

# Humboldtian model of higher education

This article is about Wilhelm von Humboldt's university concept. For the romantic ideal of science related to Alexander von Humboldt, see [Humboldtian science](#).

The **Humboldtian model of higher education** (Ger-



*The Humboldt University of Berlin*

man: *Humboldtisches Bildungsideal*, literally: **Humboldtian education ideal**) is a concept of academic education that emerged in the early 19th century and whose core idea is a holistic combination of research and studies. Sometimes called simply the Humboldtian Model, it integrates the arts and sciences with research to achieve both comprehensive general learning and cultural knowledge, and it is still followed today.

The concept of holistic academic education (compare *Bildung*) was an idea of [Wilhelm von Humboldt](#), a Prussian philosopher, government functionary and diplomat. As a privy councillor in the Interior Ministry, he reformed the Prussian school and university system according to humanist principles. He founded the University of Berlin (now the Humboldt University of Berlin) and appointed distinguished scholars to teach and research there.<sup>[1]</sup> Several scholars have called him the most influential education official in German history. Humboldt sought to create an educational system based on unbiased knowledge and analysis, combining research and teaching and allowing students to choose their own course of study. The University of Berlin was later named after him and his brother, naturalist [Alexander von Humboldt](#).

## 1 Background

Humboldt's model was based on two ideas of the Enlightenment: the individual and the world citizen. Humboldt believed that the university (and education in general, as in the Prussian education system) should enable students to become autonomous individuals and

world citizens by developing their own reasoning powers in an environment of [academic freedom](#). Humboldt envisaged an ideal of *Bildung*, education in a broad sense, which aimed not merely to provide professional skills through schooling along a fixed path but rather to allow students to build individual character by choosing their own way.<sup>[2]</sup>

Humboldt had studied the Greek classics since his youth. He is a prominent example of [Eliza Marian Butler's](#) thesis about the important role of Ancient Greek literature and art in 19th-century German thinking.<sup>[3]</sup> Humboldt believed that study of the Hellenic past would help the German national consciousness, reconciling it with modernity but distinguishing it from French culture, which he saw as rooted in the Roman tradition. The vehicle for this task was to be the university.<sup>[3]</sup>

The cultural-historical background of the Humboldtian model answered the demands of the *Bildungsbürgertum* for enhanced general knowledge (*Allgemeinbildung*). The *Bildungsbürgertum* led the Prussian reforms of the early 19th century and managed to generate a knowledge society *ante litteram*.<sup>[4][5][6][7][8]</sup>

Humboldt believed that teaching should be guided by current research, and that research should be unbiased and independent from ideological, economic, political or religious influences. The Humboldtian model strives for unconditional [academic freedom](#) in the intellectual investigation of the world, both for teachers and for students. Study should be guided by humanistic ideals and free thought, and knowledge should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism rather than authority, tradition, or dogma.<sup>[9][10][11]</sup> In line with the basic concept of *Wissenschaft*, Humboldt regarded philosophy as the link between the different academic disciplines, which include both humanities and natural sciences.<sup>[12]</sup>

Humboldt encouraged the University of Berlin to operate according to scientific, as opposed to market-driven, principles such as curiosity, freedom of research, and internal objectives. Nevertheless, Humboldt was a political conservative (in Prussian terms) and saw the state as the major player in educational matters. In 1920 [George Peabody Gooch](#) said that Humboldt's idea of the state could only be realized in a "community of Humboldts".<sup>[13]</sup>



Statue of Wilhelm von Humboldt outside the Humboldt University

## 2 University concept

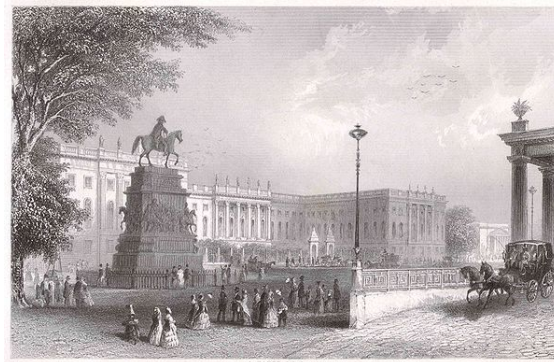
The University of Berlin, founded in 1810 under the influence of Wilhelm von Humboldt and renamed the Humboldt University of Berlin after World War II, is traditionally seen as the model institution of the 19th century.<sup>[9][14][15][16] [17]</sup> In fact, the German system emerged from innovations both before and after 1810. Among other scholars, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Barthold Georg Niebuhr were appointed by Humboldt.<sup>[1]</sup> *Niemals wieder hatte ein deutscher Unterrichtsminister eine stolzere Berufungsliste vorzuweisen* (Never again did any German Minister of Education have such a proud list of appointments to show).<sup>[1][18]</sup>

