

The Humboldt principle – a basic strategy for Universities

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Humboldt and the educational ideal

Wilhelm Freiherr von Humboldt (1767-1835, brother of the natural scientist and explorer Alexander v. Humboldt) was, among other things, minister of education in the Prussian civil service and was known first and foremost for his reform of the school and university system according to humanist principles and the basic approaches of the Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi. It was very important to him that schools and universities be fundamentally "neutral" – free from ideological influences and private interests such as those seen, for example, in feudal or clerical tutelage.

In this connection it is interesting to note that this **liberality of universities** promoted by Humboldt was the model on which development in many other countries was based, for example in the USA, whose top universities of today did not even come close to meeting this standard at that time, but rather were often strongly religious educational institutions – something that we are reliving today in various US states, with their laws on structuring the school curriculum according to the biblical creationist doctrine and to the exclusion of scientific findings. A similar situation – albeit in a less extreme form – existed in various German states, with church supervision of schools lasting right up to the 1950s. And it may possibly be about to be revived today; at least the conduct of certain politicians begs this conclusion.

In the first half of the 19th century student fraternities were among the strongest advocates of a liberal university system. This can be seen very clearly in substantial demands made at the second Wartburg festival in 1848, such as

- unconditional academic freedom, and
- student participation in the selection of academic authorities and the allocation of university professorships.

Another demand was for universities to represent **all academic knowledge** and, in accordance with this principle, to increase the range of subjects offered, while ensuring that differentiation between faculties did not occur – a demand that takes up the Humboldtian educational ideal and which is as highly topical today as it was then, anticipating as it does the academic inter- and transdisciplinarity described by academic theorist Jürgen Mittelstrass as the cognitive paths of the future for academic work.

This call for the *universitas litterarum* leads back to the Humboldtian educational ideal, which centres around exactly that – the universal education of the individual. The associated educational canon can be traced back to Classical Antiquity, with the "*artes liberales*", the seven liberal arts which were the heritage of all free citizens and consisted of the disciplines of the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). The holistic study of these, and

cooperative study by teachers and students, as we experience it today in the unity of research and teaching, places the individual's feet on the path to universal education. Humboldt does, however, adapt this image of universal education to what were probably different conditions and orients his system most substantially towards rhetoric, philosophy and literature – thus unconsciously fostering the nascent efforts of the late 18th and especially the early 19th century to separate philosophy and natural sciences and, subsequently, the almost dogged present-day dispute on the value and necessity of humanities-based education on the one hand and scientific and technical education on the other.

The terms used in this debate often arouse deep prejudices; after all, who wants it said of them that they are, for example, "only" an engineer, or – even worse – a soulless technocrat. On the other hand, the opposite point of view also has some completely unexpected supporters – how else should one understand Goethe when, as a young minister, he expresses the following opinion: *"Only the natural sciences have practical application and can thus be used to benefit humanity. The abstracts, philosophy and philology, lead, if they are metaphysical, to the absurdity of monkishness and scholasticism, and, if they are historical, to the radical aspects of national and international idealism"*.

A key aspect of Humboldt's ideas on nurture, education and knowledge – despite all the disputes over the value of the disciplines – is that it is the state's responsibility to provide general education but that it should leave vocational training to the professions; that is, to practical experience. Here the division of tasks between state and business, derived from their respective areas of competence, is very clearly defined – and one can only recommend to the policymakers of today that they look back to the roots of our education system when "concocting" new paths for the vocational education of young people – which they can be observed doing regularly and promptly at the beginning of every new academic year.

With regard to universities, Humboldt even goes so far as to explicitly dispute that it is within their remit – and their ability – to train students for a particular career, because if a university were to do this, it would no longer be a university, or *universitas litterarum*, but merely a school.

In this context, the question that arises **today** is what the prospects are for academic education in the future – and derived from this – what could be a strategy for universities to win the future.

The influence of the governments

The governments have targeted a framework for the establishment of a two-tier education system in the future – whether this is right or wrong is no longer a matter for debate, and neither is the question of whether this decision was made on the basis of objective facts. It were the governments of European countries which, as it so often do, showed themselves to be resistant to taking advice on this question, of such existential importance to academic education, and which exercised their power monopoly without scruple. In doing this it was certain of the assent of broad sections

of the population, partly because, for example, a previous German prime minister had set this course early on by their wholesale disparagement of the majority of the academic community as *lazy good-for-nothings*. What's more, they found numerous compliant helpers in the universities – helpers who not infrequently saw personal advancement more in the formalistic setting of the committee than in the strivings of academic work – and thus to whom the Oxford University motto "Sapienti sat est" (*it suffices to the Wise – or here better as motto: wisdom is happiness*) is also likely to be alien.

Be that as it may, the decisions have been made in the political sphere, where objective, scientifically founded facts rarely count – and thus it is hard **not** to agree with Slovenian writer **Zarko Petan**, who also said of political decisions: "*An empty head makes nodding very easy*".

Although this has firmly lashed down a political framework for one part of academic training – one which thus in all probability can no longer be changed. Fact is that the further political considerations being linked throughout Europe to the "Bologna" concept are rather worrying. It is not only hard to reconcile plans to make the doctorate into a third study cycle with a possible legal entitlement to a PhD title with the image of independent academic study; the discussion on professional masters' degrees and *professional doctorates*, in other words the equation of professional activity with academic competence, also foreshadows where this path is intended to lead: to standardization and to levelling. This, however, as has been observed and documented again and again, is only possible at the lowest of standards.

