Letters from Andrew - V

Letter - V - 28/Sep/1997

I started to originally draft Letter V back around January, oops.

This letter was going to be roughly chronological but as I have a pathetic memory at the best of times I'll just stick things in as I remember.

Studies, Ph.D. and all that.
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For readers of the last letter it must have seemed like the final chapter of a poor thriller but with the last page torn out. So I will cover the details for you here and now rather than waiting until the end of the letter, which chronologically, would heighten annoyance, suspense or both.

I received a letter on the 29th of August that confirmed I had met the conditions upon which confirmation of admission as a Graduate Student was dependent. As a result of this the letter also went on to confirm my admission as a Graduate Student for the 1st of October 1997.

What did this mean ??

Well it meant I satisfied all the requirements for admission, principally the admission requirement for a student is money, but there
were several other aspects too.

First admission requirement was that my laboratory was prepared to take
me on a PhD student. Given my laboratory had been the original instigator having asked me if I'd like to start things moving for admission I was going to be a little surprised if this was a problem, however if there was a cruel joke to be played on me this would be the right time.

What had latter seemed obvious was the laboratory had confirmed my application was acceptable to them.

Second part was that a college accept me as a member for studies. As I
have mentioned previously colleges are an intrinsic part of the undergraduate system, however for graduate students their role is a little less clear. Principally pastoral, partially as suppliers of

accommodation and such more base facilities.

In truth it is a continuous point of contention between graduate students and the university in general and colleges in particular. Exactly what role does the college fulfill. Of course this stems from the fairly substantial fees that pass from a graduate student into the college under the name of "Approved Fees". the Approved Fees have a value of 1,650 pounds per annum and as they are payed directly from grant bodies to the college(s) most don't think twice about what the college is actually doing with all this money.

The general conclusion is that in an average college this money can end
up subsidising Fellows and undergraduates. For a typical college, the responsibility of undergraduate teaching is immense (colleges are responsible for all parts of an undergraduate education apart from the lectures and exams), including such things as libraries, computing facilities, supervisions, directors of studies and so on. By the way, this is why, for an undergraduate, which college you were at is almost as important as being in Cambridge/Oxford in the first place.

However for a typical graduate student, the college has no role to play
in such teaching, at best its role might supply a pigeon hole so that items can be addressed to a student (many don't have such facilities in
their laboratories, departments or faculties) and perhaps the ability to use a largely useless (undergraduate orientated) library.

I recently heard of a student who had queried the amount the were paying for no apparent good reason, that particular college suggested that about 1,600 pounds a year was a perfectly acceptable fee for a pigeon hole.

Once you have finished the natural course of the degree (3 years for a PhD for example) you become exempt from these fees and pay only a nominal amount to keep a pigeon hole.

Okay well thats a bit of college fee bashing out of the way :)

Okay to be fair to Corpus we have nice graduate only facilities with lovely grounds, TV room, a bar, music room and so on. Also the college sports facilities (tennis courts, football/cricket pitches and squash courts) are available, there are some computing facilities for students
(all pretty irrelevant to me, I like to stay away from computers when I'm out of the office, thats part of the reason these letters never get
written), and other things I'm sure I've forgotten too...

If you have to pay the fee its nice to know there are some facilities to be had.

With (this) University so orientated around undergraduate students and the colleges so intrinsic to the University itself, their role in graduate education is assured.

When someone applies to a course at the University part of the form includes a selection panel for which college you would like to apply to. Membership of a college is a requirement for every student in the University.

It is not only mandatory, it is nonsensical to be a student and not a member of the college. Principally, this is because the colleges did (historically) all aspects of education and, nowadays as discussed above,
are still central to the education undergraduates.

Just to re-cap on some letter 1 stuff, there are 33 colleges ranging from the enormous Trinity and St Johns down to the tiny Magdalene and Trinity Hall. Colleges range in "specialities" (Churchill has a science
bias) and in restrictions (there are 3 women only colleges and 3 graduate/mature age student only colleges).

When you are presented with a list of colleges and a set of check boxes
(and instructions to number your first three choices) a typical student
has not the faintest what sort of criteria they should be applying.

