**Lecture 4**

**The History of Universities**

Uh, good morning everybody. Um, today’s lecture is going to be looking at where the modern university came from. Now, of course, the modern university is a research-driven institution; some of you will know that REF2014 is coming up. And you’re all at university, you know that a university is something with buildings and administration and it has rules and regulations and it has a big library, like our library up the road; not only an analogue one but also a digital one. It’s got coursework, it’s got exams. Um, all these structures that you are used to studying under. And you know, of course, that to be a successful lecturer, you need to be publishing things, writing things ... um ... and getting them out as books and as papers.

Now, that’s a modern university, but it has evolved from really rather different origins. And it’s these really rather different origins that I’m going to talk to you about today. So, I’m going to be addressing two questions. First of all, where did the modern university come from? And second of all, how was student life different for the medieval students, ... um ... who were the first people studying at institutions like the University of Paris, Bologna, and even places like here at Glasgow.

So, this lecture has five key things I’m going to look at. First of all, I’m very briefly going to tell you about what I mean by medieval history, because you need some parameters for this topic. I’m going to give you some quick background on the early history of western universities and then I’m going to turn to look a bit at medieval student life. And I’m going to focus in particular on one university and I’m going to tell you a little bit more about the University of Paris. And the final thing I’m going to look at is the medieval curriculum and how teaching was done in a medieval university.

And what we’ll find, I hope, is that although there are some similarities, there are a great deal of differences between then and now.

So, before we get started, just a quick ... uh ... overview of what I mean by medieval. Um, you might have heard the word ‘The Dark Ages’, as a historian, we don’t like those, that as a term ... um ... or the Middle Ages. Um, the period that we’re talking about really is from around the fall of Rome, about 476, to around the end of the Hundred Years War in 1453. Different scholars use different dates, but those are common ones that are used. So, really long time period, a thousand years more and ... uh ... so we split it into phases, the Early Middle Ages, the High and the Late Middle Ages, and the High Midle Ages are a period that are going to be quite important to us as we explore this topic from around the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth centuries.

Now, as a historian, I have to find out about the past from somewhere, and I find out about the past from the sources that were made at the time. Primary sources are the tools of the historian, as you should know. Um, but the primary sources that we have available as medievalists are rather more limited and perhaps unusual than those that you have available as perhaps modern historians.

So, you can see on the slide I’ve put up a variety of pictures of kinds of sources we might use. I’ve got up a picture, for example, of the Bayeux Tapestry. I’ve got up a picture of a seal. A seal was something that was used to confirm a document, so a bit like a signature. I’ve got up a picture that’s an illustration from a medical text showing how to deal with fistulas. I’ve got up a picture of Chartres Cathedral, a huge building, what does that tell us? Well it tells us what was important to medieval people. They built their big permanent structures in— on a— a God. So, we have slightly different sources to the ones you might be used to using. We also have rather fewer sources then so we have to use them a bit more cleverly. We’ll be coming back to sources and the sources we have available to think about student life later in the lecture.

I’d like to turn to thinking about, broadly, how … uh … the modern university emerged. And I’m going to go right the way back to the classical inheritance of Graeco-Rome education— Graeco-Roman education, sorry. Now … um … classical learning was incredibly sophisticated. And … um … there were many schools which … uh … were available to … uh … men, obviously, but a wide range of men in the Empire. In 70 AD, the Emperor Vespasian even established some professorships— some chairs, of Greek and Latin, because he recognized the importance of a well-educated population to the administration of the Empire.

Now I bring this up because the way that learning was done in the classical world, through a process of dialectic, is still really important in the way that we create knowledge today. Dialectic - quite a tricky word. Um, dialectic basically means establishing something as correct, or true, through a dialogue between people who hold different opinions on it. So they are using reasoning to try and establish the— the truth on a subject.

