

King's Student Perspectives Economics

Sebastian, 3rd year

Hello! I'm in my third year, studying Economics at King's. Given that you are reading this, I guess that you are considering Cambridge too, which is great! Below is my story and my thoughts on how I've found studying Economics here. Best of luck with your applications, and have the greatest time at university!

How did you come to study at Cambridge?

I went to school in my hometown, which is Malmö, the third largest city of Sweden (though it is only about the size of Edinburgh). I had lived in the same yellow house all my life, so making the leap across to Cambridge felt like quite a big step for me. However, starting university is quite a big step for everyone, to be honest, so I think that my step was perhaps only bigger than many in a geographical sense.

When kids in Sweden are aged fifteen, they pick a program for high school. Already, at this age, I think that I wanted to at least have the option of living and working in another country, so I enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program rather than taking the standard Swedish qualification (though as it turns out, I could have applied to King's with Swedish qualifications too). The IB program really suited me, because there is a lot of flexibility in the subjects that you take. At that time, I'm sure I had about ten different plans every two weeks for what I wanted to do, so I benefited from being able to keep my outlook broad and study a wide range of subjects.

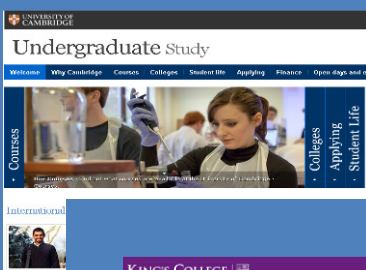


Me in King's Front Court

Since most of the IB teaching was in English (for the first time, for me) it was also during the IB course that I opened my eyes to universities in

English-speaking countries. At this stage, I had already decided that I wanted to study at university, so the question was really which one.

I remember that there was a UK universities' fair at my school, and I went home afterwards to look at the Cambridge website. All the different curriculums and pictures of the town really lifted my spirits. I thought to myself: "if I am ever given the opportunity, I would not mind studying at this place".



Did you know straight away that you wanted to study Economics?

When I looked at Cambridge, the course (tripos) that caught my attention at first was Architecture. My father is an architect, and I liked the engineering-like outlook of the Cambridge Architecture course.



With Thomas in King's library

At the same time, I was studying a lot of interesting economics and mathematics at school, however, so in the end, I followed my interest in this, and Economics was the course that I finally settled for.

I had lots of reasons for choosing to study Economics, but most importantly, I liked the look of the very academic approach to Economics at Cambridge, as this kind of curriculum wasn't offered at any of the Swedish universities that I was considering. I definitely don't regret my choice of degree. I feel that my understanding of economics has massively increased at Cambridge (even in the areas I haven't enjoyed so much). Yet, at the same time, I am certain that I would have been happy studying Architecture at Cambridge too. This place is great, and the advantage is that what you don't pick up from lectures on your course, you pick up from interesting discussions with your friends studying other subjects such as Architecture.

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Can you tell us more about your interest in Economics?

I became interested in economics through politics and current affairs. Back at school, I was always very interested in politics, and what reforms the government was introducing. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, economics seemed like one of the most important areas underlying current affairs and politics, so I was naturally drawn to the subject.

I did some debating at school, and I always enjoyed watching politicians debating different reforms on the television. However, I never felt satisfied because I couldn't understand the implications of what they proposed. I think that the following kind of reasoning is useful in economics: "If I change this variable, that happens..." Perhaps thinking about this was one of the things which made me settle for the subject.

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Economics was also a relatively popular choice of subject in Sweden at the time, so I don't want to deny that this influenced me too. In the

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end, I think that I perhaps confused economics slightly too much with politics. But as it turns out, I really don't mind that I did.

How have you found the content of the Cambridge Economics course?

The Cambridge tripos offers a lot of great options (or "papers" as we call them here), and I have particularly enjoyed the ones in first year and third year. We had a paper on British economic history in first year, and another one on British politics since the second World War. You also get introduced to game theory and more formal economic models.

The second year course in mathematics and mathematical statistics is great, and in my own experience, this kind of dragged me through the more orthodox economics you're taught in second year, which personally I wasn't so keen on. Economics is changing at many universities but Cambridge remains a place where you'll be taught classical ("orthodox") economics from scratch (I will speak more about this later). In third year, you are then able to extend these classical theories, and that is when you take courses with a different approach to various problems.

