The University of Bologna: The Oldest University in the Western World

Module 1: Source Texts for Descriptive Writing

Outline Prompt:
The University of Bologna is one of the most respected universities in the world. Describe its development, its organization, and its famous female teachers.
Text 1: A Short History of the University of Bologna

The University of Bologna in Italy is proud of being more than nine hundred years old. 1088 is commonly accepted as the year in which the University was formed. From the earliest days of the university, students had begun the practice of collecting money in order to pay their teachers. In the beginning, this money was given as an offering because of the view that science, as a gift of God, could not be bought or sold. Gradually these donations were transformed into regular salaries. The students did not always contribute to the collections and there were times when the government had to contribute money to ensure that studies could continue uninterrupted.

Bolognese legend speaks of a woman, Bettisia Gozzandini, who taught at Bologna between the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It is said that not only did she give lectures within the university, but also lectured in public before large crowds. The University admitted female scholars into courses from the twelfth century onwards. Among Bologna's most famous women teachers was Laura Bassi, who was made lecturer in philosophy in 1732 and in experimental physics in 1776. She studied logic, metaphysics, philosophy, chemistry, hydraulics, mathematics, algebra, geometry, and modern and ancient languages. In 1988 the city of Bologna celebrated the ancient origins of the university and the anniversary of eight centuries of teaching with a prestigious ceremony that brought representatives from all the major universities of the world to Bologna to honor the Alma Mater, the mother of universities. Academies, universities and heads of state sent their good wishes, books were published for the occasion, and the celebration of Bologna became an international celebration of scholarship.

Text 2: Subjects and Departments at the University

The University of Bologna is historically famous for its teaching of law and has been ranked as one of the world's top 50 universities. The University counts about 100,000 students in its 23 colleges.

The University began to form in Bologna at the end of the 11th century, when masters of grammar, rhetoric and logic began to devote themselves to the study of Law. In 1158, due to the wishes of four doctors (thought to be pupils at the University), King Frederick I created the Constitutio Habita, which was an agreement in which the University was legally declared a place where research could be performed independently from any other power.

In the 14th century, scholars of medicine, philosophy, arithmetic, astronomy, logic, rhetoric, and grammar began to collaborate with the school of jurists. In 1364, the teaching of theology was instituted. In the 15th century Greek and Latin studies were instituted, and in the 16th century experimental sciences were begun.

In the 17th century, which is thought of as the "golden era" of the University, medicine coincided with the teachings of the famous researcher Marcello Malpighi and students began to use the microscope for anatomical research. By this time, the University's fame had spread throughout Europe and it was a destination for many well-known scholars and guests.


University of Bologna’s ‘University Quarter’ (www.telegraph.co.uk, 2012)
Text 3: A University Covering Various Areas of Study

The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is the oldest academic institution of the Western world. With its 95,000 students, 3,300 lecturers and researchers, over 1,000 research and scholarship winners and 1,800 PhD students, 23 colleges and 70 departments, it is one of the most important higher education institutions in Italy and the whole of Europe.

The University’s academic offerings are extremely broad. Its 23 Colleges offer 120 first-level degree courses (bachelors), 135 second-level degree courses (masters), 108 doctoral degree courses and 84 vocational master courses for post-graduate students. From Chemistry to Engineering, from Archaeology to Law, from Medicine to the Humanities, research is at the heart of Bologna University’s strategic choices. Its excellent results in many fields are published.