Some of these subjects continue to have resonance, even in the modern day, which started off as classical debates. Um, a famous one, which … uh … links classical thinkers with modern philosophers, is the nature of universals. By universals, I mean things like … uh … is goodness something you can only see in individual acts of being good? Or is goodness something that exists in the abstract? Can we decide that something is good or bad without having an example of it? Now, that’s something that we still discuss today but … um … was the debate which … uh … separated the thinking of Plato from his student, Aristotle.

Classical inheritance had a bigger impact on the medieval university than it maybe does directly on the modern university, so let us jump forward a little bit. After the fall of Rome ... um ... there was a period of relative chaos in Europe. And amidst this relative chaos there was a degree of intellectual stagnation. Now this is debated between scholars how serious this was. There certainly was some retention of classical learning ... um ... in—particularly in the monastic houses. But even through the seventh, eighth, nineth, tenth centuries, schools were mainly restricted to the monasteries and what they studied was mainly restricted to liturgy. Liturgy ... um ... the study of how to express worship of God. So, there wasn’t that big a range of things being considered intellectually.

This does change in the nineth century ... um ... when Charlemagne in 800 ... uh ... gets himself crowned emperor. And this sparks off the Carolingian renaissance, a short period of intellectual revival and it— it involves setting up schools. Um, he sets up a school at the palace under the auspices of ... um ... an important ... uh ... British scholar called Alcuin ... um ... and all free men are obliged to send their sons to school. The Carolingian renaissance doesn’t particulrly last but it does mark the start of a more settled Europe. And in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, we start getting schools popping up all over Europe. You get schools popping up in cathedrals, in particular, and also urban schools in towns. Um, these schools are ... uh ... attracting young men of wealth and they offer ... um ... possibility of employment, for example, at the imperial court.

Now, that’s a very, very brief overview of well over two—twelve hundred years. And I wanted to do that very briefly to lay the foundations of what I really ... uh ... wanted to focus on which is the twelfth century intellectual revival, which is when we get the first universities as we know them today. The first universities are the University of Bologna in the south of Europe, and the University of Paris in the north.

So, what’s so special about the twelfth century? The twelfth century is a really interesting period. All sorts of things happen. By the twelfth century there are many kind— many raids happening in Europe from all sorts of groups: the Vikings, the Magyars, the Muslims. All the edge of Europe ... um ... basically ended. And with peace came the opportunity for economic prosperity and trade. When you get trade you get the need for towns, when you get towns with trade, you get the need for literacy. And this is all in the legacy of what Charlemagne had set up and so the twelfth century is a new period of stability that allows intellectual life to start to flourish. There’s also contact with ... um ... other cultures, particularly Islam and Byzantium, through the Crusades, but also through trading. And a lot of knowledge have been preserved in these cultures where it had been lost in western Europe.

One of the things that’s really interesting about the twelfth century that you might want to go and find out a little bit more about yourself is that it marks the start of a movement from the wr— the spoken word to the written word as authoritative. Now this is true in all sorts of fields including, for example, economic transactions, but it is true in education as well. A scholar called Stephen Jaeger wrote a really interesting book called *The Envy of Angels*. In which he argues that this is the period when you start to get the move from ... uh ... charismatic pedagogy, and by that he means the presence of a teacher like myself ... uh ... projecting the force of charisma onto the students and that was how they learnt. And there’s a move from that being the source of authority to books being the source of authority. And it happens very gradually as a very interesting idea. All of this is part of a huge social economic religious change that marks the twelfth century. So, that’s the context for the start, the foundation of modern universities.

The word university didn’t actually originally mean anything like the establishment in which you are now studying. Originally, university just referred to a group of men that had got together like a guild. Um, and in fact the term that would be more accurately used of medieval universities would be a studium generale, is a thirteenth century term ... um ... which means a craft guild of learning ... uh ... a place where people do study in general.

Universities started off with quite free and easy systems and the twelfth century they have a lot of flexibility. We’re going to come back to that when we think about ... um ... uh ... student life. Gradually over the thirteenth century and the fourteenth century and so on, they became more and more regularized. Kings and bishops started to see that sponsoring a university might quite be a good thing, it might do a lot for their reputation, it might also ... uh ... give them a great deal of influence.

