

Reflections on a year at Cambridge University
by
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The purpose of this document is to share some of my experiences as a Douglas Smith Scholar at Cambridge University. I cannot state strongly enough what an extraordinary opportunity it was, and how fortunate I have been in being afforded it. In addition to reporting on my experience of the Scholarship process and the University, I share my thoughts on a range of topics. As such, the report may contain sections of relatively boring detail which should just be glossed over. I also visited both Eton and Malvern Colleges (the latter being the school at which Mr Antony Clark is currently Headmaster) and met old boys and girls from these schools (and many of the other prestigious UK public schools) at Cambridge. Thus I believe I have gained perspective which has enabled me to reflect on St Andrew's.

Applications

During the Scholarship selection process, I stated that my intention was to read for either an MPhil in Finance or Economics were I to be successful. Between being awarded the Scholarship and making the application to Cambridge, I weighed up the two alternatives and spoke to a few experienced practitioners in the field of financial services which I intended to enter after studying. Ultimately I decided the MPhil in Finance was the better of the two options. The programme is based at the Cambridge Judge Business School, which meant that I would have the opportunity to interact with other programmes based there, such as the MBA class. In addition, it is run in conjunction with the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Mathematics, with options to take papers from both of these Faculties, thus offering a potentially diverse and unique experience. Lastly, the MPhil in Finance also accepted fewer students, and it appeared that it was a more sought after degree by applicants.

Initially I was concerned with being accepted onto the programme, and as such I applied to the MPhil in Development Studies and MPhil in Real Estate Finance as second and third choices. At the time I felt that the lack of a connection between the Scholarship and Cambridge, which means that the Scholar-elect is simply another applicant in the eyes of the University, was a serious weakness of the Scholarship. However, with the benefit of hindsight and my experience at the University, I do not think this is a significant issue. It would, obviously, be great if arrangements with the University were already in place as they are with the Rhodes Scholarship. However, my experience of the last year is that applicants with serious Oxbridge aspirations tend to struggle more with securing funding for their course than an offer of a placement.

That said, I certainly made every effort to ensure a successful application. Through mutual friends I made contact with a person who had just finished his post-graduate studies at Cambridge. He put me in touch with a South African academic who is the Director of the MBA programme at the Judge. I exchanged emails and telephone calls with him asking advice, upon which I made contact with the Course Director of the MPhil in Finance. Thus the Course Director knew who I was, and had seen my CV and other documents before my formal application would have landed on his desk. It is my belief that these measures had a positive impact on my application, and I would advise future applicants to do likewise.

Ultimately, I was accepted onto all three programmes I applied for. The day I found out that I had been accepted onto the MPhil in Finance programme was a very happy one, and with it came a great sense of relief. Finally I had everything in place, after almost a year of researching the Scholarship and the University, organising referees' reports and actually making the applications, it was finally all almost confirmed! The only thing that remained was being offered membership of a college at Cambridge. Gonville and Caius and Jesus Colleges were my first and second choices respectively, but I was turned down by both. In the end I was accepted into Fitzwilliam College, which, while being disappointed at the time, I am very happy about in retrospect.

MPhil in Finance, Judge Business School

The first day of term began with a general welcome and introduction by the Director of the Judge to all the new MPhil and PhD students. I was completely overwhelmed by the facilities and the professionalism of the people involved. It felt as though we had won some amazing competition, as we were each given individual welcome packs and had lots of people smiling and welcoming us. The presentations were unbelievable as the different people talked us through the various aspects of the business school, from the library to the IT infrastructure to the Alumni office. It really felt like we had arrived! After this each of the Programme Directors met with their programmes separately. I was already overwhelmed by this stage, and then our Programme Director told us that the MPhil in Finance was, according to the Board of Graduate Studies, the most selective MPhil programme at the University. He told us that they had received more than 700 applications for the 22 places that we were occupying. This completely surprised me and with incredulity I realised how lucky I was.

In my application for the Douglas Smith, I stated that I wanted to both broaden and deepen the knowledge I had gained through my undergraduate degree. The MPhil in Finance was a means to both of these ends, and hence was of great value to me. Due to the fact that the degree was open to a wide range of backgrounds (finance not being an undergraduate subject in the UK), it was necessary for the degree to begin from first principles. As a result, a couple of the initial modules covered similar ground to my undergraduate, although the pace was far greater. These and a few other general modules allowed me to further broaden my knowledge base in the field of finance. The later modules, however, provided some fascinating areas of study and depth of knowledge. I particularly enjoyed interacting with the Faculty, who on the whole were brilliant. In addition to the Faculty, some of the guest lecturers and speakers at the Judge were also very stimulating. These included the last director of the CIA speaking about leadership and the current chairman of the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) speaking about the impact of the financial crisis on accounting standards. In this sense the reach and reputation of an institution such as Cambridge was very evident, and most enjoyed.