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My favourites in third year have been a course on policy evaluation, and public economics (very roughly, the

economics of taxes, healthcare, education and climate change). As you can see, I have my own particular interests, so don't let this discourage you if you really want to look at different things, such as the economics of international trade etc. There are optional courses on offer, and if you think that Economics is your thing, then I'm sure you'll be able to find some topics of particular interest to you in the Cambridge course.

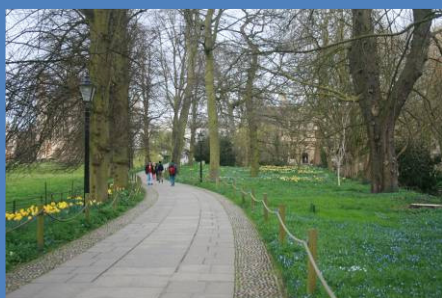
In hindsight, I'm quite glad that I learnt all the classical models that we have been taught, because I am now able to understand and respond to arguments which relate to these, and this is important. Going through them was the

worst part of the course for me though, and I

sometimes wish that the tripos was structured a bit differently. For example, in first year, we learnt more or less the whole of the Solow model of economic growth, but then in third year you do it again, with a bit of extra maths. This repetition is definitely a negative aspect of economics at Cambridge and I hope that they change it. I can't compare it with other universities, though, so don't assume that you won't be taught in the same way in other places.

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The Avenue – the way back into College from the Economics Faculty



Markus (another King's Swede!) and I punting on the river



A fancy dress party in Freshers Week

What was starting at King's like?

I was a bit nervous for the first few days, of course. And there are so many firsts; the first meeting with people in your year, first friends, first meal in "hall" (our dining hall has a ceiling 15 metres high!), first time punting (a punt is a kind of boat that you can go out on the river Cam in),

first assignment, first birthday party, and the list goes on and on. This may be the same wherever you go, but what makes a big difference at King's is that all the people you meet are so friendly. Everyone is in the same boat, so your classmates will want to help you out if you help them in return. And the tutors just want to help everyone.

Another plus is that there are so many activities for freshers (first-year students in their first week). You can do everything from kayaking inductions on the river in front of the chapel, to checking out debates at the Cambridge Union Society (a university debating club). In my first week, I really enjoyed having college parents. These are students in the year above who get to know you when you are new and help you to settle in. It meant that I had someone to talk to immediately on my first day. I think that I appreciated this especially since I am an international student. I wasn't very used to introducing myself to others, so having someone who you simply had to

talk with was pretty cool. Then I just tagged along as my first week went on. I remember there being so many activities, dinners and fun get-togethers that I was running around the place in a super-enthusiastic mood for the whole week. I remember feeling very excited, and I actually managed to have a lot of fun.

Some of the best times were simply spent in the kitchen of my accommodation. There was always someone around, and with everyone being new to Cambridge, it is so easy to strike up a conversation. What is more, everyone is interested in

what you have to say – the colour of your house, the name of your dog, string theory, whatever.

Then the supervisions start and you begin to get a bit of routine. This is great too, but it takes a while to get into Cambridge-style assignments. Your supervisors are there to help you, and do take the

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opportunity to ask help from your classmates. Getting into the swing can feel tough at times, when work is stressful, but mostly it is just exciting, and there are so many different places you can go for help at King's if something is bothering you – your DoS (Director of Studies), your college parents, the college nurse, KCSU (King's College Student Union) welfare officers, other freshers, and many more.

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King's canteen is quite modern – it was refurbished a few years ago.

What is the food like?

The food is great at King's. There are always three hot options for lunch, plus at least one vegetarian option, and a super salad bar. I normally splash out on weekends, when there is brunch from 11 – 13:30. Bagels, scrambled eggs, pancakes, salmon, yoghurt, coffee, you name it. The price of a standard lunch is definitely OK – around £3 (you pay a fixed rate each term of about £90 to get member prices).

I try to cook once a day as well, just to keep to my student budget. The kitchens in the accommodation work really well too, at least in the hostel I am staying in at the moment (Market Hostel). Apart from the kitchens in the Keynes building and Bodley's court (which are more basic), kitchens are pretty good elsewhere.

What about finance (for EU students)?

Cambridge in general and King's in particular have been incredibly generous when it comes to helping me as a EU student.

