

THE CHRONICLES OF A GRADUATE

By Alec Dent

The new year is synonymous with many things- but to most of you readers, the main concern is preparing for that decisive and unpleasant exam, looming closer every day. 2010 marks a new beginning for me too, although I left the school several years ago. And knowing that many of you are still facing several miserable months of parental pressure, university applications, exams, and ultimately, fear of the Unknown, I decided it was time to look back and tell my own story. This is not meant to be a lecture in what to do and not to do, (you have enough teachers and parents for that), but some of you might like to hear about how things work out in real life to an ex Terminale, 7 years after the *remise des diplômes*...

I was an average Terminale ES student, who enjoyed history, economics and German, but who struggled with Shakespeare, Plato and the obscure Greek symbols on my calculator, and had no idea about what to do after the Bac. I had thought of taking a gap year, but had no real project in mind and feared that a year away from books would make it that much harder to get back into them. I had heard the horror stories of life (or lack thereof) in Prépa, had no interest in eternal *stages en entreprise*, and knew that I was not interested in becoming a French student. I wanted more from further education than what I felt the French university system could offer, and had decided early on that the British-Irish campus lifestyle was far more appealing.

Through many discussions with teachers, friends and family, and with no clear idea of what I wanted, I decided to stick with my best subjects. I then decided that although I found History fascinating, a business degree would be more versatile and relevant to the job market (which is, let's face it, the main reason why I was going to university in the first place).

This was the thought process which led me to apply to a number of courses in both Ireland and the UK, and was finally offered 'International Business and German' in Warwick and 'Business Studies and German' in Trinity College Dublin.

I eventually chose Dublin over Warwick- both are good universities, both courses were very similar and required an Erasmus year in a German-speaking country, but what tipped it for me was one of national identity- a parameter of student welfare which I have often felt has been overlooked by other students and misunderstood by proud and eager parents. Although I had lived my whole life in France, I was closer to my Irish relatives and felt that I would integrate more with Irish students than I would in a British environment.

My first shock as an unsure 17-year-old First Year was that I was streaks ahead; By Christmas I had obtained top grades with minimal effort in Maths (whereas I had struggled to get 10 in the Bac), Economics, German and History- and expected the rest of the course to be boring, which it was, and easy, which it wasn't.

In fact, despite my excellent results in First Year, I ended up repeating 2 exams in my second year, because I was slow to realise that university has a lot to do

with self-motivation and self-discipline. (Hint: Lectures are absolutely worthless unless you prepare for them beforehand, pay attention during, and do the required reading afterwards. Strolling in late and pretending to listen whilst doing the Sudoku in the student paper looks cool, but won't get you through exams. And lecture notes are much harder to decipher by yourself in the library in August two weeks before your Statistical Analysis repeat exam. Trust me.)

Having finally passed Statistics, I was free to go on Erasmus- and ended up in Mannheim University- the most prestigious Business School in Germany. (This was not my first choice- I was keen on Innsbruck in Austria, which is close to an awesome ski resort and offers huge student discounts on ski passes, but everybody else wanted to ski too and my marks weren't good enough to beat the competition- despite my early head start in First Year).

Germany was a swift learning curve. I suddenly realised that I wasn't quite so fluent as I thought I was, but that there was no point in being shy and speaking English all the time. I also struggled because of my age- I was 19, attending the same lectures as 3rd Year German Students, who were, owing to longer schooling and compulsory military service, an average of four years older than I was. But I grew up in many ways during that year. I managed to pass the required number of credits, did the lighting for a German theatre group, went on week-end trips here, there and everywhere, found a part-time job in a multi-lingual Telemarketing company, feasted on cheap kebabs and became somewhat of a beer *connoisseur*. By the end of the year though, I had passed the ultimate language tests; I could argue with taxi drivers, understand the news on the radio and even file a Police report after I was mugged in the Turkish district. But that's another story.