As the MPhil in Finance is an applied degree, the amount of reading required was less than I expected. However, all the textbooks and other material we needed during the course of it were readily available in one of a number of libraries throughout the campus. In addition, if the Judge or Fitzwilliam libraries (and I'm sure all the others too) did not have a book you needed, you simply notified them and they would buy it for their collection. This meant that I did not need to utilize the main University Library at all, which was just as well, as it is quite intimidating! It is one of the most comprehensive libraries in the English world, with over 200 miles of shelving, which is reputed to be growing by a couple of kilometres a year.

I found the English generally to be a book-loving society. This was reflected in the number of bookshops (in almost every train station, major filling station, on every second street – and not just in Cambridge) and the relative price of books. They are very reasonably priced compared to South Africa, and as such if a novel takes one's interest, one simply buys it. I relished the affordability of books, as well as the wide range of books available. I have always enjoyed reading, but my interest in more challenging and thought-provoking texts is largely due to Mrs Lynnette Paterson, who introduced and encouraged us to read good literature. In my view, South Africans' reading practices lag those of the British. Reading, I believe, is something St Andrew's ought to promote more actively.

An international community

One of my favourite aspects of my class, and indeed the whole Cantabrian experience, was how international it was. Of the 22 students in my class, 9 were from Asia, 9 from Europe, 2 from North America, 1 from New Zealand and there was 1 African (me!). Of the 9 Europeans, only one was from England. My closer Fitzwilliam friends included a Catalan, a Frenchman, a Luxembourgian, a Canadian, an American, a Cypriot, a Taiwanese, and a handful of Brits amongst others. I have made and hope to maintain a network of friends from around the world.

I suppose it goes without saying that meeting such a broad group of people was a great experience of other cultures. It opened my eyes to how diverse different cultures are, and I particularly enjoyed learning more about the subtleties (and glaring differences!) that exist between the various European cultures. The whole experience of living in the UK, particularly following their media, changed my perspective of South Africa. I suppose it is natural to view the place or country that you grow up in as the centre of the world, as it is the centre of your world, but it was fascinating to be removed from that. To realise how South Africa is actually a minor player on the larger world stage was a humbling moment. At times in South Africa it appears that we get so caught up in the detail of life here and the problems that exist that we lose an ability to take a step back from it and maintain perspective. Another realisation I had was that it seems we often get so focussed on our problems that they tend to grow out of proportion, and we neglect the fact that other nations and peoples face similar, different and often more complex issues than we. As such it was quite refreshing to learn of other countries' challenges, and of the means that they have solved them. My experience of Britain and a few other western European countries also opened my eyes to the fact that while they are more developed than South Africa in many ways, they also face their own problems. Organised crime in Italy, political corruption in most of them, social unrest in the poor white areas of Britain, and strong cultural disunity in Spain are all serious issues. However, it was also interesting to see how these issues are dealt with in comparison to South Africa. For instance, the public outrage and sense of disgrace surrounding the UK MP expenses scandal was noteworthy, as was the way in which the politicians involved were held responsible.

It was also very interesting to be in the UK for a general election, especially after taking part in my first one in South Africa last year. I enjoyed being in a society where there was a debate as to the merits and demerits of the different political parties competing (although this was probably stronger than average due to the academic nature of my environment). It was also refreshing to have this competition between the parties, and a closely contested election race in which small indiscretions (such as an overheard slanderous comment) were seen as significant. However,

their situation is far from ideal, and this was seen in the reporting on a large tract of British society being disinterested and indifferent to the election. A major positive in South Africa, in my view, is that there is more of a passion and fire when it comes to partisan support. However, as the poorer Britons seem to have discovered, this quickly turns to apathy as their situation remains unchanged regardless of their vote.

It was also humbling to meet people from other countries that seemed to know almost more about South Africa and our history than I did, and certainly far more than I know about their countries. That said, there were others I met that when I told them I was from South Africa, asked why I wasn't black. While this gave me some hope that I was possibly not the biggest ignorant, it also made me think that there were plenty of countries of which I might have asked a similarly unintelligent question. This underlies one of the major realisations for me over the year, namely that I find the world and its diverse peoples and cultures fascinating and something I should like to learn more about. The opportunity to experience this first hand has been extraordinary.

Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

The collegiate system at Cambridge is brilliant. There are 31 Colleges within the University, and each offers a diverse and rewarding experience. Each College has extensive facilities, including great libraries, sports facilities and grounds. Fitzwilliam completed its new library while I was there. Fitzwilliam is one of the more modest Colleges, owing largely to its relatively recent foundation (1869). However, the new library is a 4 story building which is state-of-the-art and cost approximately £6 million. In this sense my mind boggled at the wealth of the institution as a whole, and particularly some of the older Colleges. I really enjoyed the atmosphere at Fitzwilliam, which was unpretentious and accommodating. The people I met there were also fantastic, some of which I hope will remain lifelong friends. Even given Fitzwilliam's status as a less traditional College, there were certainly still traditions alive and strong. For instance, Formal Hall, which students attend in their academic gowns and at which they are served a 3 course meal, still takes place twice a week. Another example, with which St Andrew's would identify, is that students are not allowed to walk across the lawns within the College grounds. In addition, there are common rooms to which all members of a College belong based on a ranking system (undergraduates-postgraduates-Fellows), although one can only enter one's own common room and those of the more junior levels. The collegiate system, like the house system at St Andrew's, allows one to interact with a different set of people. As such, I was not confined only to those on my academic programme, but spent time with people reading for a cross section of other degrees. As with St Andrew's, I found that this multidimensional interaction with different people greatly enhanced my experience there, and was an aspect many other schools and universities sadly lack. Sport of course was another dimension for interaction.

Some of the colleges have the most amazing architecture and buildings. Surely the most beautiful college is St John's College, which is also one of the biggest. It has built one new block of student accommodation in each of the last five centuries. King's College chapel is the most photographed building in Cambridge. It was commissioned by Henry VI but was only completed over 100 years later during Henry VIII's reign. Interestingly Henry VI also founded Eton College, as a means for bright boys from poor backgrounds to receive top education and enable them to study at Cambridge. The King's chapel still has the highest fanned ceiling in the world, and boasts a Rubens above its altar.

Sporting experience – CUGC, CUCC

Sport is a large part of life at Cambridge. In keeping with Cambridge's traditional and idiosyncratic style, the purpose of almost all sports played is the annual Varsity Matches, in which Oxford is the opponent. In some sports Oxford is actually the only other university the team will play throughout an entire season. It is generally this contest that defines the whole season, and is often the only result anyone particularly cares about. The most well-known of these are the University Boat Race on the Thames, the Varsity Match (rugby, played at Twickenham) and the cricket Varsity Matches (of which the 50 over match is played at Lord's). The golf Varsity Match is also quite famous, as it is the oldest amateur match in the sport and is often played on an Open-rota course.

I tried to remain as involved as ever in sport. I played rugby for my College throughout the winter, which made me appreciate our milder weathered rugby season! I also played cricket for my College during the summer. The English love of cricket was astounding. Almost every College had its own cricket field, and there were other club and public fields in town. This means there must be at least 25 cricket fields in Cambridge. The amazing thing was that there was a match on these fields almost every day. This is not an exaggeration, as the groundsman of my College's ground told me that he had an average of 110 fixtures a season. These obviously were not all full day affairs, but were a combination of declaration cricket, 50-over cricket and 20-20 cricket. I also really enjoyed the green and manicured playing surfaces, a large contrast to the dusty and dry fields I had become used to in Cape Town during my undergraduate years! I was also fortunate enough to play for the Crusaders side, which is the University 2nd XI. I was selected for all three fixtures against Oxford, although the 50 over match was rained off (however Oxford did allow us to drive the 3 hours to Oxford through pouring rain to a saturated field before making that decision!). We did well to win both the 20-20 and 3-day games. The 20-20 was a classic edge-of-seat match that saw Cambridge batting first and being 2/4 after 3 overs, recovering to 148/6 in 20 only for Oxford to be 53/1 after 3 overs in reply. The match finished with our legspinner (a brave call for the final over in which Oxford needed 12 runs to win with 3 wickets in hand) taking a hat-trick with his first 3 balls to win the match! The 3-day game was a far more one-sided affair as Cambridge bowled Oxford out for 76, made 485/8 declared, and bowled them out for 128. I was happy to take what must be some of my best bowling figures of 6-37 in the 22 overs I bowled over the two innings.