Really in 1200 though, there’s only a few institutions that could even really aspire to this fancy titles, studium generale, maybe Bologna, Paris, Oxford, maybe Salerno but there was quite a lot of sc—schools, like those cathedral schools I was talking about before which were on their way to becoming general establishments of learning but weren’t there yet. Some studium generale also specialized in different disciplines. So, Montpellier, for example, became very famous for its medical tuition.

I’ve named a couple of universities and I‘ve put up on the overhead a list of some of the early universities to be established. The first two I’ve already mentioned, Bologna and Paris. Now, the two dates that we’ve got there, 1088 and 1150 are very approximate. As I say, the starting of a university in these early days was a very free and easy system. It was really a group of students and a group of teachers broadly in the same place. Now, also in the twelfth century and early thirteenth century, you get the foundation of Oxford and Cambridge. But you will notice that the remaining UK universities are very far down this list. We are well into the fifteenth century before we get the foundation of places like St Andrews and Glasgow, and ... um ... into the sixteenth century for many of the other universities that we think of now as ancient universities.

How these universities came about, the structures that they used, have been studied by another scholar called Alan Cobban, a very interesting book called *The Medieval University*, and he suggested that the way that universities emerged followed a variety of different archetypes. And I want to draw out two of them that relate to Bolgna in south Europe and Paris in north Europe.

Now, Bologna was dominated by students. Students were really calling the shots in Bologna. They tended to be an older group of folk and they tended to be trying to get some kind of professional qualification, something like law or medicine to allow them to have a good career. And when they moved to be near the masters who were teaching them in the area, they wanted affordable lodgings, good food and so on and they wanted a good education. Now, because university didn’t have any set buildings, or any set place to be, they had a lot of bargaining power. And they got together and did bargain to get good rates with the townspeople, and also good rules that they ... uh ... were happy with—with the masters, so they were able to enforce certain rules about how far a master could travel without permission, for example. Um, in response, the masters themselves formed a guild and started acquiring things like ... um ... a certain level of attainment from their students. But the way Bologna emerged was very student-dominated. And the idea of a rector, you will know that our univeristy too has a rector, as somebody who represents the students and is the head of senate ... um ... comes out of this sort of a model.

Now, Paris in the north, the trend is really quite the other way round. The power lies with the masters, the teachers of this ad hoc community. Students going to Paris tended to be a little younger and less mature ... uh ... perhaps as young as fourteen. And they didn’t have the same clear life goals necessarily. So it was quite easy for masters to be in a dominant position over their younger students who tended to be preparing, for example, for a life in the church. So masters were able to determine things like what students were able to wear, what their curriculum would involve and so on. There were other models as well and ... uh ... Alan Cobban’s book talks about these. You might want to explore them in a bit more detail.

By the fourteenth and fifteenth century, these models have ... uh ... consolidated into a university more like you would recognize today. And, of course, by then masters were paid an academic salary so there was no more possibility for students to control what they could and couldn’t learn. Because, of course, in the early days, masters depended on money coming in from their students directly in fees.

So, that’s my framework of how universities emerged. What I’d like to turn to now is how student life was like in these early universities. So what was life like as a medieval student? Well, some of the differences have already become apparent. You didn’t have a set building that you studied in. You travelled to listen to the ideas and thinking of different masters. Students could travel all over Europe, many students did. Um, John of Salisbury, for example, managed to be a student for many, many years … uh … travelling to different parts of Europe.

Students would go into university much younger than you guys, about 14, 15 years old. So what their— their foundational knowledge would be much lower than we would expect here at university today. Books were really expensive. There was no grand library for students to go and do research in. They were very dependent on what they were taught by their master. Students were very unlikely to own books and masters probably only owned a few books. So communication did depend on an oral interaction. All the teaching was in Latin and that meant that students could confidently travel all over Europe to hear the best lectures. It also meant, of course, that education was an elite activity. It required you not only to have money and to have the free time to be travelling, but also to have the language skills to allow you to do that.

