The future of collaborative scholarship and education

Oxford and its Middle Eastern partners are pushing forward the frontiers of research and education with new links across the Arab World.

New collaborative research projects, academic posts, scholarships and training programmes for university leaders have been established to advance medicine, development, environment, energy, water and human rights. This activity builds on more than 400 years of ties between the University and the region, demonstrating how historic links can remain relevant in a changing world.

Many of Oxford’s partnerships in the Middle East link our leading research and teaching centres to governments concerned with the impact of rapid development in the region. Collaborative research projects include work to study water flows and inform water policy, developing mathematical models to plot the movement of sand dunes, and the launch of a joint Petrochemical Research Centre with the King Abdulaziz City of Science and Technology (KACST) in Saudi Arabia. Other research focused on the region includes work on relations between the Islamic world and the West, in partnership with the Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies.

Oxford has been fortunate to benefit from the generosity of many donors in the region, as well as the support of our Arabian alumni. We look forward to entering an exciting new era of collaboration together.
Historic Arabian treasures in Oxford's museums and libraries

Generous donations from the late HRH Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia and Saudi entrepreneur and philanthropist Yousef Jameel have helped to create the Jameel Centre, a new home for the extensive Islamic Art collection at the Ashmolean Museum. These gifts have also established an online resource for the museum’s Eastern Art collections, making the Ashmolean’s ancient and modern treasures accessible around the world.

The Pitt Rivers Museum has worked closely with Middle Eastern partners to make its collection of 5,000 Wilfred Thesiger photographs available in the region. Its collections include working with the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage on a permanent exhibition at Jahili Fort, Al Ain.

The images document Thesiger’s 1940s crossings of the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf. The project is part-funded by the King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives in Saudi Arabia.

The Griffith Institute

For more than 70 years, the Griffith Institute has been at the heart of Egyptology and Ancient Near Eastern studies. Now situated in the Sackler Library complex, the Institute holds some 30,000 volumes on Egyptology and Middle Eastern studies, including excavators’ records from the tomb of Tutankhamun.

The Khalili Research Centre

The Khalili Research Centre is Oxford’s centre for the art and material culture of the Middle East. Its major ongoing projects include “Ancient Arabian Languages and Cultures,” which will build a single portal for ancient Arabian resources, creating a global database for the region’s ancient and modern languages and cultures.

Research and policy development

Informing water policy

Dr Rachel McDonnell, a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Geography, is leading a project partnering Middle East and North Africa government organisations, international research centres and NASA. The project will generate new data on water resources, crop production and climate change impacts. It will combine satellite observations with leading edge modelling to aid decision-making on local water and food security issues.

Dr McDonnell has been heavily involved with Middle Eastern water issues for many years. She helped write the Abu Dhabi water master plan and then the UAE Water Conservation Strategy which have both led to many important changes in water management and policy development.

Applying mathematics to the advancement of science, the economy and society

Now in the fifth and final year of its £25m grant from King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia, the Oxford Centre for Collaborative Applied Mathematics (OCCAM) has demonstrated how mathematical and computational models can deliver economic and social benefit for the region. OCCAM currently works with over 50 researchers who have focused on outstanding mathematical and scientific problems as well as economic issues that concern Saudi Arabia. Through collaborations with KAUST scientists, progress has been made in areas as diverse as dune motion, oilfield reservoir modelling, and water filtration and bioinformatics.

Staying at the forefront of innovation in petroleum and petrochemical research

The KACST-Oxford Petrochemical Research Centre is a research centre, created by the Oxford Department of Chemistry and the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) – the Saudi Arabian national science agency and laboratories – to drive forward petrochemical research.

In August 2013 the Centre received a new gift of £1.5 million from KACST, allowing it to expand to include colleagues at Imperial College, Cambridge and Cardiff universities, creating a network of world-leading petrochemical researchers.

The Centre is working with its Arab World partners to develop a number of areas vital to future petrochemical use, such as the development of materials that will allow the clean combustion of fuels and the challenge of turning carbon dioxide into fuel. The Centre will allow new innovative petrochemical technologies to be adopted more widely and will help in the education and training of leading research staff.

Understanding post-Gaddafi Libya

Researchers from the Institute of Human Sciences, working with colleagues from the University of Benghazi and Oxford Research International, carried out the first national survey of Libya in the post-Gaddafi era, in 2012.

The face-to-face survey of more than 2000 Libyan men and women painted an optimistic picture of the country’s future, with citizens looking ahead to improving lives and rating health services, education and the environment as priorities for Libya’s future.

Publication of the survey – the results of which were widely covered by press around the world – has been followed by a workshop on human rights, displacement and asylum, held collaboratively by Oxford’s Refugee Studies Centre, the UNHCR and hosts the University of Tripti.

Faculty posts funded by Arab World donors

Oxford has been fortunate to benefit from the generosity of a number of Arab world donors who have funded key faculty posts at the University.

One of the largest gifts, made by the Qatar Foundation, created the leoh Ming Pei Professorship in Islamic Art and Architecture. The professorship is named for architect Bé Pei, who designed the stunning Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, which opened in 2008.

The Qatar Foundation also created the His Highness Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani Chair in Contemporary Islamic Studies, currently held by Professor Tariq Ramadan (see below).

These professors and other Oxford faculty engage in teaching and research exchanges with the Museum of Islamic Art and the Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies.

Other important posts endowed by Arab World donors include:

• The Khalid bin Abdullah Al Saud Professor of the Contemporary Arab World
• The King Mohammed VI Fellowship in Moroccan and Mediterranean Studies
• The Dubai Ports World Professorship in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at Said Business School
• The Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahayan Lectureship in Islamic Studies

HH Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani Chair in Contemporary Islamic Studies

Named by TIME magazine as among the 100 most influential thinkers of the 21st Century, Professor Tariq Ramadan has written and lectured widely and contributed substantially to debate on the issues faced by Muslims in the West and the Islamic revival in the Muslim world.

His latest books are The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East (2012), The Quest for Knowledge: Pursuing a Philosophy of Plurality (2010), What I Believe (2009), Radical Reform, Islamic Ethics and Liberation (2008).

Student profile: Aslı Sidahmed, Sudan

Course: MPhil in Development Studies

The Oxford Experience: Oxford is cosmopolitan, intellectually stimulating, eventful and engaging. My favourite thing about the University is the great resources students have access to – as a social scientist, I can try a different library every day.

Aspiration: I would like a career that mixes policy and academia through research. Oxford has provided me with rigorous research training and taught me to engage with sources and contextualise authors in a way I hadn’t previously felt. I feel like I am a better researcher now than I was before.