The university's features included a unity in teaching and research, the pursuit of higher learning in the philosophy faculty, freedom of study for students (*Lernfreiheit*, contrasted with the prescriptive curricula of the French system) and corporate autonomy for universities despite their being funded by the state. In addition to Humboldt, the group of reformers in Prussia included philosophers such as Fichte and Schleiermacher, and Berlin University was a focus of national cultural revival.<sup>[19]</sup> Humboldt was aware of other German philosophers educational concepts, such as Kant, Hegel and Fichte. Schleiermacher was an important influence on the Berlin university.<sup>[12]</sup>

## 3 Impact

These principles, in particular the idea of the research-based university, rapidly made an impact both in Ger-

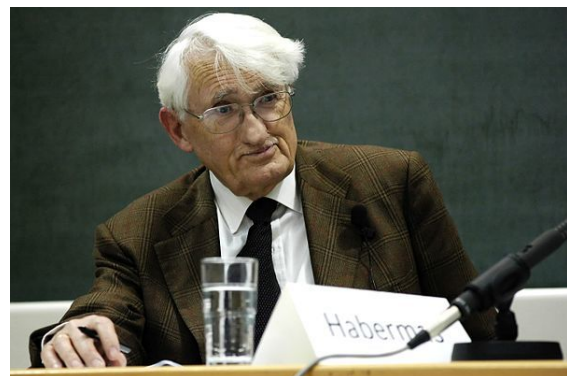
many and abroad. The Humboldtian university concept profoundly influenced higher education throughout central, eastern, and northern Europe.<sup>[19]</sup> It was in competition with the post-Revolutionary French concept of the *grandes écoles*. The French system lacked the freedom of German universities and instead imposed severe discipline and control over curriculum, awarding of degrees, conformity of views, and personal habits, instituting, for example, a ban on beards in 1852.<sup>[20]</sup> Universities built on the Humboldtian model have provided students with the ability to address **recalcitrant problems**, leading to major scientific breakthroughs with important economic effects.<sup>[21][22]</sup>



University of Berlin, now the Humboldt University of Berlin, c. 1850

American universities were early to adopt several of the German educational and scientific principles, and during the 20th century these principles have been recognized as valuable in most of the world.<sup>[23] [24][25]</sup>

### 3.1 20th and 21st centuries



Jürgen Habermas, who has promoted Humboldt's educational ideals

Already in the 1960s, the Humboldtian model of the university attracted renewed interest and was discussed internationally. The German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas actively promoted Humboldt's ideas.<sup>[4][26][27]</sup>

In the 1970s, breakthrough discoveries in **biotechnology** and patent legislation favouring market-oriented research such as the **Bayh–Dole Act** in the US allowed for the creation of research partnerships between universities and industry with the objective of rapidly bringing innovations to market. (The earliest such partnerships in the US, such as **Stanford Research Park**, date back to the post-war period.) A similar development has taken place in all industrial countries, based on proposals of the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development**.<sup>[28]</sup> This innovation of the “market university” as an economic engine, which first emerged in the US, diverges from Humboldt’s principles. In a 2012 study, Stähle and Hautamäki doubted the long-term sustainability of what they termed a “contradictory science policy”, and argued for a return to a neo-Humboldtian approach to the university that would aim less for “innovation than for civilization” and reinstate the basic Humboldtian principles of academic freedom and autonomy for educational institutions, the pursuit of knowledge as a basis for both civilization and education (German *Bildung*), and unity in teaching and research.<sup>[21]</sup>

The implications of the Humboldtian approach and of the conflict between market-driven and idealistic approaches to higher education have led to ironic results in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Though elite private universities in the US do charge high tuition fees, both universities and their students also benefit from charitable donations as well as from government support. This combination of resources results in lavish funding that far exceeds the budgets of German universities, which are state-funded and mostly tuition-free.

