

The Medieval University

Oliver Hadingham, Rikkyo University, Japan

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Abstract

The university first emerged in medieval Europe. In Italy, France, and England universities developed from the late eleventh century to take on the role of educating the young for future careers. In many ways, the medieval university appears quite unlike the university of today, with its numerous departments and huge student body. Yet in tracing the emergence of universities across Europe, in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford, certain parallels are discernible between old and new. In outlining the emergence of the medieval university as an institution and in understanding the lives of the early university masters and students, we can more fully appreciate the role of the university today.

Keywords: universitas, institutional development, curriculum, liberal arts

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Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century the number of universities has grown exponentially. Hundreds of new institutions have emerged throughout Europe and North America, some based on a recognized template, others taking a more novel approach. Universities have proliferated throughout the developing world too, in meeting the demand for new knowledge and skills vital to the new challenges of a changing world. Where once school leavers would choose between a handful of institutions and a handful of degree subjects, now they are faced with a bewildering number of choices of what exactly to study, where to study it, and even when to do so. Today's university experience is markedly different to that of even thirty years ago.

Yet despite the apparent newness of the contemporary university, the university as an institution goes back many centuries. Universities founded relatively recently, institutions that appear products of the modern world in so many ways, are shaped and inspired by what has gone before - often a long time before - and retain many of the features of the first universities. The earliest universities emerged in medieval Europe during the twelve and thirteenth centuries. Historical evidence is often patchy, making generalizations and a certain amount of conjecture unavoidable when discussing how they formed and the experience of the earliest professors and students. The legacy of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford, however, remains an important one that still informs contemporary notions of the university, of what it does and should provide, and also the experience of those within it.

Monastery schools and cathedral schools

Monastery schools and cathedral schools, offering a form of education to relatively small numbers, were an established feature of medieval society. Not much written evidence exists about these schools as neither masters nor students recorded much; it was still very much an oral culture (Wei, 2012, p. 8). Students were not drawn from the aristocratic elite, who were taught, if they were at all, at home by tutors in the arts of war and government. School students were largely children of wealthy merchant families or prominent families in cities, or of prominent figures in the church. The purpose of such 'further' education (i.e. beyond that offered by parents themselves) was to develop in their children the knowledge, skills, and aptitude needed to become a churchman, or increasingly as medieval populations rose, to find work in the fledging state administration emerging at the time in towns, cities and regions. Cathedral schools had one main master, with pupils often drawn to the school by the reputation of the master. Monks taught at monastery schools, but there were also a number of itinerant teachers at this time moving from temporary posts at different schools.

Pupils were taught a curriculum based on the seven liberal arts: the *trivium* (grammar, dialectic, rhetoric), and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). This curriculum, while still steeped in the teachings of the church, drew increasingly on ancient world thinking, Aristotelian logic was to take a prominent part in the curriculum; classical ideas had been recently rediscovered in Europe thanks to the efforts of Islamic scholars in

translating and transmitting them throughout Christendom.¹ This translation movement started in the twelve century, but the texts were not widely used until the thirteenth century. Aristotle's work was translated from the Greek, in some cases from Arabic, to Latin. James of Venice was a prominent translator of Aristotle from 1130-1150; William of Moerbeke helped supply fairly accurate Latin translations by 1286 (Marenbon, 2016, p. 25). Crucially, Aristotelian logic enabled scholars to more rigorously subject texts to analysis. The need to interpret a text in the light of existing knowledge emerged. Out of this academic discourse gradually grew between scholars.

The purpose of such schools for the monastery or cathedral running them was the desire to instruct the young to live a virtuous life under God. A life of virtue was still strongly and almost exclusively rooted in faith in the twelve century. Yet emerging was the idea that monastic values could co-exist with study, both were means through which virtue was strived for. Hugh of Saint Victor was the first to suggest that to learn, to think about, and to interpret knowledge was a means to attain virtue (Wei, 2012, p. 3). Scholarship was virtuous, in and of itself.