For a typical graduate student some colleges will guarantee accommodation (as Corpus does) others may have very cheap fees, and (typically the largest/richest of the colleges) offer bursaries for books, computers and so on. The end result is a lottery process for selecting your college.

Almost everyones first choice is Kings, Trinity or St Johns, almost certainly because they are the best known colleges (and make offers to their students that only rich colleges can do).

Well my application number one was Corpus, having lived in college accommodation and near the graduate complex I knew what to expect, I knew I would be treated fairly well and Corpus had been very good in supporting me with room accommodation up until that point.

There are other college fees including room rental and a thing called the Kitchen and Buttery charge (an amount that subsidises the kitchen and subsequently encourages students to eat in college.) These things are not really worth a comment except that at one stage Trinity had sincerely considered not charging its students any rent as they considered rent collection was a bigger administrative headache than the financial benefit it gave. Due to significant pressure from other colleges, Trinity renewed and continues to charge rents.

Finally Corpus confirmed that my application had been successful and that this particular hurdle had passed.

The final hurdle was financial.

In addition to College fees, and substantial university fees (over 8,000 pounds a year for a science student from overseas) there were living expenses, rent, food, and so on. All together this meant a bill
of about 15,000 pounds a year.

The first good news was that I had won an ORS.

What is an ORS I hear you ask, well the full title is Overseas Research
Students Awards Scheme, it is payed for by the UK government and is getting increasingly more difficult to get as budgets are cut the number
of awards are reduced.

The ORS pays for the difference in University fees between me being an overseas student and a Home or EC student. (So much for the Commonwealth apparently the UK has left, although the Commonwealth have
a part to play shortly.)

This in effect meant I had received about 5,700 pounds a year scholarshipping and that I was on my way to getting the money needed.

Actually the ORS is a lot more important than all that, without it many
funding bodies either wont or can't assist in funding, so getting the ORS was great news.

The next bundle of news was that the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust had organised 5000 pounds a year for living expenses. At this stage I needed to show to the Board of Graduate Studies (they administer the graduate students) that I could find the money required for University (2,500 a year) for college (1,650 a year) and the remainder of my living expenses money (about 1,000 a year).

Oh dear I thought this isn't going quite right. Well it turned out

the
laboratory had intended all along to pay for the University and
College
fees towards my PhD so all of a sudden my application was hanging only
1,000 pounds a year out of reach.

Some people would have dived into savings (I didn't have any, apart
from being a rather underpaid plebian in the university scheme I was
never
really certain of the success of my application so I took a "if it
happens it will happen" attitude, especially with regard to savings,
my
major savings were largely eaten up getting to the UK in the first
place) or sold off possessions (nope, none either) or lied (that was a
possibility...) to prove they had the required funding and I was
worried
that the whole process was going to flounder for the sake of 1,000
pounds (a year, which is still a fair bit of money).

All of a sudden things came to a head. My supervisor was certain all
would be sorted out for money and wanted to re-advertise my position
so
that it could be filled as I turned into a student. Well I was pretty
unenthusiastic about resigning from a job I had in exchange for a
student-ship I didn't have. I pointed out where things were to him
and
he jumped into action assuring me that my funding was guaranteed, that
all was right with the world and that the resignation would help move
things along too.

I resigned.

At the same time I learnt that in a deal with the Cambridge
Commonwealth Trust, the laboratory had agreed to pay the fees in
exchange for the Trust covering the full amount of my living expenses.
It appeared the Trust had reneged on the deal. After some to-ing and
fro-ing, and a great deal of work on the part of my supervisor this
too
became sorted, the Trust had come to the party and I received a new
offer from the Trust that gave me the full amount required.

Within days of the new offer, the Board of Graduate Studies had all
the
information they needed and my application was confirmed.

So what does it all mean....

strangely enough not a great deal.

I'm still working in the same place with the same email and letter address, I live in the same house (I elected to stay put at 88 Barton Rd), and the work I am doing now will be largely the same as what I will be doing at least for the first few months of my PhD.