### 3.1.1 Current debate

Humboldt is still being discussed in Germany. Current problems and policy decisions regarding German education are addressed by a joint initiative called *Konzertierte Aktion Internationales Marketing für den Bildungs- und Forschungsstandort Deutschland* (KAIM). KAIM coordinates efforts of the partners, which include the state and federal government, universities, trade unions and industry associations. (The name of the group, KAIM, refers to earlier cooperative efforts, for example the **Konzertierte Aktion** at the end of the 1960s.) It tries to improve the international position of German education and research capacities, including marketing. Estimating that American universities receive US\$10 billion annually from tuition fees and other financial contributions, which KAIM sees as an important source of revenue for the US, they have warned Germany to prepare for American attempts to market the American university model via the **World Trade Organization** in order to corner the international educational and research market.<sup>[29][30]</sup> The Humboldt concept and its image are used by different and sometimes opposing parties in the German debate.<sup>[31][32]</sup>

In Germany, the **German Universities Excellence Initia-**

**tive** was begun in 2005–06 to counter the perceived lack of cutting-edge achievement in both research and education in the state-funded universities. This initiative is primarily driven and funded at the federal level. The American tradition of large private grants and foundations for science has been mirrored in the 21st century, for example at **Freiberg University of Mining and Technology**. The Freiberg University, one of the oldest mining schools in the world, narrowly escaped closure after **German reunification**. In 2007 it received a private grant in the triple-digit millions of euros from the *Dr.-Erich-Krüger-Stiftung* (Dr. Erich Krüger Foundation), the largest grant ever made to a state-owned university in Germany.<sup>[33]</sup> Peter Krüger, the Munich-based real estate and food retail entrepreneur who endowed the foundation, was born in **Freiberg** and started an apprenticeship there in 1946, but was driven away by the **East German** communists because of his bourgeois background. He was made an honorary senator of the University of Mining and Technology in 2007.<sup>[34]</sup>

## 4 See also

- **Liberal arts education**

## 5 References

- [1] Peter Berglar: Wilhelm von Humboldt. Rowohlt, Reinbek 1970, ISBN 978-3-499-50161-6., p.56
- [2] See: R. D. Anderson, *Germany and the Humboldtian Model* 2004
- [3] Held, Dirk t.D., PhD, Connecticut College, USA, “Hellenism, Nationalism, and the Ideology of Research in Humboldt’s University”, in *Transformation and Continuity in the History of Universities*, International Commission for the History of Universities (CIHU) Oslo, 10–11 Aug. 2000
- [4] “wilhelm-von-humboldts-idee-der-universitaet”. aka-blaetter.de. Retrieved 2014. Check date values in: |access-date= (help)
- [5] “Humboldtian education ideal”. www.oxfordscholarship.com.
- [6] [freedom of study for students (Lernfreiheit, contrasted with the prescriptive curricula of the French system)]
- [7] “Humboldtian education ideal” (PDF). www.donau-uni.ac.at. Retrieved 2014. Check date values in: |access-date= (help)
- [8] “Humboldtian ideal”. www.universitypressscholarship.com. Retrieved 2014. Check date values in: |access-date= (help)
- [9] “Humboldt’s educational ideal and modern academic education” (PDF). www.drc.uns.ac.rs/presentations.

