

Wilhelm von Humboldt's Treatise "On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Academic Institutions in Berlin" (1810)

Abstract

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), a renowned philosopher, scholar, and linguist, and the minister responsible for educational reform in Prussia, oversaw the planning and opening of the innovative University of Berlin in 1810. This text reflects the spirit that animated Humboldt's conception of knowledge [*Wissenschaft*] and its pursuit in the scholarly community of the university. Though also essential to the state and the nation, knowledge was now conceived of as an end in itself. The idea now known as "academic freedom" finds expression in this piece, though Humboldt accorded the state a major role in professorial and other university appointments.

Source

"On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin"

Wilhelm von Humboldt

The notion of the higher scientific institutions, as the pinnacle where everything that happens directly for the moral culture of the nation comes together, is based on the idea that they are destined to work on science in the deepest and broadest sense of the word, and hand it over as subject matter to be used by intellectual and moral education, suitably prepared for this purpose, not intentionally so but by itself.

Their essence thus lies in internally connecting objective science with subjective education, and externally connecting the completed school education with the beginning university studies under one's own guidance; or rather, to bring about the transition from one to the other. Still, the chief factor remains science. [...] For when the latter stands pure, it is correctly perceived in and of itself and in its totality, even if there are individual deviations. Since these institutions can thus achieve their purpose only if each one, as much as possible, faces the pure idea of science, solitariness and freedom are the predominant principles in their circle. But since the intellectual work within humanity flourishes only as cooperation, namely not merely in that one fills in what another lacks, but in that the successful work of one inspires the others, and that the general, original power that shines forth in the individual person only singly or deflected becomes visible to all, the internal organization of these institutions must bring forth and sustain a collaboration that is uninterrupted, constantly self-renewing, but unforced and without specific purpose.

Moreover, it is a peculiarity of the higher scientific institutions that they always treat science as a problem that has still not been fully resolved and therefore remain constantly engaged in research, whereas the school deals with and teaches only finished and agreed-upon bits of knowledge. The relationship between teacher and students will therefore become quite different from what it was before. The former does not exist for the latter, both exist for science. [...]

What one therefore calls higher scientific institutions is, disconnected in every way from the state, nothing other than the intellectual life of the people whom external leisure or inner desire leads to science and research. Even without them one person would study and collect on his own, another join

with men of the same age, a third gather a circle of disciples around him. The state, too, must remain faithful to this image if it wants to bring together in a more solid form the inherently undetermined and in a sense accidental activities. It must make sure to

1. always preserve the activity in its most lively and robust vitality;
2. not allow it to decline, to maintain pure and firm the separation of the higher institutions from the school (not only from the general theoretical, but also, and especially, from the variety of practical ones).

It must thus always remain conscious that it is not really bringing this about, nor is it able to do so, indeed, that it is always an impediment as soon as it interferes, that the matter itself would proceed infinitely better without it, and that the following is the true state of affairs:

that there must needs exist in the positive society external forms and means for any activity on a broader scale, and that it therefore has the obligation to procure these also for the treatment of science;

that is not merely the manner in which it procures these forms and means that can become deleterious to the nature of the thing, but that the very circumstance that such external forms and means even exist for something totally foreign always has a detrimental effect and drags the spiritual and lofty down into the material and lower reality;

and that it must therefore have a clear sense of the inner nature for the sole reason that it can make up for what it itself has corrupted or impeded, even if without any fault of its own.

Even if this is nothing other than a different view of the same process, its advantage must also express itself in the result, since the state, if it examines the matter from this perspective, will interfere ever more humbly, just as no theoretically incorrect view, whatever one may say, ever goes unpunished in the practical activity of the state, since no activity in the state is merely mechanical.

This having been said, one can readily see that when it comes to the internal organization of the higher scientific institutions, everything depends on preserving the principle of seeing science as something that has not been and can never be entirely found, and to constantly pursue it as such.

As soon as one ceases to seek true science, or imagines that it does not need to be created out of the depth of the spirit, but could be externally strung together by collecting things, everything is irretrievably and eternally lost; lost to science, which, if this is continued for a long time, takes flight and leaves behind the language like an empty shell, and lost to the state. For only the science that comes from the inside and can be implanted into the inside also reshapes the character, and the state, just as humanity is not concerned with knowledge and talk, but with character and action.

Now, to forever forestall this wrong path, one need only keep alive and vigorous a three-fold striving of the mind:

for one, to derive everything from an original principle (through which the explanations of nature are elevated, for example, into dynamic, organic, and finally psychic ones in the broadest meaning);

second, to shape everything toward an ideal;

lastly, to combine that principle and this ideal into a single idea.

However, this very thing can *not* be promoted, though it would not occur to anyone that it needs to be promoted among Germans, in the first place. The intellectual national character of the Germans has this tendency inherently, and one merely needs to prevent it from being suppressed, either by force or through a hostility that is, of course, also found. [...]

But if the principle of pursuing science finally becomes dominant in the higher scientific institutions, there is no longer a need to see to anything else in particular. There would then be no lack of either unity or completeness, the one seeks the other by itself and the two will put themselves – and this is the secret of every good scientific method – into the right reciprocal relationship. [...]