New Student
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If I was a student new to Cambridge I would probably be writing a letter similar to Letter 1 about the delights of 1950's plumbing and weird rituals.

Instead I can write that my house has recently had a renovation in the bathroom and we now have a shower (or as close to a shower as you get in this country). Some of the communal areas have been painted too, this has certainly improved the look of the place also. As far as heating, and such only time will tell.

While I have stayed in 88 Barton Rd for the past year, my house has been vacated for most of the Summer months. One vet has moved out entirely, one will be back in a week or two, I have a new PhD student in
the house (a criminologist) replacing the Icelandic historian and a Swiss mathematician studying towards a thing called Part III, Part III can be thought of as as you would a Graduate Diploma course, people moving into PhD programmes is quite common once they have done a Part II, but its easily as likely that a Part III student will go into industry and was doing the degree to widen their knowledge base.

As a new student I would typically have arrived between the 30th of September and October 3rd.

On October 4th there are a number of college activities, these included
a graduate year photo (of the new students of the year), and a process called matriculation. This process formally admits me as a member of the University body, albeit as a junior, or student member.

The University and College has various orientation and welcome events for new students over this first week or two, all much the same as the beginning of the year for any other university around the world: BBQs,
afternoon teas, various meals, dances, pub crawls and all manner of other activity.

Okay well as mentioned above I am with the same laboratory (Computer Laboratory), the same research group (Systems Research Group) doing similar things. The official "Subject" of my PhD is "The application of statistical estimators to ATM communications networks". What does this mean ?? well not a great deal, its a nominal catch-all title that will enable me to writhe from commitment to any particular area of study for the next three years.

Seriously, statistical estimators broadly describe a host of techniques
being developed in the laboratory in association with the mathematicians
in Dublin for working out how much network traffic (chatter) is on a particular computer network.

ATM communications networks describe a style of getting data from one place to another between computers, this is a technology or technique as much as any thing. There are lots of different technologies for getting data from one computer to another (even putting the data on disk and taking the disk, by hand, from one computer to another (often referred to as "Sneaker Net"). ATM networks have long been considered the next great way to network computers (this still remains to be seen)! However, the laboratory has lots of experience in ATM networks and so my work is with those.

More later in the work section.

One note, the Monash newsletter got some information that was printed in Etcetera in late August (26th); it was both inaccurate and misleading.

I've never been in Computer Science at Monash, I was from a department called Robotics and Digital Systems, this became a department called Department of Digital Systems (and another change is coming for that department along with several others in another reorganisation). Also I think the figure of $45,000 a year, instead of going just to me, was the figure the Cambridge Australia Trust (the Australian bit of the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust) give among all students in Australia in a
year.

As you can see from the money discussion above, rather than $45,000 a year I get more like $5,000 a year from the trust, oh well.

I sent them a retraction/correction but I'm not sure it will ever see the light of day.

Nonetheless, it is interesting that Monash had known or noticed at all,
I guess thats nice too.

Okay now that you have all read the last page of the mystery thriller of "Would Andrew become a graduate student" I'll go on to other things.

Places
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Well taking off from the previous letter.

A few weeks before Christmas I went down to the laboratories of British Telecom. For about the past year I have been working on a project with some people in the British Telecom Laboratories (BTL) in a follow up project to one my supervisor was involved in several years earlier.

This project is described without much clarity in my previous letters but in short I was building a system to assess the ideas of some mathematicians at BTL on the control of network traffic.

Going out to BTL was a trip I was looking forward to as, in-spite of being in Britain now for 19/20 months I still had and have not seen much of the place.

BTL is located down at Ipswitch, no not Queensland, Ipswitch in Suffolk, I think.

Well on the way down there were Sugar plants (converting Beet into sugar, this being the major source of local refined sugar) and more flat areas of East Anglia, really not that inspiring after all. BTL itself resembles a cross between a set of housing commission flats and the air traffic control from any major airport, not a particularly stunning place.

I've since found out people working at BTL don't particularly like the place and often commute large distances (for Brits) to and from work. Although I am told the local rivers are pretty nice for boating and fishing.

