

Joseph II, Letter to Austrian Chancellor and Bohemian Governor Heinrich Cajetan Count von Blümegen on the Reform of Higher Education in the Austrian Empire (November 29, 1781)

Abstract

Joseph II concentrated university study at a handful of institutions in his far-flung lands. He aimed to spread elementary schooling and to shift higher education away from traditional humanistic disciplines and toward policy-oriented training for state officials.

Source

Dear Count Blümegen! The importance of university studies has led me to wish to simplify and perfect them as much as possible. Therefore, I have, first and foremost, selected a director who is suitable for the university system and who, charged with this task alone, is able, through his knowledge and industry, to bring about the desired goal. This person is the Court Librarian, Baron Suiten, whom you will advise by decree to assume the chairmanship as head of the Court University Commission and to subsequently submit his ideas and reports only to the Bohemian-Austrian Court Chancellery as well as the Censorship Commission so that they may forward them to me. Anyone ranking above him has to refrain ipso facto from appearing on the University Commission henceforth. The directors of the faculties, however, are right there by virtue of their office and must report to him as the nominated head. Since it would be impossible to create something perfect unless all the related parts come together and offer assistance to each other, the entire normal school system [for teacher training] will have to be subordinated to and incorporated in this University Directorate, and thus Provost Felbinger will, with the cessation of his office and salary here, henceforth be left only with his abbey in Hungary and the direction of the normal school system there; here, however, the most qualified directors, whether they be Piarists or others, secular or spiritual, shall be kept in the normal school system. The main task will consist of drafting well-designed instructions for Baron Suiten himself and establishing the principles. For this draft, I will additionally provide the following principles:

1st in future, the major universities shall be limited to three in the Austrian-Bohemian territories, these being Vienna, Prague, and one in Galicia. The universities in Innsbruck, Brünn, and Freiburg will cease to exist, and afterwards there will

2nd exist in these very provinces and in a few additional ones only grammar schools, which will, however, convey law studies, but with far fewer professors and without a medical discipline, yet with a surgical and midwifery school.

3rd The useless instructors, i.e. those teaching foreign languages and such, will have to be employed at the local university,

4th For filling teaching posts it is imperative to exercise the utmost care and to make the best selection, regardless of nationality and religion, and all who are not world-renowned skilled men will require selection through competition.

5th One will draw on and apply the best of those features introduced at different foreign universities and make an effort to attract some skilled professors as well.

6th One will select from the discontinued universities the most skilled professors, transferring them to the one to be established in Galicia. In the meantime

7th, until one is quite sure of finding something better, one will stick to the existing theological, philosophical, and legal lecture texts in all respects.

8th The combination of normal school training with the humanities is the main task to which one probably must adhere, and one will have to see principally whether the grammar of the national language in particular might be taught, so that the people would become even more firmly grounded in the language in which they have to serve the state most often.

9th It will be necessary to draft an essay on how to divide the university studies and schools in the Bohemian and Austrian ancestral lands on the whole, so that the number of Latin schools does not become excessive and board can be determined exactly. For the number of those learning to read and write must be as large as possible, the number of those applying themselves to higher studies smaller, and finally, those taking the entire range of university studies must include only the most select talents.

Source: *Die Österreichische Zentralverwaltung. Part 2: Von der Vereinigung der Österreichischen und Böhmisches Hofkanzlei bis zur Einrichtung der Ministerialverfassung (1749–1848)*, Vol. 4: *Die Zeit Josephs II. und Leopolds II. (1780–1792)* Documents, edited by Friedrich Walter. Vienna: Holzhausen, 1950, pp. 118–19; reprinted in Helmut Neuhaus, ed., *Zeitalter des Absolutismus 1648–1789*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, ed. Rainer A. Müller, vol. 5. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1997, pp. 432–34.

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