I was also lucky enough to represent Cambridge in the second golf team, which was an awesome experience! Due to the Cambridge University Golf Club being quite old, the fixture list is full of matches against equally old golf clubs in the south and east of England. As a result, these clubs were almost without exception exclusive, traditional and boasted courses of magnificent quality. Many of them were also links courses, which were phenomenal to play. From November through to March, we had a fixture almost every Saturday and Sunday, except over the break for Christmas. Our team was made up of 10 players, and we played two rounds of foursomes (and occasionally singles instead of the second round of foursomes after lunch) against these clubs in a given match. We arrived in jacket and tie, either to coffee or occasionally a full breakfast, followed by the morning's golf. We were back into jacket and tie for lunch, which generally was a 2 or 3 course affair complete with French wines and followed by Port or a drink called Kummel (which I only ever saw in these golf clubs). Then it was back onto the golf course for the afternoon's matches, which were generally followed by tea and sandwiches (or another pint!). And due to the fact that we were being 'hosted' by these clubs, the only expense we ever incurred

was our petrol money to get there and back! Some of the clubs I was lucky enough to play at included Royal St George's (where the Open will be played in 2011), Rye, Royal Cinque Ports, Brancaster and New Zealand. We played Oxford in March at a links course in Wales, Pennard Golf Club. This was a brilliant experience, with our team all decked out in matching bright orange corduroys and light blue jerseys. The format was foursomes in the morning and singles in the afternoon, meaning there were 15 points up for grabs. After a closely contested match, Cambridge came out on top by 9-6, which was a great result as we were the underdogs going into the match. It felt like we had won the Ryder Cup, and I can happily say it was one of my favourite sporting moments of my life. Team golf is certainly a great way of playing what is generally thought of as a very individualistic game.

Social highlights and travel

Another highlight was May Week, which in a sense can be compared to a combination of Balloon Week and 'Plett Rave/Rage' (if it's still called that!). It is a week at the end of the academic year (actually in June) during which many of the Colleges at Cambridge host balls to celebrate the end of final examinations and to pass the time before results are released. The balls range from the amazing to the unbelievable. The biggest balls are those of St John's and Trinity College, both of which are reputed to have budgets of £1 million. Tickets are obviously very expensive, but even so are practically impossible to acquire. They are released to members of the College first, then people associated with the College, the University and finally to anyone else with a hope of buying one. The final stage is done by ballot as the oversubscription is so extreme, and a friend and I were lucky to each be drawn for a double ticket for the Trinity May Ball. As a result, we were four of 2000 guests at the event which starts at 9pm and lasts until 6am. The ticket includes almost anything you can imagine, including French champagne, oysters, and all manner of other food, drinks and entertainment. The entertainment continued through the night in around 8 different venues, and included world renowned bands, UK comedians, a Venetian masquerade, a breathtaking fireworks display, a carnival and a jazz and casino tent. It was without doubt one of the most impressive, albeit over-the-top, events I have attended. What really makes it beyond comprehension is that it is an annual event. On the first page of the 48 page Trinity College Ball entertainment booklet, there is a Lord Byron quote that reads,

*On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined,
No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing hours with flying feet.*

Lord Byron read for his undergraduate in Trinity College from 1805 to 1808, which is why the above poetry was used. This was one memorable if insignificant moment of so many when I was awed by the history, tradition and significance of Cambridge University.

The Trinity May Ball is a good example of the general sense of occasion that permeates and characterises Cambridge life. This certainly reflects the fact that British life appears to have a far better developed sense of occasion than South African. In my 10 months at Cambridge, I was surprised at the number of occasions that required black tie, and found myself dressing in jacket and tie on a weekly basis. While many would see this as typical stuffy British tradition, I found it quite novel. In addition, the number of ties available within the Colleges and the University is mind-boggling. There is a tie for nearly everything, ranging from the various Colleges' summer

ties to different team ties and finally a Cambridge graduate tie. One of the most recognisable outside the University, I am told, is the Hawks' tie, which is only available to those that have attained University Club colours (represented the University at 1st or 2nd team level against Oxford). And then there are the bow ties. Now I understand where the tie tradition at St Andrew's comes from!

During my time in the UK I was also very fortunate to be able to travel quite widely. I managed to visit Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as France and Switzerland on the continent. One particular highlight was going skiing for the first time with a group of friends from Fitzwilliam. It is a fantastic sport and one that I hope to be able to return to in the future. I went to Ireland with a group of old school friends in November last year for the rugby match between the Springboks and the Irish. The cheap flights that one can find from the UK all over Europe made these trips possible, and this is something that will certainly be missed from South Africa. Living in the UK certainly made me realise that South Africa is remote from many places in the world, which complicates travel somewhat!