I've since been back there several times as part of my project, although the mathematicians I work with seem to prefer to meet us in Cambridge, I'm understanding why and realise there are many worse places to be in Britain (even in the depths of winter).

For those that care to know: BTL (at Martlesham Heath, Ipswitch) covers the same area as Monash Clayton campus. It has one particularly awful building (similar to the Menzies at Clayton), and many more pleasant low-rise buildings. The site also contains a significant amount of BT backup equipment and is a popular place for many antennae to link to

Satellites over the Indian Ocean.

My Christmas was spent with family both close (my brother Nick was still in Britain at this time) and more distant (we spent Christmas day itself with the family of a second cousin). A grand time, with even the obligatory snow fall.

One of the highlights in the lead up to Christmas day was sitting in the outside garden of a local pub (experiencing muld wine at 5 degrees below) being serenaded by members of Kings College Chapel. I was surprised not to have been swamped by tourists, the event is a ritual and free for anyone to come along and enjoy. The whole picture is made complete with a fall of light snow.

New Years Day was something different again.

Nick had given me, as a Christmas/Birthday present, a New Years Day in Edinburgh. Extraordinary. It was both a stunning city and a fantastic time. I bemoan that alcohol plays such an important role in every part of British culture, (I really sound like a terrible tea totaller, oh well), but in the cold night air on the nights leading up to New Years Eve, such warming fluids could be the difference between a pleasant glow and freezing to death.

At any rate, New Years Eve, more properly known as Hogmanay (or the Festival of...) in Scotland. is a combination of events for the locals, tourists, and just plain silly things. This whole time (I was there for six days all told) culminates on New Years Eve (no surprise there) with a huge street party. The whole thing is described as going down to the local with a few hundred thousand of your friends.

Events I managed included: various bar things (all a bit dull compared with the rest), torch light procession (including the "ritual" burning of boats, stages, various displays (animals, small children, no not really...), visited Edinburgh Castle (now .that. is a castle), the street party itself, various concerts (catering at five/.six venues to all sorts of tastes.)

It was a bit hard to tell which ceremonies were for the tourists and which were ones had any basis in tradition however come midnight the place was ablaze with noise and light as a ridiculous amount of fireworks went up to the traditional Old Lang Syne.

I see no reason for there not being many million in Edinburgh when all those 9's roll over at the end of the century.

The next major visit was to a little piece of Spain. I spent some time
towards the end of winter in Lanzarote. Lanzarote is a Canary Island off the coast of Morocco. I'm told that the Canaries are the antipodes of Australia, well not the whole of Australia, just the bits with the warm weather and sunshine, and the volcanos.

I decided a holiday was in order (to allow me to escape the ugly British
winter) and when the option to escape to Lanzarote came up, I saved up and went.

I guess in hindsight I should have been counting on PhD things, but at this stage the idea of scholarshipping was absolute pie in the sky and I still had to make it through the winter.

Spain (along with France) is unique in the EU in requiring a visa from visiting Australians, Lanzarote is a part of Spain, its worth remembering that when you travel there (and your an Australian). Okay I
knew it, but as the Spanish embassy was famous for taking six weeks for processing and the holiday was in six, I was a bit worried of an "exciting time" at Arreciffe Airport in Lanzarote.

Why Lanzarote ?

Well there are the black sand beaches, the sun, the lack of fresh water
resources on the island, the volcanic rifts (although none like Monserate, at least at the moment).... sounds like an idea place Eh ??

Okay, why Lanzarote ? 'cause I didn't know any better.

I had decided to get more involved in Triathlon (since I'd basically taken a holiday from the sport since I came to Britain) and some of the
local club were planning to go over for a "camp" that was planned over there by some random expert, along with a whole lot of other experts (has-beens and wanna-bes). So I was going to Lanzarote for a Triathlon training camp. Madness ? you be the judge.

I should note I am not a complete nutcase about Triathlon although I do
enjoy it. Not being particularly competitive (too darn slow), and really just doing the sport for fun (and fitness) I was worried I was going to be regretting going along with a bunch of self confessed

masochists on a train/pain and suffering holiday.

Ah, but what a holiday.