- [10] “freethinker”. /www.merriam-webster.com.
- [11] “free+thought”. dictionary.reference.com.
- [12] Bildung in Zeiten von Bologna?: Hochschulbildung aus der Sicht Studierender, Jennifer Ch. Müller Springer-Verlag, 28.06.2011, p. 41
- [13] George Peabody Gooch 1920, *Germany and the French Revolution*, pp. 107ff, quoted in “Wilhelm von Humboldts Rechtsphilosophie”, Jens Petersen, Walter de Gruyter, 2007,
- [14] “the-idea-of-a-university-today”. www.historyandpolicy.org.
- [15] “free-education-pipe-dream”. www.voxeurop.eu.
- [16] “wilhelm-humboldt”. plato.stanford.edu.
- [17] “Matematikcentrum, Lunds University about Humboldtian education ideal” (PDF). ctr.maths.lu.se.
- [18] The Western Time of Ancient History: Historiographical Encounters with the Greek and Roman Past Alexandra Lianeri Cambridge University Press, 31.03.2011, p. 121
- [19] Compare Anderson 2004
- [20] Rüegg, “Themes”, *A History of the University in Europe*, Vol. III, pp. 4–5
- [21] Hautamäki A. & Ståhle P. (2012): *Ristiriitainen tiedepoliittikkamme, Suuntana innovaatiot vai sivistys?* [The contradictory science policy. Towards innovation or civilization?]. Helsinki: Gaudeamus. The book also contains contributions by Ilkka Arminen, Riitta Hari, Sanna Lauslahti, Tarmo Lemola, Markku Mattila, Arto Mustajoki, Kaisa Oksanen and Saara Taalas.
- [22] Geiger R. L. (2004). *Knowledge and Money, Research Universities and the Paradox of the Marketplace*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [23] Berman E.P. (2012). *Creating the Market University, How Academic Science Became an Economic Engine*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- [24] “policy-paper/The Humboldtian ideal: a community of scholars and students”. health-equity.pitt.edu.
- [25] The Humboldtian ideal: a community of scholars and students/"The phrase 'idea of the university' was not invented by Newman, but goes back to a seminal period in modern university history, the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Prussia. Starting with the University of Berlin, founded in 1810, the 'Humboldtian' university became a model for the rest of Europe, and by 1914 German universities were generally admired as the best in the world. It was the Humboldtian model that shaped the research universities of the United States, which head the international league today."
- [26] “First of all, the Humboldtian ideal of the unity of research and teaching has been in practice scrapped in favour of a division of labour, the function of which is to produce more efficiently: patents and citations, in the case of research; highly skilled labourers, in the case of teaching. Second, this division of labour is necessary insofar as the university is seen primarily as an economic motor for the region (understood locally for smaller colleges and nationally for the major universities). The classical ideals of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*, the academic equivalents to free speech and civil rights in liberal democracies, are eroded as they constitute impediments to achieving the market ideals of efficiency in production and distribution of goods (goods here understood as more engineers and fewer humanists among students, for example; patents and technical applications instead of *Bildung* and basic research.)” “The Future of the European University: Liberal Democracy or Authoritarian Capitalism?” (PDF). www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se.
- [27] “vetenskap\_samhället/forskningspolitik/” (PDF). www.kva.se/. Archived from the original (PDF) on 2015-01-02.
- [28] Niinikoski M-L. (2011). “Innovation: Formation of a Policy Field and a Policy-making Practice”. Aalto University – Doctoral Dissertations 40/2011.
- [29] Konzertierte Aktion “Internationales Marketing für den Bildungs- und Forschungsstandort Deutschland” (KAIM) Newsletter 2001, quoted in University of Kassel, Veranstaltungsreihe des AStA, “Konsequenzen der Hochschulstrukturreform und der Internationalisierung von Bildung”, (Consequences of Structural Reform of Universities and of the Internationalisation of Education) 5.11.2 Ingrid Lohmann, Humboldts Bildungsideal vs. marktförmige Universität? (Humboldt’s Educational Ideal versus Market-Format University?)
- [30] “Can we think about the student as a public?“. https://educationandutopia.wordpress.com. External link in |publisher= (help)
- [31] “Bachelor of What, Master of Whom? The Humboldt Myth and Historical Transformations of Higher Education in German-Speaking Europe and the US” (PDF). www.ses.unam.mx.
- [32] “Freedom of teaching and learning (*Lehr- und Lernfreiheit*). Central here is that Humboldt was a liberal in the traditional sense. He believed in individual freedom, and therefore argued that students had as much right to choose their instructors and subjects as professors had to decide what and how they taught. This implied a radical break with any form of set curriculum. The unity of teaching and research (*Einheit von Lehre und Forschung*). For Humboldt and those who cite him, learning is a collaborative enterprise, in which ‘the professors are not there for the students, but rather both are there for science (and scholarship)” Humboldt, 1809/1990, p. 274). The unity of science and scholarship (*Einheit der Wissenschaft*). For Humboldt at least there was no fundamental distinction in principle between the natural sciences and the humanities, because the concept of *Wissenschaft* applies to both. The primacy of ‘pure’ science (*Bildung durch Wissenschaft*) over specialised professional training (*Ausbildung, Spezialschulmodell*). Humboldt and those who cite him claim to understand science and scholarship as processes of inquiry — ‘not a finished thing to be found, but

something unfinished and perpetually sought after', as he put it — not the discovery and repetition of things to be learned from textbooks, but an approach to learning, an attitude of mind, a skill and a capacity to think rather than specialised knowledge". (Humboldt, 1809/1990, p. 274)]

- [33] Bartsch, Michael (24 January 2007). "Geldsegen für Freiberg". *taz* (in German).
- [34] Möls, Christian (4 June 2007). "Millionen-Stifter Peter Krüger wird Ehrensensator der TU Bergakademie Freiberg" (in German). Informationsdienst Wissenschaft.