The school system as it existed in the early medieval period did not offer much security to the masters. Scholarly life was incredibly nomadic, with masters having to move from town to town to find employment. No institutional structure existed and the market was highly competitive (Wei, 2012, p. 12). Teaching was an unstable occupation involving many risks. The idea of tenure did not exist; masters were employed temporarily, relying on a stream of students for income from fees paid by their parents or patron. Masters had to ensure they were popular with those they taught: dissatisfied students moved elsewhere, and celebrated masters drew students from afar. Those students hoping to become masters themselves had to compete with their masters for pupils. The instability, conflict, and competitiveness were vital in building an awareness of both masters and students as groups with clear identities (Wei, 2012, p. 51). As Wei notes, the "disorderly sense of adventure and competition gave both masters and students a strong sense of themselves as a new and distinct social group" (ibid.). This sense proved instrumental in the gradual emergence of places of higher learning that became known eventually as universities.

Studia Generalia

Scholars gradually organised themselves collectively into corporations or guilds to counter the insecurity they faced, and through this gained formal legal rights and also privileges from kings, emperors and popes. In 1155, for example, Frederick I gave scholars in Italy a distinct legal position through the 'Authentica Habita' decree. The increasing involvement of political powers was important in the development of a clearer social (and legal) identity of scholars. It is also a sign that as medieval society became more complex, there was a greater need for an educated populace. This was not an endorsement of mass education, as we would now

¹ The basis of higher learning in the Islamic world at this time was one centred on the teacher-student relationship, one without any institutional foundation. The closest thing to a university was the *Madrasas*, set up principally for the study of Islamic law, but also incorporating other subjects. While sharing certain features with the early European universities, crucially, *Madrasas* did not possess the autonomy or legal collective identity of the early universities in Europe.

understand it, but a realization that just as medieval states needed armies, they also needed growing ranks of ‘unarmed soldiery’ to administer the state and bring prestige to their ruler (Catto, 1996).

A more legally defined group of scholars did not make a university quite yet. Also important in the move towards the foundation of universities was greater pedagogical agreement among scholars. The desirability of a common basic grounding in dialectic and syllogistic reasoning was by the twelve century fairly well established across Europe. Schools were increasingly using the same set texts. This helped define further the method of teaching, giving structure and an overarching framework for students to pursue their studies. Masters gained a clear point of reference for their own scholarship as certain texts became more widely accepted. One consequence was more debate among learned men as they increasingly shared common points of reference (Ferruolo, 1985). Set texts also provided teachers with a more rigorous and focused curriculum to teach (Wei, 2012, p. 48), and more distinct fields of study emerged, the first move towards clearer academic disciplines (Evans, 1980, p. 27-56).

The word *universitas* refers simply to any collective body with legal rights, more as a trade guild is generally understood. As Wei points out, closer to the reality of these proto-universities is the idea of *studia generalia* (general places of learning). With scholars now enjoying a firmer group identity, students - and other masters - were attracted from across Europe, drawn by the awareness that such places taught advanced subjects like law, theology, medicine and the arts (Wei, 2012, p. 88). Masters were attracted by the employment opportunities, but also the desire to further their scholarship within such communities of scholars. Students were themselves attracted by the idea of a centre of learning for a particular subject. Bologna quickly established a reputation for the study of law, Paris for the liberal arts.

The first universities

The process of development was never uniform. The earliest universities – Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167) – emerged for different reasons. Bologna had a student-led development and identity. Bologna drew a great number of students from afar, attracted to it as a centre for the study of civil law. Students formed together for protection into ‘nations’, loosely reflecting their origins. Larger bodies also formed comprising law students from other Italian towns (*universitas citamonanorum*) and for those students originating north of the Alps (*universitas ultramontaneorum*). As the power of students in Bologna grew due to the increasing number drawn to the town to study, they became more aware of their importance to the town and threatened to leave if they were not kept happy. This would result in a huge loss of revenue, which, together with pressure from papal authorities, meant Bologna sought compromise with the students (Wei, 2012, p. 91).

In 1189 masters were required to swear they would not leave the town to teach elsewhere. The masters were mostly natives of Bologna and did not feel the need to organize collectively as being Bologna citizens they already enjoyed rights. Pope Honorius II decreed in 1219 that the archbishop of Bologna should bestow a licence to teach. Masters were dependent on fees paid by students. Masters could not leave the town without the permission of the rector and the

students. They were fined if late for class or their class ran over the designated time allowed. Masters could also expect fines if they failed to cover the required syllabus by a given date, or if they failed to attract more than five students to their lectures. In addition, four students were elected to monitor a master's performance in his role, with each master not knowing which students were keeping tabs as he carried out his duties. By the end of the 13th century salaried lectureships were established, placing the town in a position of power over the student bodies, a movement much fought for in curtailing the financial clout of Bologna students.