Actually I was not alone, there were a number of others, either new to the sport (well I had an advantage there, at least I'd done a few years at the sport), or simply as slow (slower! than I). But the majority of the people present (60 all told I think) were either speedy or very speedy.

Lanzarote has lots of advantages for a Triathlete, especially one from flat Cambridge, not the least being the hills. I can proudly report I cycled up the steepest ascent (about 1 in 6 for most of its length and then a nasty little 1 in 4) on the island at one stage while I was there, very happy I am with that too!

The Sea !!!

Oh how I miss real waves on real beaches. The sea off the coast of Anglia goes onto the channel, there is no beach head, no sand, no waves, dull dull dull. Lanzarote had all of these things. It also plays host to a large tourist diving contingent as the areas are (apparently) stunning for divers to enjoy.

Humm black sand, now that was a novelty, however it feels just like the white stuff and isn't anywhere as weird (after a period of acclimatising) as you might first think.

Lanzarote is pretty popular with all sorts of tourist (one of Research Group leaders was going out with his family a few weeks after I got back), but as a tourist involved in a sports thing, we had all our arrangements made through a large sports village complex thing that catered to people that may want to play a few rounds of sand golf (!) swim in a great 50metre pool (first one I'd seen since leaving Australia) or various other nutty things. The complex, Club La Santa, is actually run/owned by a company based in Denmark which meant a remarkable number of very tanned trilingual (Spanish being the islands native tongue) Danes. The Club La Santa itself is a facility specifically designed for English speaking guests (in addition to Danish and Spanish of course) and is quite popular with professional sports people wishing to escape England (Scotland/Wales/Ireland's) green and pleasant but wet and cold hills.

I really didn't have the faintest what the place was going to be like, yet that did not prepare me, it was a place full of ordinances on the height of buildings (three stories is the limit, although two is more common) the colours are strictly regimented (white), with a choice of door/window colours (green/blue or black). The end result was a place that was stereotypical Spain, it couldn't have been more Spanish if donkeys pulling carts made their way lazily along the roads. And they did have the donkeys and carts.

I should note though, the roads were excellent in quality (apparently the tourists dollar brings some good things after all) and the local drivers just excellent, courteous to a fault. Both of these things being fairly important if you plan to spend a part of each day whizzing
around the island on a bike.

Ah but the most appealing thing of this whole place.... Siesta. What an excellent concept. The result of this mid-day break was many places
started around 8am and stopped at 8 at night, but with a few hours break in the middle of the day everyone enjoys the (harsh) day just that bit more.

Oh well I had to head home and Britain had still not gotten out of winter. Nothing as bad as some earlier weather in January had been, (a
whole week when the temperature didn't get above freezing), but still colder than I'd remembered the previous years weather to be.

The other place of note, was Pembrokshire. As a great side effect of participating in my first British triathlon season I did manage to see a bit of the countryside. Pembrokshire coast in Wales, was a place worth revisiting.

The Pembrokshire coast (Broad Haven in particular) is reminiscent of the Great Ocean Road area, full of dramatic cliffs plunging to tumultuous surf with long (deep, the tide moved the water mark over a 300 feet at Board Haven) sandy beaches. I was only there for a few days, (one of those was spent running/cycling and swimming a particularly hilly course), so I'd have to get back here again.

A stunning area considering not more than a year earlier the Sea Empresss had, due mainly to bureaucratic bungling, released thousands of
gallons of crude oil into the local sea. Broad Haven itself was quite fortunate, the oil slick was carried past this part of the coast before
being driven ashore closer to Cardiff.

During August I was taken way from a warm, if unstable, English summer to a very pleasant time in the United States.

Prior to any decisions on PhD things, I'd organised a trip to California feeling that, if the PhD application was not successful I might be looking for a job, and if the PhD application was successful I would be looking for a break between work and studies as well as sounding out potential places to take a summer intern-ship during the course of my PhD program.