✂ *Firstly, there is the Cambridge European Bursary Scheme. This gives EU students the opportunity to apply for a substantial bursary based on the income of their household just like the Cambridge Bursary Scheme for UK students. The "bursary" is simply a sum of money which you get over the course of your undergraduate degree at Cambridge (and you do not have to pay it back). Typically you receive an amount via your college bill every term, and you can use the money at your own discretion. This has really helped me, and relieved some stress when it comes to finances.*

✂ *Secondly, most European countries have student grants from their own governments as well, and you should look these up.*

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✂ *Thirdly, I can recommend searching the internet or a local bank for stipends. Since Cambridge is such an internationally renowned university, chances are that you may find a stipend or fund which is willing to provide you with some funding. Have a go at writing as many applications as you have time to*

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*In summer, we
often eat outside
in Chetwynd
Court*

and consider worth writing! If luck is on your side this may help you out significantly during your time at university.

I have also used the travel grants that King's affords to its students. I felt so privileged when I found out how generous these can be. With the travel grants, King's simply wants you to explore, and as you will read on the application form – "academic purposes [of the travel] will be interpreted broadly". There really is a lot of sense to this, as travelling lets you explore the unknown. I went on a long road-trip with my sister across America last summer, all the way from Los Angeles to Seattle, and via plane to New York. It was a fantastic journey. And I may still never have been to North America if it wasn't for the travel grant, so the grant is what I call "kinda awesome".

How did you choose a Cambridge college?

This question initially made me laugh because when I applied to Cambridge I ended up applying to King's in a very hap-hazard way! I didn't think the colleges were such a big deal and I think that I found out that John Maynard Keynes had been to King's, plus the chapel looks really pretty on the photos online. In this sense I am very, very lucky, because I really do think King's is one of the nicest colleges, and I have grown very fond of it.



Webb's Court - Playing in the snow

King's has got a student body from all around the world and from all corners of the UK. It's one of those things that are very hard to describe, but the atmosphere at King's is very familiar, and that makes a big difference. When the pressures of work are weighing heavy there is always someone to talk to about something completely different. And I've heard many friends from other colleges saying that they feel pressured to get involved in certain extra-curriculars. This is not the case at King's. So I have

pretty much only positive things to say about the atmosphere.



The squash courts (left) and astroturf (right) are by Old Garden Hostel. There are also grass tennis courts at the sports ground.



King's rowing: I'm third from the front!

The facilities are another important aspect of choosing colleges, and here King's is again at the top. Located in the very centre of the city, it's a short walk anywhere. There are squash courts, tennis courts, a football field, rowing, a new-built gym – only for King's students. And many different King's societies which go bouldering, play basket ball, play field hockey etc. All in all, I don't think that I lack anything in terms of facilities.

What is the best thing about studying Economics?

You get to analyse current affairs with knowledge you've picked up from lectures, and if you talk to students from other subjects you can compare and contrast your approaches to the problem. This is the best thing about Economics at Cambridge in my mind. I think that you are taught the importance of rigour, and a valuable formal (often mathematical) way of presenting your ideas/models.

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How important is it to have a strong background in Maths for Cambridge Economics?

Since the first-year math course is pretty confusing (I found that the second-year course is much better), it is good if you have a background in maths. In fact, the entry requirement for Cambridge Economics is Maths at IB Higher Level (grade 6 or above), A-level Mathematics or another equivalent. If you study Maths at this level you will be more than fine!

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To get through the first year course, you basically have to know differentiation and logs. There is not too much new material, but I do think that you will enjoy the course more if

you also enjoy solving maths problems. You will find that many of the maths problems you face in economics are of a similar nature – so don't worry about getting into the swing of it.

In my opinion, if you meet your offer, you definitely don't have anything to worry about. King's has excellent maths supervisors, and if you make an effort for every supervision you are not going to have any problems.

What do people do after the Economics course?

I think that Economics is one of those courses with a relatively broad outlook, so people go into many different things after their degree. Similar to Law, there are trends in what people do afterwards though. These trends can be very persuasive. Economics is probably one of the best degrees (in the sense that you are taught relevant material) if you want to work in banking. Consulting is another popular choice. If I were to give a rough estimate I would say that around a third of the economists I know are going into "the city", straight after their degree, and perhaps even more will end up there.

As for myself, I am hoping to do a Master's degree in Economics after a year of work and travel. Since I went straight from school to university, I definitely want to take time to do a few of the things "on my list" before continuing with my studies. Next stop: the Alps.

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A note to current King's economists

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying Economics 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