Paris, unlike Bologna, gained its momentum as a university from its masters, developing an identity through them (Anderson, 2006, p. 1). The early 12th century the cathedral of Notre Dame drew students from afar to its liberal arts curriculum. Other schools in Paris also attracted students and teachers of repute from across Europe. In the second half of the 12th century masters in Paris began to organise collectively as most were not native to Paris so did not possess the legal rights of local people. Most masters in Paris, unlike their counterparts in Bologna, were younger and held church benefices providing extra income. This meant they were not so dependent on student fees as masters elsewhere. Greater impetus towards the establishment of a university in Paris was provided by conflict between the town and the schools. In 1200 a German student studying in Paris was overcharged for wine. The inn in which he was drinking was smashed up and the innkeeper attacked. The innkeeper approached the royal provost of Paris, and a hostel accommodating German students was attacked by townspeople, and some students were killed in the process. Masters in Paris went on strike. The king supported the masters, and the provost and his supporters were given life sentences. A charter was established that gave masters a special legal status vis-à-vis the townspeople and royal officials. The charter set out certain conditions that ought to govern 'town and gown' relations, chiefly the royal provost and town officials could not arrest scholars nor seize their possessions. The provost was required to declare an oath to abide by the charter, as were the townspeople. Through this conflict, masters and students had come together and won certain privileges and been recognized as a defined group.

While the statutes established the university in Paris as a legal corporation, and bestowed on the university a degree of autonomy to govern itself and enter into legal arrangements with others. Paris developed a clearer identity too. Its privileges and activities were defined, as were its relations between the university and the chancellor and the townspeople. The university as a physical institution did not yet emerge. Classrooms and accommodation was still rented at this stage of development. Most university buildings date from the early modern period; what medieval buildings there were, and that remain, are few and far between: Merton College, Oxford, the best example.

Yet Paris did develop an institutional shape. The faculty of arts comprised about two thirds of the university, with over 100 masters (Wei, 2012, p.113). Other faculties had smaller teaching staff of around 10-16 masters. The size of the arts faculty meant that effectively the head of the faculty was seen as the head of the university. The university at Paris emerged out of a collection of colleges, as Oxford and Cambridge were to. The early colleges were charitable foundations that offered accommodation and grants to poor scholars; for instance, College des Dix-Huit (1180) was founded by an Englishman returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy

Land. College de Sorbonne (1257) provided theology students with a library and extra revision classes during exam periods.

Oxford followed the Paris collegiate model of development, but gained its identity through royal impetus: when Henry VI banned English students from pursuing their studies in Paris. Oxford, and later Cambridge, were able to occupy a valuable space between the monarch and the church in certain disputes, and were as a consequence favoured by the king. Early students at Oxford lodged in rented accommodation, so called halls. The founders of the early Oxford colleges made substantial endowments of land, as well as financial endowments used to pay for buildings, scholarships and communal worship. New College, Oxford (1379) was founded by bishop of Winchester, William Wykeham, at the same time as Winchester School. Winchester students proceeded to New College after their school years were spent. Eton College and King's College were co-founded by Henry VI in 1440 with the same understanding that students would move on to King's for higher learning. (Indeed, it was not until the mid-Victorian era that non-Etonians were admitted to King's College.) The school to university link was smoothed further by the foundation of grammar schools from the late middle ages, which taught the Latin vital to a university education (Anderson, 2006, p. 3).