Some concern of other countries' scholars, e. g. Germany

"*Do German politicians know what universities are for?*" is the headline of an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung from some time ago. The article was written by American philosopher **Richard Rorty**, who at the time was Warburg guest professor at the University of Hamburg. It concerns the cuts made in the humanities, which, in some political and economic circles, are sadly still (or once again) seen as being dispensable and far from "useful disciplines".

Rorty delivers a pointed history lesson to German politicians which should certainly cause some blushes:

"The United States currently prides itself, with some justification, on having some of the best universities in the world. This fortunate circumstance is not, however, the result of decisions made by the American government or the states. It is due rather to the fact that, in the second half of the 19th century, American researchers and scholars returned from such places as Heidelberg, Tübingen and Berlin demanding that universities be founded in America that were like those they had seen in Germany. The transformation of the previously religiously oriented colleges like Harvard, Yale and Princeton to genuine research universities can be traced back to such endeavours. (He continues) ... No great American university would seriously consider, even for a second, the suggestion that it halve the number of humanities subjects in its curriculum. Any such suggestion ... would just be considered an arrogant attempt to change the country's cultural climate".

The author names as one of the consequences of such a development the decline of the entire higher education and school system to American levels (!!) and closes with the warning: "... *Only a government that has forgotten what universities are for will believe that it can make savings this way*".

Now, it is all very well to get worked up about the short-sightedness of politics, but it would be wrong to believe that this is a purely modern phenomenon; Seneca himself, for example, lamented the spiritual poverty of politics with the observation: "*Nescis mi fili, quantilla prudentis mundus regatur*" (*Dost **thou** not know, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed?*)

The doctorate

Here the question arises as to how things could have actually come to the point where the government thinks it has to intervene in fundamental academic affairs and formulate policies that would stand up in an administrative court. My interpretation is that academic self-perception, the quest for truth, the struggle for excellence typical of every good scholar or scientist, is profoundly alien to those involved in politics, which, in combination with their anti-academic attitude, eventually results in their curtailing this academic freedom and suffusing it with rules in order to stifle every individual impulse before it has a chance to develop.

Instead of granting freedom, our thoroughly regulated education and research system seems to have *Procrustes* as its patron saint, indefatigably ensuring that everyone fits exactly in his bed of many laws. From the political point of view, there would be pure chaos and anarchy if universities and academics were to do what they wanted without first being told what they should want or were allowed to want. The shame of this is that it is precisely those things that are often the best drivers of innovation – smart legislators thus leave as much room for manoeuvre as humanly possible so as not to destroy this innovative energy. Admittedly in a free society, differences will arise: in profiling, in the focus of research and of teaching, in the forms of knowledge transfer, in academic success, on the quest for performance, on abilities and successes – and the legislator must also accept, for example, that alongside civil service, trade union and labour law paths there are also other paths a university of the future can follow, and wants to follow.

But it is exactly this which is a thorn in the side of politicians, according to whose own existential lie and definition everyone is equal – and who must thus, of course, also behave as if they believed it. That is why it takes an enormous effort to remedy existing shortcomings in every single individual. This is certainly laudable, as it means that – if it works – no one is left to fall through the cracks. However, it will eventually lead to a levelling-out at the lowest standards, because we are doing absolutely **nothing** to nurture the particular talents and abilities of the individual. The fact that our future is being recklessly gambled away as a result seems to burden neither state and society nor the political sphere especially, even though it is undoubtedly in all our best interests to train up an elite which will be able to smooth our way into the future. Because in case of doubt, the world will not give us and our frivolously misspent opportunities any special consideration.

Instead, the quest of the individual for excellence and for universal education, the desire to stand out from the crowd, if no longer regarded with suspicion, is still seen as a vaguely disreputable private matter. As if there were not sufficient, frighteningly clear historical examples of the results of such an intellectual bloodletting – whether in the aftermath of the atrocities of the Third Reich in Germany or as a result of the "cultural revolution" in China, to name but two examples.

So as to be able to follow this difficult path of the intellectual elite successfully and at the same time to our own satisfaction, we need a universal education – narrow technical excellence is not enough in this case. A doctorate is more than just a further subject specialization and deepening. It is an extensive moulding of an individual personality, and one which should be driven by the "*artes liberales*", the seven liberal arts of Antiquity.

Excellence is the only key for a shining future. Humboldt's call for comprehensive academic education is certainly valid today even more than in the past. Our globalized world demands for excellence and elite – and therefore universities, following these demands, will gain the future. With respect to Humboldt and his ideas about academic education, this also means – besides academic excellence – for the individual – professor or student, staff or researcher – a personal challenge in setting goals for himself, such as:

- Education as a means to personal achievement,
- Aspiration towards personal improvement,
- Mutual respect and tolerance,
- Service to the community,

because especially in our times, these goals are as important as they ever were, and standing up for them requires, now perhaps more than ever, bravery and moral courage – in a world in which almost everyone sadly only sees themselves and their immediate personal advantage.

Not the balance leads to success, but the quest for perfection. In this sense, Humboldt with his demand for individual maximum performance may serve as guide for universities on their path into the future. Those universities that do not adapt to the uniformed main stream, offering and demanding excellence, will be the winners – and those do not let the words of Polish author Stanislaw Jerzy Lec apply to them: *Anonymity can only be achieved by the true nonentity.*