

*King's Student  
Perspectives*

*Asian and Middle  
Eastern Studies:  
Arabic and Persian*

*Keye, 3<sup>rd</sup> year  
April 2012*



*Keye at Jebel Akhdar  
(Green Mountain), Oman*

**Keye is currently on his  
Year Abroad (the third  
year of the course).**

## *Why did you choose Arabic and Persian?*

*When people ask me why I study Arabic and Persian, some of them think they already know the answer: "So you can become a translator, right?"*

*Imagine their surprise when I tell them I study Arabic and Persian because I love languages - full stop. What is most important to me is studying and to study what I love.*

*I wasn't interested per se in becoming the next James Bond, climbing the ladder of diplomacy, or sharing my own translation of One Thousand and One Nights. I was interested in the languages, how they were going to differ from the ancient and modern languages I had*

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*studied in secondary school: all those squiggly lines and dots all over the place: would I be able to read that, ever? And was I going to see enormous differences and surprising similarities between Arabic and European languages? Would I actually be able to speak the languages too?*

## How have you found the course and teaching?

*Over the last two years, the Faculty has provided me with the support to excel in these languages, as well as giving me the opportunity to study other facets of the Middle East to which I had given little thought before my arrival at Cambridge. I feel like I have learned a lot in a short period of time: the small groups in which we are taught allows for special attention to students' needs and provide the perfect setting for discussions; it also allows for the staff's enthusiasm for their subjects to have a great effect on the students and, in my experience, they are always there to help.*

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## What is the workload like?

*In first year you take four papers and I took two Arabic, one Persian (all compulsory because I do both Arabic and Persian) and one paper on Contemporary History of the Middle East. This last paper covers many topics but is only one hour a week, so there was quite a bit of individual reading that needed to be done. I had Arabic five hours of a week, three hours focussing more on grammar and reading, two hours with an emphasis on listening and speaking (but this has changed since I believe) and I had four hours of Persian, two hours of grammar, one hour of speaking and one hour for reading and writing. In addition to this I also had one Arabic supervision each week and one Persian, in which you can choose what you want to focus on, as well as five history supervisions for the five essays you have to write in the course of the year, in which you go over your and your classmates' essays and discuss the topic in much more detail.*

*I thought the combination of the language and literature papers worked well as your language skills benefit from both.*

*In second year you take five papers, so after taking my Arabic (4 hours a week) and Persian (2 hours) language papers I had three choices left. I chose both Arabic (2 hours) and Persian literature (3 hours) and I thought the combination of the language and literature papers worked well as your*

*language skills benefit from both. I also took an anthropology paper (1,5 hour) which focused on contemporary political and social topics and issues in the Middle East. Then I still had my language supervisions once a week as well as one supervision for each essay I wrote for the other subjects, which were not more than five for each subject for the entire year.*

*In comparison to other subjects, at times I think our workload is not too bad because we do not have to*

*I also took an anthropology paper which focused on contemporary political and social topics and issues in the Middle East.*

*write an essay every week; at other times, though, you notice that there is much vocabulary that has to be learned and there are many exercises that have to be done in order to train your grammar skills. You have to dedicate a portion of your time each day to learning and revising (new) vocabulary, but that's part of learning a language of course.*

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## *Is there time to do other things?*

*While I am sure there is much joy to be had from learning languages, it is very important to just get away from it every now and then. I tried to keep my evenings work-free so I could go to formal meals with friends at other colleges, talks organized by the faculty, societies and colleges, and just going out! There are enough sport societies and facilities for everyone and once spring rolls in (though for the die-hards even when it's winter!) Cambridge is excellent for anything outdoors.*

*I had very little experience when it came to writing essays.*

## *What have you found difficult?*

*I had very little experience when it came to writing essays and getting my first essay back covered in red writing, accompanied with a supervision report that said I came across confused (true!) was hard, but over the course of two years (and with the wonderful support of Ann Frost) I have developed my own way of tackling the questions posed – I won't deny I still find it difficult at times, but it is a good way of applying what you have learned from*

*your readings. That, along with the feedback you get from your professors, is great preparation for the dissertation you write in your final years.*

## *Can you tell us about the Year Abroad?*

*The special and slightly daunting part of language studies is the Year Abroad. On the one hand I wish I had started organized it earlier, on the other hand I have a feeling that nothing's certain when it comes to the Middle East these days, so I am not sure how much difference it would have made!*

*Photo: An Omani razha dance at the Sultan Qabus University - celebrating National Day.*





*I decided to go to Oman for my Arabic and Iran for Persian and the only things I did in preparation for that were contacting the ambassador of Oman to the Netherlands, who kindly helped me find a family I could stay with, and applying at a language institute in Tehran. Enter the "Middle East-factor!" I ended up staying with a group of students in the middle of nowhere (perfect for your Arabic!) most of the time, going a 1000 km south every now and then to find a whole different dialect and different attitudes! I have really benefited from*



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*having studied not just the language, but contemporary history and anthropology as well: not only do I speak Arabic every day, I also observe how Omanis come to grips with the political and cultural developments of the last century. Without the wide array of staff and subjects available in the faculty, I would have not been able to appreciate every aspect of society as much as I do now.*

*By the time I finally got my visa for Iran the University could*

*no longer approve my trip because of recent events (storming of the British embassy etc.) so I suddenly found myself moving to Tajikistan, where they speak a dialect of Persian but it is written in Cyrillic! I do not think I could have prepared myself for any of this but the important thing is to just go with it, see it as another interesting challenge and make the absolute most of it!*

*I do not think I could have prepared myself for any of this but the important thing is to just go with it, see it as another interesting challenge and make the absolute most of it!*

*For people doing Persian right now Tajikistan seems to be the only option, but hopefully that will change soon. As for Arabic, most of my classmates*

*are in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan, volunteering at all sorts of centers and institutes, taking courses at universities and generally having a good time. For most Arabic countries it is relatively easy to get a visa and renew it when needed. Getting a visa for Tajikistan and Iran is quite difficult, but the faculty can help with Tajikistan.*



## How did you find the application process?

*I was a deferred entry and foreign applicant. The university system in the Netherlands is (very) different from in England, so I was a tad overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork/need for recommendations, as well as having to come to the college for an interview etc. It all worked out in the end though! In hindsight I see the interview as a way for the professors to find out more about you, but also for you to find out more about the college/course/people who teach.*

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### ***A note to current King's AMES students:***

*If you would like to write about your experiences of studying AMES at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: [undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk](mailto:undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk).*