Of course, it was also a very male-dominated environment. In fact, quite a misogynistic environment probably, of wine, women and song. And certainly, these young and potentially hot-headed scholars got themselves into trouble more than once. We have quite a lot of records of fights breaking out between students and people living in the town. They’re called ‘town and gown riots’ and the most famous one is the St Scholastica Day Riot in Oxford in 1355, when 63 scholars and 30 locals died in a— a very large bout of fisty-cuffs. Another thing that was very expensive was candles. So … um … classes would start with the light. I don’t know how much it appeals to you, to think that you might have to start class at 5 a.m. I’m certainly glad that I don’t have to start lecturing at that time.

Now, I said I was going to come back to how we know that student life was like that. Because we have sources but they are not the level of records that we have today. Universities did not even have records in the same way because they were not organized, cohered institutions, certainly not in their very early years. So what sorts of things do we have? Well, we have a variety of different sources that we can use to piece things together.

One of the things that we have is early, legal documents about the university. So, a particularly notable example of this is the statutes for Paris University, which were … um … issued by Papal Bal— … uh … Papal Commission in 1215. Um, and these are a set of rules that set out all sorts of things about university life. What you’ll notice about them is that it’s much more about the pragmatics of life than a modern university document, which probably has all sorts of … uh … good intentioned goals but they’ll be really quite abstract. These statues— statutes reflect a very small community in which scholars and student— sorry, scholars and masters really knew each other well. So, for example, in these statutes, if … uh … one of the students die, half of the masters in the university would go to their funeral. And if a master died, everybody would go. Of course, this seems a little strange to us but if you bear in mind the St Scholastica Day riots that I was mentioning earlier, you might realize that the risk of dying in the medieval period was somewhat higher than it is today.

The statutes also set out things like what texts would be studied. Which texts of Aristotle, for example, could and could not be studied. Very controversial. Um, they set out rules about who could be a master. They said that nobody was allowed to be a lecturer before they were twenty years old, and they must have studied for six years by then. Of course nowadays, becoming a y— a lecturer by twenty years old is not very realistic. However, if you were lecturing in … uh … theology you would need to have studied for eight years and be at least thirty five years old, which tells us something, of course, about which diciplines they priotitized.

We also have some slightly more fun documents ... um ... we have accounts of student life written by scholars that were there at the time. For example, Jacques de Vitry who went on to be a cardinal and a bishop in France ... um ... wrote about his time at the University of Paris and said with ... um ... an amusing degree of ... uh ... consternation, that students wrangled and disputed, not merely about the various sects of subdiscussion but the differences between countries also caused dissension, hatred and animosity. So, it seems that ... um ... this ... uh ... culture of fisty-cuffs is even recorded in the writings of quite illustrious ... um ... figures who had studied.

We also have some student songs. Um, the best known one is usually called Gaudeamus Igitur and it’s sung quite commonly at lots of university graduations. You might sing it at your graduation. Its real title isn’t really Gaudeamus Igitur; that’s the first two words of the song. Um, it’s really called ‘On the Briefness of Life’. And this is a song which taught—which sings very enthusiastically about ... uh ... the teachers and the university life .. uh ... and that we should long live the academy and recommending ... uh ... study. However, it also talks about pretty maidens who are easy and beautiful on the eye ... um ... and how much fun it is to spend time with them.

Finally, we also have pictures of student life; illustrations in various texts. I’ve put one of them up on the overhead. And you can see that ... uh ... we have a set up very much like the set up here today. The ... uh ... person at the podium certainly isn’t a woman, but the students, as you can see, are sitting, taking notes and listening to a lecture. As you can also see, there are some of them taking notes like I can see some of you are taking notes, and some of them not really paying attention, which is not unfamiliar to me as a lecturer either. So, those are the sort of sources that as a historian I use to help me understand what student life was like and what university was like in those early days of the foundings of establishments like Bologna, Paris.