Final year in Dublin was difficult. Not only is Senior Sophister very demanding academically, but my biggest problem was re-adapting- After a year abroad, nothing felt quite right. Instead of going out, friends were reading the paper and began discussing jobs, politics and MBAs. It took time, poor results and a lot of anguish to finally wake up to the fact that I was simply not ready to sit my finals- and after a stint of student counselling, I took one of the best decisions of my life, and in March, deferred my entire Final Year.

After a wild summer spent working in a nightclub, I had to retake all the same classes, but finally completed my 10,000 word thesis in German on "*The business implications of cultural differences in the German and Chinese Context*", did well in my group project on Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, sat my Finals, and managed a 2.1 Honours Degree. In the space of a year, I had changed. By June 2007, I could not wait to move on.

By then I had developed a rather cynical outlook on university- when I had started, I had thought that by Graduation I would be well on my way to being a Business Guru, who would not only understand, but truly master the corporate universe. However, by Graduation, I still felt ignorant. I was profoundly disillusioned with the world of academia, which I felt was more interested in research and professional recognition than encouraging students to excel, and felt that university, as a preparation to the Real World, had simply not delivered.

I had gone through the motions of applying to graduate jobs, but crashed and burned miserably in several telephone interviews. The truth is, I simply wasn't interested enough and ready to find a real job.

Likewise, I had no interest whatsoever in further study. I wanted to try something different- and follow a fantasy which had been slowly maturing for over a year. I wanted to travel, but earn money. I wanted to have fun, but have a proper job which would teach me worthwhile skills. In short, I wanted the Gap Year I had not taken earlier.

This led me to become a Tour Manager, taking groups of 50 tourists (mostly from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the USA) aged 18 to 35, on organised coach tours of Europe, lasting between 12 and 46 days, visiting between 6 and 18 countries. So there I was, a 23 year-old managing a driver, a coach, 50 passengers, a budget, and having to organise, coordinate, lead and animate a diverse group of people on an international holiday. Incredibly hard work, but a very rewarding experience. In 12 months, I travelled to 25 different countries, carried several hundred passengers around Europe, dealt with a whole range of unexpected and difficult problems such as a coach crash on the Champs Elysees, hospital visits, food allergies, wrong hotel reservations, closed motorways, lost passports and lost clients. I had to learn enough to give an interesting and accurate city tour of every major European city, had to be able to explain French history to complete novices, and had to be familiar with the works of famous artists, architects, writers and poets. I saw ANZAC bay, gambled in Monaco, dressed up in Lederhosen in Munich, went on boat cruises around Greece, biked down mountains in Tyrol, tasted Schnapps in Vienna, danced to flamenco in Barcelona, wove a carpet in Istanbul, waved to the Pope in Rome, and attended dozens of Parisian Cabaret shows.

Needless to say, being able to speak English, French, German and some Spanish (which had been my LV2) was not only functionally vital to my job; it also enabled me to interact with our local business partners on a level which most other tour managers could not understand, and being able to make sense of what was going on around me made my travels that much more enriching.

The end of the summer season last year came as a real shock. Tourism is a notoriously fickle, poorly paid and exploitive industry, and the global credit crunch made employment scarce and uncertain. I found myself jobless and, for the first time since passing my Bac, ended up living at home again. After several months of uncertainty and depression, I started waiting on tables in Paris, hating every minute of it. Then after 3 months of mind-numbing boredom and frustration, I had had enough. Envious of my other friends who had started full-time employment, I decided that my degree was meaningless in France and emigrated to London, determined to get myself onto a graduate programme. (Essentially, most big companies have a range of opportunities in place for promising graduates- which usually last between 1 to 3 years and offer the possibility to rotate and work in different areas of the company. Since the graduate becomes a fully salaried employee, the company pays for further training, and allocates a mentor to supervise and encourage the newcomer's development within the business).

What followed next were several months of active job-hunting, and dozens of applications. Whereas initially I started out applying to everything and anything with the words 'Graduate' and 'Opportunities' in the same sentence, I narrowed down my search and decided I was interested in working in Defense and Aerospace, and more specifically, the business side of building big, complicated and expensive machines such as planes, armoured vehicles, submarines, warships, satellites, helicopters or missiles. Not only is the end product interesting, but it is also a sector of industry which is at the crossroads between business, technology and global geopolitics.