Well with much thanks to some friends in the area I had a splendid time in California visiting numerous interesting places such as deserts, beaches, aquarium, observatory, museums, galleries, Yosemite, a not so notable place called Coalinga (so named because it was Coaling Station A for the trains at the turn of the century), numerous universities (UCSD, CalTech, Stanford, UCB), Palo Alto, Pasadena, San Diego (and surrounds), San Francisco, Pismo Beach (of Daffy Duck and the famous "left tern at Alberqerque" fame for those that have not studied the classics), Solvang (weird piece of Denmark in the middle of California), and many other things too.

Of particular note were Palo Alto (computer geek alert), the heart land of silicon valley. I visited an ex-Lab person employed at the Digital (computer) companies, Systems Research Centre (SRC). They do interesting stuff including the electronic book I spoke of in a previous letter and other things involving networking and computers. Getting an intern-ship here could be excellent if hard work (assuming they still exist, there is great concern that in a recent sale of intellectual property, Digital may have wound up much poorer). Additionally they are not the only place to go to, most large research arms of computer companies have a lab here. (The major exception being Microsoft.)

Also Yosemite... One word: Wow. I understand a lot more about why Americans rave about this place, stunning stuff. The presence of large non-human mammals had me quite worried (bears), although I got use to the situation. However on the final day the reasons for the elaborate food sealing regime became all too clear. A bear had broken into one of the cars in the car park, most likely attracted by a box of cookies that were strewn everywhere. The car had windows broken and much of the interior was damaged beyond repair.

All stunning stuff and of course the weather was just fantastic.

One advantage of being in the UK is simply the difference in prices for travel. The UK/US trip is so common it can be had for silly prices that the number of people and distances in/to/from Australia simply don't allow. Sigh. A small compensation for the weather :)

Other Events
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Honorary degree day was held again and recipients included Dame Kiri
Te
Kanawa and recorded sound specialist Dr Ray Dolby were amongst the
nine
honorary graduands who received Cambridge University degrees. In stark contrast with last year, it poured down on all concerned.

Bill Gates.

Chilling. Actually pretty exciting for the lab and the local property markets. As you may have heard in addition to Microsoft starting a laboratory in Cambridge, Bill Gates has donated an amount of money to build a new laboratory building. Much is made of such things, politicians wax lyrically about a renaissance of technology in Cambridge/Anglia/UK, university vice-chancellors wax on about how wonderful are the changes they can oversee in the University, laboratory academics are happy to be getting (sometime in the future)
a
new building, signature hunters hunt signatures, the pessimist sees this as the taking of money directly from the hand of the devil, the optimist hopes this means the computer lab will shape big computer business directions.

Everyone in the computing world has a strong opinion of Bill Gates, well not perhaps everyone, but strong opinions certainly abound - both good and bad.

Me ? I am mindful of (a) the immovable object, Cambridge repeatedly shows itself to be such an object, (b) sayings about looking at the mouth of gift horses.

I am disappointed however that one of the agreements regarding the new building is that only Microsoft Research will be joining us in the building, it was part of the original agreement. I can't help but feel we will be the poorer for this decision.

Latest 10-Nov-1997
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Well if I don't finish this letter now it could well take another six months for me to finish so instead of filling other completely random detail I'll give you a five line summary of the "state of the nation".

PhD
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Currently I am finishing up work on the BT project I had been doing for
the first half of the year. The work is related, but unfortunately it has been going on a lot longer than expected as a result I'll be very happy when its over. So far only a few experiments and a significant report remain.

Health
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I'm fine.

Other activities
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I have been acting as a bit of a born-again first year, or at the very least first-year graduate student -- enjoying all the college and university activities I can get a chance to be involved it.

I've decided to get involved in that foolish Cambridge pastime of rowing. I was once told only fascists would intentionally row, but nowadays all sorts of people should have better sense. Apart from the brisk, dark mornings and the ability to fill every spare moment, it seems a bit of fun and certainly has meant I've met a lot of other people with no spare time !

Weather
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Well its getting cold and dark, how depressing.

Surprise
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I will be coming back to Australia for around 3 weeks from around the 13th of December. I look forward to catching up with as many of you as
want to see what happens when Australians go to Britain for a couple of
years.

Best regards to all,
Andrew.

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