And I said I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about the University of Paris, because the University of Paris is a fascinating institution, and if not an archetype of what a university was like, certainly one of the most interesting and one of the ones we know the most about. Now, in the twelfth century, Paris became the place to go to learn. It had everything you could possibly want and it attracted lots and lots of masters and students.

It did this because of a variety of factors. One of them was that there were already lots of schools in Paris. You remember I spoke as I said about the establishment of cathedral schools and urban schools. Paris had them popping up all over the place. There were lots and lots of schools in the vicinity of Paris. Paris itself had undergone rapid growth recently, and ... um ... Paris also had an atmosphere which allowed quite free and easy access between masters and students. Now, this was like a snowball; the more students went to Paris, the more masters felt that Paris was the place to teach. But, of course, if all the best masters were in Paris, then Paris was going to attract the students to study there. Also, Paris offered good food and wine, as we might expect of France. It had good lodgings and of course, if all your friends from home were going to study in Paris, then that would make it even more attractive place to go.

By the 1140s, Paris has masters on all manners of subjects. And probably the most famous of those masters was a scholar called Peter Abelard. If you want to understand medieval learning, you really must go and find out more about Peter Abelard. He’s a fascinating character. He wrote ... uh ... extensively and potentially hele— heretically. The church perceived it to be heretically on ... uh ... all sorts of aspects of philosophy. He also wrote ... um ... a biography of his own life, which is both a fascinating and enjoyable read. When Abelard, Abelard had a very high opinion of his own abilities, perhaps rightly, but when Abelard wanted to show what a great scholar he was, it was to Paris that he went. And, of course, not only the once but— but several times because he not only was a great scholar and thinker, but also had a great art for not making friends and certainly upset some of the other masters that were in Paris.

So, we’ve seen what university like— life was like, in terms of wine, women and song, in terms of where you might go, you’d want to go to Paris. But once you went there, what did you do? Did you get to study history and geology and physics and ... um ... all the disciplines of the modern university? Well, no. No, you didn’t. Very few of the modern disciplines existed. This is where we look back to that classical inheritance that I started the lecture with. The curriculum in the medieval university came out of the classical curriculum. When the student went to university, they had to complete at least two levels of study, potentialy three levels of study, if they wanted to do a professional qualification.

The first thing that they studied was three subjects called the trivium—trivium three. They were grammar, logic and rhetoric. These are basically the skills of how to learn. Grammar is about language skills and the mechanics of writing; how to express yourself. Logic is about reasoning and thinking through problems. And rhetoric, or dialectic, or debate, any of these words, is about engaging with other people to try and persuade them to your viewpoint using reasoned argument and defending your own argument.

Now, these skills continue to underpin our curriculum today, and our expectations of students today. We don’t teach them as specific subjects any more. Once a student had done those three subjects they could then move on to the quadrivium. A quadrivium was the ... uh ... conceptual frameworks of knowledge. It was some of the details of what was considered to be knowledge. And the four subjects, the quad, the four subjects in the quadrivium were arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Students may also study history. Every single student had to do those subjects. Every single student had to study this broad arts degree. There was considered initially to be very necessary preparation for your ultimate goal which was supposed to be the study theology.

Now, wasn’t always the study of theology. By the thirteenth century, there were professional university qualifications also in law and medicine. And many students, we know from sources, were a little— increasingly a little reluctant ... uh ... on—the—a arts degree front because they were seeking to get the qualification which would allow them then to go into these professions.

Um, however, that was the broad curriculum. Something very important that came into the curriculum in the twelfth century, was the ideas of Aristotle. Now, at the very start of the lecture, I talked about Plato and Aristotle having different ideas about what really existed.

Aristotle was ... uh ... Aristotle argued that what existed was what could be experienced with our general senses. And the study of this logica nova, this new logic ... um ... began in the twelfth century. Aristotle had been lost to the west, it had been preserved in Islamic ... uh ... knowledge ... um ... Islamic books, but it hadn’t been preserved in western Europe. So ... um ... this was a new field of study and it had quite a lot of influence on the curriculum. It was also very controversial.