All these companies look for more or less the same profile: They all want a minimum of a 2.1 honours degree. (In fact, what people say is true- there is absolutely no point in getting less than a 2.1 at university, because recruiters simply are not interested). Not only that, but they wanted a full breakdown of my Bac results. However, pure academic achievement was not the only thing they were interested in.

They all, without exception, look for proof of individuality, participation and achievement in non-academic fields, be it through sport, charity work, music, art or part-time work. (I started martial arts in First Year and finished my degree with a black tag in Taekwondo, competing in university competitions in and around Dublin- but also did the lighting for a number of plays).

And lastly, they all wanted proof of internationality. Not having good language skills is an eliminating factor in the early stages of the application process for many employers. In fact, most recruiters take 2 languages for granted, and are more interested in graduates who can speak 3 or more and can demonstrate exposure to the outside world, whether it be through a gap year abroad doing something challenging and rewarding, or through studying or working abroad- or preferably all three.

By ticking all those boxes, I have ended up being one of the lucky 64 graduates (out of over 1,500 applicants) taken on by Airbus this year. Most of those will be working as engineers designing various parts of the aircraft, but 7 of us have joined the Procurement department in Bristol. This means that since September, I have begun working in the department which buys all the components which Airbus then assembles and turns into planes, as well as the machines, tools and services used in the process. This sounds fairly straightforward, but don't forget that a single aircraft is made up of *4 million* different parts- ranging from nuts and bolts to miles of cables, complicated flight systems, engines, wings and landing gear, all of which need to be designed, built, bought, shipped, stored and assembled. Then multiply this by the number of planes Airbus is building at any one time (about 1,000 per year), then add a few thousand spare parts for all the planes currently flying around the place (an Airbus either lands or takes off *every 4 seconds*), and you realise that it's a pretty complicated operation.

The programme is one of the 'Top 100 Graduate Programmes in the UK' rated by the Times, which explains why so many graduates applied for it. After 6 months in Bristol, which is where Airbus assembles the fuel systems, the wings and the landing gear for every Airbus, I will be spending several months on placement in their sites in

France, Spain and Germany. I will then be working with either an airline or a supplier (based anywhere in the world) for 6 months before returning to Bristol. The decent salary is only one of many benefits- others would include 5 weeks of holiday, extensive further training, (such as a Negotiation Programme and an Aircraft Familiarisation Course to name a few) and a lunchtime finish on Fridays.

Once I had secured my place, I went about looking for summer employment, and was fortunate to land a job in the contracts department of E.ON Ruhrgas, Germany's biggest energy company. Although I knew absolutely nothing about the oil industry, I spent 6 months drafting and managing contracts for equipment and personnel going offshore. And it is only now that I understand the true value of university- which lies not so much in the subject matter, but more so in the myriad of other skills I developed as a student; personal organisation and time management, clarity of thought and expression, the ability to learn, to multi-task, and to think things through.

Having said that, my successful application with Airbus is directly linked to my studies- they have recently opened a huge factory in China, and are one of the world's pioneers in Radio Frequency Identification technology- two of the subjects I had discovered and studied in depth in my both my Final Years. Being able to demonstrate a keen interest in cultural issues and a good understanding of new technologies clearly registered with the interviewers.

Then, of course, is the issue of internationality. Airbus operate across 16 sites throughout Europe, employ more than 80 different nationalities and sell planes to over 300 airlines. It stands to reason that they would want someone who can work in 3 languages, has seen most of Europe, and is used to interacting with different people- skills which I had been practicing subconsciously since 6eme.

I had no idea where I would end up when I left the Lycée, 7 years ago. Even after graduation, nobody could have guessed I would spend a year clowning around Europe and being paid to do so, then spend a summer working for an oil company and finally end up building planes.

But then likewise, nobody can predict where any of you will end up. The Lycée in itself is by no means a guarantor of success- but the opportunities to learn languages, which I took for granted at the time, and the multitude of extra-curricular activities on offer make the Lycee a unique preparation for the university of life. The rest, as they say, is up to you. Good luck.