The next universities to emerge were the result of migrations of masters and students after conflicts with the local authorities (Cambridge, 1209-14, formed by departing Oxford scholars and students; Padua, from Bologna, 1222; Orleans and Angers, founded after a dispute at university of Paris, 1229-31). Secular and ecclesiastical authorities were behind the founding of universities such as Naples (1224) and Toulouse (1229). The next wave of major university founding was in the mid- to late fourteenth century: Prague (1347-78), Krakow (1364), Vienna (1365), and Heidelberg (1386). The Scottish universities followed in the 15th century: St Andrews (1410-1411), Glasgow (1451), and then King's College, Aberdeen (1495). Again, the needs of society and the state are an ever-present influence at this stage as in earlier stages. As Hastings Rashdall states, the increasing numbers of universities founded in the 14th and 15th centuries was overwhelmingly down to "a direct demand for highly educated lawyers and administrators." (2010, p. 456).

Learning

A statute of 1215, drawn up by papal authorities in Paris, established the conditions for granting of a licence to teach and for how the arts should be taught:

No one shall lecture in the arts at Paris before he is twenty-one years of age, and he shall have heard lectures for at least six years before he begins to lecture, and he shall promise to lecture for two years, unless a reasonable cause prevents, which he ought to prove publicly or before examiners. He shall not be stained by any infamy (as cited in Wei, 2012, p.93-94).

The declaration of standards was important in addressing oft-heard complaints about masters that were too young, too uninformed, and too degenerate. The chancellor's power over masters was strictly circumscribed, but the series of statutes of 1215 did establish a basic

institutional framework in which masters taught, in addition to the giving the university shape as a legal corporation.

Set texts were established for certain subjects. Widely used set texts helped define method and academic disciplines (Wei, p.48). Reverence for the text went to the heart of masters' pedagogy, which served also to nurture debate among scholars. The medieval reading lists were short, with students not encouraged to read widely. A subject's key texts were focused on and students were required to develop an intimate knowledge of them. Students studied the text and certain commentaries under the guidance of their master. They were then tested orally, in the belief that this method best developed students' analytical skills. Masters were not concerned with a student's ability to form original ideas. A solid grounding in use of students' mental faculties was the goal.

The early university curriculum was not focused solely on training students for the priesthood, even if theology featured heavily. Attending lectures in canon law, for example, was something that could serve as a career launch pad as the church began to occupy a more central position in medieval society. Indeed, even though Aristotelian logic was the favored method in use at medieval university lectures, religious thought remained as yet unchallenged. Masters would make clear distinctions between reason-based teaching and Christian doctrine (Marenbon, 2016, p.29). Aristotle prevailed, but an Aristotle interpreted by Christian scholars.

Students were to submit to the authority of a particular master, with masters responsible for the group of students clustering around them. This meant students jostling for the favour of their master, rather than the other way around with masters competing for students, as in the earlier school system.

Lectures were of two types: ordinary and extraordinary or cursory. Masters gave ordinary lectures at fixed days and times, usually the mornings. Ordinary lectures provided a full account of a text, as well as an account of the commentators' views on the text. It is important to note that the medieval university was very much a teaching institution rather than an early version of the modern research institution. Limited scope was given for masters to question received thinking and pursue other lines of enquiry (Cobban, 1999, p. 172). The Renaissance was many years hence. Extraordinary lectures were given on texts falling outside the official syllabus (Cobban, 1999, p. 172). Extraordinary lectures *ad cursum* (general summaries) were usually given by bachelors to train those wanting to pursue an academic career. Cursory lectures may be a better term for this type of lecture as they were general of a less difficult nature, offering an overview of a text without the need to outline and grapple with the commentary around it.

Disputations were an adversarial debate, taking place in public. One or two bachelors would defend the opinion under debate, with other bachelors or the residing master opposing the issue. The master had responsibility to sum up the debate and reach a ruling on the question. Extraordinary disputations were often undertaken for the master's own students and were not formal or public occasions. Other extraordinary disputations were occasions for more free debate between scholars, and served as opportunities to air new lines of thought (Cobban, 1999, p. 175).

The medieval student

The early university students did not reside in today's college-owned accommodation. Most rented houses with other students or lodged with masters or townspeople, only later did a college system similar to that of Paris emerge at Oxford and Cambridge, which took more of a paternal role in the student's university life. This made most students heavily dependent on families to fund their studies. The typical medieval university student was fifteen or sixteen years of age up until the 17th century, when ages rose gradually and approached the age of most college freshmen now (Anderson, 2006, p. 3).

