to know the major events of the same with chronological accuracy and be able to indicate their geographical place.

b) in mathematics, the requirement is knowledge of the calculations pertaining to everyday life according to the principles based on the theory of proportions, pertaining to the algorithm of letters, to the first theory of squares and roots, to the equations of first and second degree, to logarithms, to elementary geometry (as far as presented in Euclid's first six books as well as his eleventh and twelfth book), to plane trigonometry and to the use of mathematical tables;

c) In the natural sciences:

I. in physics, the grade of unconditional competence requires clear understanding of the laws pertaining to those major phenomena of the corporeal sphere, without which it is impossible to understand the teachings of mathematical and physical geography;

II. in the description of nature, it demands knowledge of the general classification of natural products and insight into the principles according to which this classification needs to be arranged.

Thus, anyone having made the progress in these subjects indicated above receives the certificate of *unconditional competence*; in this context, one needs to note that a lower mark in French or in the natural sciences does not mean exclusion from that classification if ancient languages, historical knowledge, and mathematics are forthcoming to the appropriate extent.

2. What is suitable for the grade of *conditional competence* is the attainment of the preset goal only in one or the other of those three essential pieces of advanced school classes, with simultaneous lagging behind in the other, equally important ones.

3. Those not having achieved anything adequate to the requirements in any of these three subjects will be designated as *incompetent*; only exceedingly first-rate progress in the natural sciences can generate a limiting provision to this grade.

§ 7. Now the exam is held in order to explore possession or lack of the education necessary for productive attendance of university; in its framework, it is partly necessary for the examinee to present knowledge himself and partly to organize exercises, which allows drawing conclusions regarding the skills acquired.

§ 8. The organization of these examinations is the responsibility of the examination committee found in each grammar school. […]

§ 9. The examination is divided into two parts:

1. a written examination,

2. and an oral one.

Since the former is intended to serve as a corrective and complement of the other, the papers to be prepared, whose topics are determined jointly by the examination commissioner and principal or headmaster, by the latter after consultation with the teachers, must be completed, submitted to and checked by all members of the examination committee several days before the oral examination. However, all of the examinees are to be given the same assignments for these papers.

§ 10. The written exam papers consist of:

1. a German essay, which is primarily intended to document the development of the examinee's reason and imagination, as well as, in terms of its compositions, his knowledge of the German language and skill in using it. Therefore, the topic is to be selected from such an area that the examinees can prefer, depending on inclination, this form or the other, though the subject must never be exclusively factual.

2. a Latin essay,

3. a French essay.

In order not to divide up the composer's effort too much between form and matter, the suitable topics will be historical subjects, for the Latin essay from ancient history, for the French essay from modern history. However, in this respect, too, merely dry stringing together of facts must not, under any circumstance, amount to the whole; instead, the relationship of several important events to each other, and the portrayal and assessment of entire circumstances of nations will be the basis on which to test the youths' powers of deduction.

4. a mathematical paper, in which the goal is similarly to explore particularly the examinee's powers of judgment in applying the acquired material, and from which shall emerge whether he is capable himself to discover questions and take views, and how far his powers of deduction might extend;

5. two essays relating to Greek:

a) one German translation of a play by one author not read in school and appropriate to the proficiency, accompanied by the necessary linguistic and factual explanations;

b) a short translation from German into Greek, in the context of which etymological and syntactical, and in general the grammatical correctness are considered in every respect.

Composition of these essays takes place without any additional assistance other than that of a Greek dictionary in the case of the Greek segment, and under conscientious and uninterrupted supervision by a teacher from the school institution. […]

§ 15. Those pupils who are found prepared for university studies in the *unconditionally or conditionally competent* way will be given notification that they can leave the school institution and advance to university. Those, however, who received the assessment of *incompetence*, will receive, upon revelation of this, the advice to continue attending school for a while yet, if there is hope that by doing so they can make up the missing elements. In case though that they do not accept advice against enrolling in university, they, too, shall be issued the results of the examination in the form of a diploma. […]

§ 19. No student transferring from a domestic school to a domestic university can secure registration in the latter, if he has not in his possession a certificate from the school examination committee obtained and issued in the way stipulated above – which differs clearly from a mere *testimonio morum et*

diligentiae [‘certificate of morals and diligence’].

§ 20. For those, however, which go to university from private tuition or not directly from learned schools, and who do not wish, for instance, to join the examinations at grammar schools, and with the aim of preventing a circumvention of the above regulations in light of the substantial number of grammar schools located overall in the three current university towns of the Prussian monarchy, every university town will see the establishment of an examination committee comprised of university professors and some or all principals or headmasters of the grammar schools located there. […]

All universities, grammar schools, and learned schools of the Prussian state will have to follow this instruction closely, namely in such a way that one will already follow its procedure during the graduations of pupils and the university enrollments taking place at Easter next year. The church and school deputations of the provincial governments will, to the extent that they have to collaborate in it, be instructed to carry out its execution emphatically, to aim at its implementation with earnestness, and to heed it themselves as well.

Source: Friedrich Schultze, *Die Abiturienten-Prüfung vornehmlich im Preußischen Staate*, A: *Urkunden Sammlung*. Liegnitz [and Halle: Commission bei Eduard Anton], 1831, pp. 6–26; reprinted in Walter Demel und Uwe Puschner, eds. *Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Wiener Kongreß 1789–1815*, Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, ed. Rainer A. Müller, vol. 6. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1995, pp. 373–82.

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