So, that’s what they studied. How did students learn? Did they do what you guys do? Did they go to some lectures, maybe go to some seminars, maybe ... um ... go and study in the library? Did they have to write essays? Well, not really. No. There certainly were still lectures but studying in the medieval ... uh ... university was about studying one text. Where I would expect you to go away and read half a dozen books or more on a subject, in the medieval period there were a few very authoritative texts. The Bible of course, was the most important one.

And, to read, as the word was used in the medieval university, to lectio, was to gloss a text, to explain line by line what that text meant. Now, there were a few authoritative texts, not just the Bible, and these texts could internally, or with other texts, present statements which disagreed with each other, which contradicted each other.

Now, since these books were considered entirely authoritative, entirely correct, one of the things that medieval learning involved was finding ways to use logic to reconcile these apparently different or contradictory positions. And lists of these would be provided, quaestio of statements that seem to disagree with each other. And students would be set the task of trying to find ways to logically reconcile the ideas. Some of these quaestio were put into huge volumes like Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologica ... um ... which was a very influential text. The rules of disputatio, disputes, or ... um ... quolibets—quolibets were big university experiences where two great scholars would debate a topic.

Um, there is a—a modern legacy of this is in the ... um ... viva that you have to do at the end of your PhD, if you study to that level. Um, but what you’ll notice from all these teaching methods is that they are not about going to the library and doing research. They are about looking at a few authoritative sources and using reason and logic to debate and harmonize them. And there’s a special word for ... um ... the scholars who did this; and the word scholastic might come up in your readings. Scholastic. A scholastic was a schoolman who used this method of philosophical debate, which sought, in particular, to bring together Christian ideas—Christian doctrines and classical ideas from the pre-Christian scholars like Plato and Aristotle. And when you are reading up on this topic, this will be something that comes up a lot. It’s a very complicated topic ... um ... but if you can at least identify some of the key threads in your reading that will be probably sufficient.

So, we started at the modern university. I said the modern university is a research institution. Um, it’s a—an institution with rules and regulations, with permanent buildings, with chairs that you can sit on that are reasonably comfortable, and cafe facilities for you to go and get your lunch after this lecture. They are places with big libraries with lots and lots of books, and places where assessment is done through written work. And what we’ve seen here is that is not where they came from. The medieval university, the origins of our mo—modern university was much more ad hoc. It didn’t have the same institutional structures that we do today, although it developed them. It also was not driven by how many papers you could publish, for example. It wasn’t assessed by written coursework. It was very much an oral institution ... um ... in which learning was done through debate and reasoning.

A few key things I want to leave you with then; a few key final thoughts. The development of institutions of learning was driven by demand and need. It was not something that emerged because people had some idealistic desire to learn. There was a need for education and the circumstances in the twelfth century were also right for intellectual explosion. And so, the late medieval period, kind of the twelfth to the fifteenth century, we see lots and lots of universities popping up, largely in towns of—all over western Europe.

We’ve seen that in these institutions, individual teachers had a great deal of personal authority and the charisma of an individual teacher would have a really big effect on whether they were successful, whether they attracted students, whether they got paid. The medieval university had a far smaller number of texts but these texts held more authority and were questioned only with an intention of reconciling any differences in views that they expressed rather than to question their content as such.

Um, and so the classical dialectic method of learning was the predominant form of teaching and learning ... um ... in the medieval university. Now, it is not difficult to see how that slowly, over a few hundred years, has led to modern research methods, has led to our questioning of our sources, our exploration of meaning. The medieval university is the origin of the modern university. It was very different but you can see how what we have today, what you’ve been listening to today, has emerged out of a medieval past.

Thank you very much for listening today. Um, I hope you all enjoy the seminar which will be on Wednesday about this subject and ... uh ... you are free to go and get your lunch. Thank you very much.

***This lecture has been transcribed with permission from Dr Joanna Royle, The University of Glasgow.***