Eton College and Malvern College visits

It was very interesting for me to visit both Eton College and Malvern College. Both are English public schools, although Malvern (1865) is relatively young compared with Eton (1440). Both schools, however, are comprised of beautiful historic buildings and grounds. Eton is still a boys only school, while Malvern converted to a co-educational school in the 1990's. Although there are arguments for both approaches, I believe that St Andrew's and DSG's unique working relationship is a huge strength of the two schools. My view is that the two schools should remain separate entities, as they are, but continue to nurture and promote their interaction. I was interested to hear that 1 in 5 boys at Eton are on financial support of one kind or another, which shows that even in one of the world's most prestigious schools there is a tradition of support. I also learnt that each boy at the school has a tutor to which they are assigned, much like the tutelage system at St Andrew's. What I thought was quite novel was that in their final two years the boys were able to choose their tutor from the masters across the school, and by all accounts this was a cornerstone of their academic development. I think that I, and others, would certainly have benefitted from this more intensive tutelage approach at school. In addition, both schools have quite stringent academic entrance examinations. This made me think more about St Andrew's, and that to my knowledge there is no entrance exam. I also thought about the way in which St Andrew's has a history of helping lower achievers, often performing the miraculous in helping them pass Matric. My initial reaction was that the more academically selective the school is, the stronger it would be. However, on reflection I came to the conclusion that inclusion and support is very much part of the school's fabric, and that possibly it is better that way. This considered, however, my view is definitely that academic standards should not decline as a result of inclusivity and non-selectivity. My experience since leaving St Andrew's, including 4 years at UCT, 6 months of working in Johannesburg, and a year at Cambridge, has led me to formulate the view that the primary function of a school is the academic tuition it provides. When this is of the highest level, the rounded, diverse and holistic experience that everything outside the classroom provides is of equal importance. However, I have come to view these extramural activities as less than important if the academic side of a school is not excellent. This, I believe, cannot be more relevant than now as positions in South African universities become further oversubscribed. As the general quality of South African secondary education appears to be in decline, I believe it would be a terrible mistake for St Andrew's and similar schools to rest

on the laurels of being the top schools in South Africa. My experience of both Eton and Malvern, together with Cambridge, has made me realise how special and fantastic St Andrew's is. Eton and Cambridge, however, have both made me realise that the first 155 years of an institution's life are close to irrelevant in the greater scheme of things. I see it as our duty to contribute to St Andrew's remaining not only a top South African school, but one that is comparable with the best in the world, for the next 500 years. While this sounds ridiculous, what boggles my mind is that even if this is achieved, we will still have another 150 years of excellence to achieve before we are comparable with an institution such as Cambridge as it exists today.

Graduation

My year was completed by my graduation ceremony. A mere 6 weeks after our final assignments, dissertations and exams were completed, we had our results and were graduating. The day is a very special one at Cambridge, which was made more so by my family joining me for the occasion. There is a very definitive academical dress which must be worn for the day, and we were subjected to no less than two separate dress checks. Men are required to wear dress suits, white bow ties, academical bands, gowns and hoods. The reason the dress is carefully checked is that the colleges are fined if the graduands they are presenting are not dressed appropriately. Of course, Cambridge tradition reputedly dictates that the fine is not a monetary one, but rather in bottles of Port. Thus the incentive for the College is quite large!

The graduation ceremony is held in Senate House, the ceremonial centre of the University. Each college has to present its students who have qualified for graduation, and each college's Praelector does this in Latin. He presents each student to the Vice-Chancellor (or one of her deputies) vouching not only for their academic merits but also their character and conduct. The graduand then kneels before the Vice-Chancellor, who grips their hands in a certain way and confers the degree upon them in Latin. It is a very moving ceremony, intimate and deeply meaningful, and one which I shall treasure for the rest of my life.

I cannot stress strongly enough what an extraordinary experience St Andrew's and the Douglas Smith Scholarship have afforded me. It is my hope that funds such as these continue and indeed multiply, such that other boys may have similar experiences. I also want to acknowledge how prepared I felt to tackle the surreal world that is Cambridge. From the black tie dinners, to the sporting etiquette, and most importantly academically, I felt that my experiences at St Andrew's and UCT stood me in good stead. While I was often overwhelmed or overawed, I never felt that I was completely out of my depth or in a situation that was completely foreign to me, even if these situations were completely foreign to me. I think this is a great testament to the all-round education that St Andrew's provided and the academic education I enjoyed at UCT.

It is thus with great appreciation that I thank all who have been involved in my development, at school and especially at home. There is no doubt in my mind that I am merely a reflection of the love, care and hard work that all these people have invested in me, and that I could never have achieved and experienced this without them. I hope to remain an ambassador for St Andrew's, and I do not underestimate the debt which I owe to many.

Nec Aspera Terrent.