While it is difficult to generalize about medieval students across Europe, the letters and diaries that have survived do illuminate the preoccupations of students then, chief among them: money. Students would write to parents, sometimes brothers, uncles, even ecclesiastical benefactors asking for money. Here is an example of a letter written by a student to his father:

This is to inform you that I am studying at Oxford with the greatest diligence, but the matter of money stands greatly in the way of my promotion, as it is now two months since I spent the last of what you sent me. The city is expensive and makes many demands; I have to rent lodgings, buy necessaries, and provide for many other things which I cannot now specify. Wherefore I respectfully beg your paternity that by the prompting some of divine pity you may assist me, so that I may be able to complete what I have well begun. (as cited in Haskins, 1957, pp. 77-78).

The cost of living was indeed high for students, as before colleges developed which would house and feed students. This did not stop some students from explaining their need for extra funds due to hard winters, sieges, crop failures, even that the last money sent by the patron never reached them as the messenger was robbed.

The money provided by benefactors went on the usual things: board and lodgings, drink, entertainment (however loosely defined). Medieval students could match today's students in the debauchery stakes, perhaps even outdo them. Students of the medieval period rioted periodically, misbehaved commonly, studied occasionally.

And then, as now, parents were eager to scold their profligate offspring. Here is a letter from a father.

I have recently discovered that you live dissolutely and slothfully, preferring license to restraint and play to work and strumming a guitar while others are at their studies, whence it happens that you have read but one volume of law while your industrious companions have read several. Wherefore I have decided to exhort you herewith to repent utterly of your dissolute and careless ways, that you may no longer be called a waster and your shame may be turned to good repute. (as cited in Haskins, 1957, pp. 79-80)

Space should also be given for those students pursuing their studies with the utmost seriousness. Here is a letter from two boys to their parents.

This is to inform you that, by divine mercy, we are living in good health in the city of Orleans and are devoting ourselves wholly to study, mindful to the words of Cato, 'To know anything is praiseworthy.' We occupy a good dwelling, next door but one to the schools and marketplace, so that we can go to school every day without wetting our feet. We have also good companions in the house with us, we'll advanced in their studies and of excellent habits - an advantage which we will appreciate. For as the Psalmist says, 'With an upright man thou whilst show thyself upright.' (as cited in Haskins, 1957, pp.80-81)

The final exams were hard, but there was a strong and clear vocational incentive to pass them. Enhancing one's career prospects remains a key reason for attending university; university students of the medieval period learnt key communication and recording skills that would allow them to secure jobs that involved drafting letters, writing sermons, and maintaining archives (Rubin, 2014, p. 119). We should not, however, discount the desire for knowledge that many students had. Haskins maintains that there was a distinct 'religion of learning' emerging at the early universities (1957, p. 91), with students drawn to a university to study under a reputed authority, their master.

Conclusion

The early universities emerged out of the need to establish a clear professional identity among scholars. The realization that scholars shared intellectual methods also had a role in a vocational consciousness among them. Higher education became a means of social advancement, with students gathering at centres of learning where scholars resided.

Today's universities are quite different to the early universities. The size, nature and role of universities now would shock someone of the medieval period. There were no sports stadium, no safe rooms, and no multi-floor university libraries. But this is not to say that they are completely different, that no parallels exist; however faint or tenuous, the early universities are recognizably universities, as we understand the term. Students were as unruly and lazy or as hard working as now; the path to becoming a scholar was markedly similar to what it is today; and the university carved out an institutional basis that modern universities have built on. And, just as universities today strive to equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly globalized world, medieval universities met the demand of an increasingly expanding state for administrators and lawyers, as medieval society became more complex and medieval populations grew. The clamour of young people for the 'earning power' a university degree provides is nothing new, nor is the idea of the humanizing mission of higher education. The early universities tried to cultivate the inquiring mind, even though the authority of the Church held sway over such institutions and what went on within them. Despite this, reason-based teaching did eventually wriggle free from the confines of Christian doctrine, but it took centuries. It is mistaken to think of the early universities as liberal

institutions, where free inquiry took place, and the study of man was man. Yet crucially, the idea that acquiring knowledge was virtuous, and that the educated person was one informed about and engaged with the world around them, are not strictly modern inventions. However faintly, such ideas were discernible at those fledgling institutions of the medieval period that came to be called universities.

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