Now, as far as the externality of the relationship to the state and its activity in all of this is concerned, it must only ensure the wealth (strength and variety) of mental power through the choice of the men that should be assembled and the freedom of their work. But freedom is threatened not only by the state, but also by the institutions themselves, which, as they begin, take on a certain spirit and like to stifle a different one from arising. The state must also preempt the disadvantages that could potentially arise from this.

The most important thing is the choice of the men who are put to work. When it comes to them, a corrective – hard to avoid – can be undertaken only when the institution as a whole has been divided into its individual parts.

Subsequent to it, the most important thing is organizational laws that are few and simple but take effect more deeply than normal, which one could discuss once again only with respect to the individual parts. [...]

The state must treat its universities neither as *Gymnasia* nor as special schools, and not make use of its academy as a technical or scientific committee. On the whole (the individual exceptions that must take place in the universities appear below), it must not demand from them anything that relates directly and straightforwardly to itself, but must nurse the inner conviction that when they achieve their final purpose, they will also fulfill its purposes, namely from a much more elevated perspective, one from which much more can be brought together and very different forces and levers can be applied than the state is capable of setting into motion.

On the other hand, however, it is chiefly the duty of the state to set up its schools in such a way that they duly play into the hands of the higher scientific institutions. That is based primarily on a correct understanding of their relationship to the latter, and on the conviction – which becomes fruitful – that as schools they are not called upon to anticipate the instruction of the universities, and that the universities are not merely an equal complement to them, only a higher school class, but that the move from the school to the university is a period in the youth of life, into which the school, if it is successful, places the pupil so purely that he can be physically, morally, and intellectually left to freedom and independence, and, freed from coercion, will not pass into idleness or practical life, but will bear within himself a yearning to lift himself to science, which hitherto had been shown to him merely from afar, as it were.

Its path for arriving there is simple and sure. It must merely seek the harmonious education of *all* abilities in its pupils; merely exercise its strength on the smallest possible number of objects from all sides, where possible, and implant all knowledge in the mind only in such a way that understanding, knowledge, and intellectual work become attractive not through external circumstances, but through their inner precision, harmony, and beauty. To that end, and for the preparatory training of the mind for pure science, mathematics above all else must be used, namely beginning with the very first exercises of the capacity for thinking.

A mind thus prepared takes hold of science by itself, since the same diligence and the same talent, with different preparation, bury themselves either momentarily or before the education has been completed into practical activity, and thereby also render themselves useless to it, or become scattered, without the higher scientific striving, among individual bits of knowledge.

[...]

If one declares the university as destined only for the teaching and dissemination of science, but the academy to its expansion, one clearly does the former an injustice. Surely, the sciences have been just as much – and in Germany more so – expanded by university professors as by the academy members, and these men have arrived at their advances in their field precisely through their teaching. For the free oral lecture before listeners, among whom there is always a significant number of minds that think along for themselves, surely spurs on the person who has become used to this kind of study as much as the solitary leisure of the writer's life or the loose association of an academic fellowship. The course of science is evidently quicker and more lively at a university, where it is continuously mulled over in a large number of strong, robust, and youthful minds. In fact, science cannot be truly lectured on as science without again conceiving of it as self-actuating each time, and it would be incomprehensible if people did not in fact in the process often come upon discoveries. Moreover, university teaching is not such an arduous business that it should be regarded as an interruption of the leisure for study rather than an aid to the same. Also, at every large university there are men who, by lecturing little or not at all, only study and research by themselves in solitude. For that reason, one could surely entrust the expansion of the sciences to the universities alone, provided the latter are properly set up, and for that purpose dispense with the academies. [...]

For the university stands always in a closer relationship to practical life and the needs of the state, since it always undertakes practical affairs for it, the guidance of the youth, whereas the academy deals only with science as such. The teachers of the university are merely generally connected via aspects of the external and internal order of the discipline; it is merely via its proper business that they communicate with one another only if their own penchant leads them to do so; otherwise, each goes his own way. By contrast, the academy is a society that is truly set up to subject the work of everyone to the judgment of all.

In this way, the idea of an academy must be noted as the highest and last free place of science and as the corporation most independent from the state, and one must take the risk whether such a corporation will prove through too little or one-sided activity that the right thing is not always brought about most easily under the most favorable external conditions. One must take the risk, I say, because the idea is inherently lovely and beneficial, and there can always be a moment where it can also be brought to fruition in an honorable way.

In the process there arises between the university and the academy such a competition, antagonism, and reciprocal interaction that if one must be concerned about an excess and lack of activity within them, they will bring themselves into balance. [...]

The appointment of university teachers must be reserved exclusively to the state, and it is surely not a good practice to allow the faculties more influence on it than a perspicacious and reasonable committee would exercise on its own. For at the university, antagonism and friction is salutary and necessary, and the collision that occurs between the teachers through their business itself can also shift their point of view involuntarily. Moreover, the make-up of the universities is too closely tied to the immediate interests of the state. [...]

Source: Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, vol. 4: *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 3rd edition, 1982, pp. 253–65; 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. 382–91.

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