## 6 Further reading

- Baumgart, Franzjörg: *Zwischen Reform und Reaktion. Preußische Schulpolitik 1806–1859*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1990
- Humboldt und die Universität heute: Symposium des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Wissenschaft am 17. April 1985 im Wissenschaftszentrum Bonn / Bundesministerium für Bildung und Wissenschaft, Bonn
- Dietrich Benner, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Bildungstheorie*, Weinheim: Juventa, 2003
- Ulrike Büchner: *Arbeit und Individualisierung: zum Wandel des Verhältnisses von Arbeit, Erziehung und Persönlichkeitsentfaltung in Deutschland*, Weinheim / Basel: Beltz, 1982
- Helmholtz, Hermann von, *Über die Akademische Freiheit der deutschen Universitäten*, Rede beim Antritt des Rektorats an der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin am 15. Oktober 1877 gehalten, Berlin, Hirschwald, 1878, Repr. Universitätsbibliothek der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2005
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von: *Bildung und Sprache*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 5th ed. 1997
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von: *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 6th ed. 2002
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von: *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986, ISBN 978-3-15-001991-7
- Knoll, Joachim H. and Siebert, Horst: *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Politik und Bildung*, Heidelberg: Quelle u. Meyer, 1969
- Menze, Clemens: *Die Bildungsreform Wilhelm von Humboldts*, Hannover: Schroedel 1975
- Richter, Wilhelm: *Der Wandel des Bildungsgedankens. Die Brüder von Humboldt, das Zeitalter der Bildung und die Gegenwart*. (Historische

und Pädagogische Studien 2), Berlin: Colloquium-Verlag, 1971

- *Humboldts Albtraum - Der Bologna-Prozess und seine Folgen*. Konstanz: UVK, 2008. – ISBN 978-3-86764-129-6.
  - Tschong, Youngkun, *Charakter und Bildung: zur Grundlegung von Wilhelm von Humboldts bildungstheoretischem Denken*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1991
  - Wagner, Hans-Josef, *Die Aktualität der strukturalen Bildungstheorie Humboldts*, Weinheim: Dt. Studien-Verl., 1995
- ## 7 External links
- Germany and the Humboldtian Model R. D. Anderson DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198206606.003.0004 European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914 R. D. Anderson, 2004, ISBN 9780198206606, Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2010 DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198206606.001.0001
  - Neo-Humboldtian university – a model of 21st century university Antti Hautamäki Sustainable innovation blog

## 8 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

### 8.1 Text

- **Humboldtian model of higher education** *Source:* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humboldtian\\_model\\_of\\_higher\\_education?oldid=797383791](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humboldtian_model_of_higher_education?oldid=797383791) *Contributors:* Sca, Bgwhite, Nikkimaria, WOSlinker, Drmies, Hafspajen, P. S. Burton, Yobot, Yngvadottir, AnomieBOT, Omnipaedista, Gerda Arendt, NewsAndEventsGuy, Corinne, Onnoj, Serten II, Srednuas Lenoroc, InternetArchiveBot, Magic links bot and Anonymous: 5

### 8.2 Images

- **File:Berlin,\_Mitte,\_Unter\_den\_Linden,\_Denkmal\_Wilhelm\_von\_Humboldt\_01.jpg** *Source:* [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/Berlin%2C\\_Mitte%2C\\_Unter\\_den\\_Linden%2C\\_Denkmal\\_Wilhelm\\_von\\_Humboldt\\_01.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/Berlin%2C_Mitte%2C_Unter_den_Linden%2C_Denkmal_Wilhelm_von_Humboldt_01.jpg) *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Beek100
- **File:Berlin\_Universitaet\_um\_1850.jpg** *Source:* [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Berlin\\_Universitaet\\_um\\_1850.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Berlin_Universitaet_um_1850.jpg) *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Berlin und seine Kunstschätze, Payne Leipzig und Dresden, ca. 1850 *Original artist:* A. Carse
- **File:Humboldt-Universität\_zu\_Berlin\_04.JPG** *Source:* [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d8/Humboldt-Universit%C3%A4t\\_zu\\_Berlin\\_04.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d8/Humboldt-Universit%C3%A4t_zu_Berlin_04.JPG) *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* Own work *Original artist:* Dr. Bernd Gross
- **File:JuergenHabermas.jpg** *Source:* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4d/JuergenHabermas.jpg> *License:* CC BY-SA 3.0 *Contributors:* Transferred from en.wikipedia to Commons by ojs. *Original artist:* photographer: Wolfram Huke at en.wikipedia , <http://wolframhuke.de>

### 8.3 Content license

- Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0