STUDENT TRAVEL AWARD 2018

POST-TRIP REPORT

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1. Summary of Trip

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*Vienna, Austria*  
*Lavender Bay, Sydney, Australia*
2. Report on the Travel Award
I have broken down the components of the travel award to evaluate their necessity, effectiveness and future recommendations.

i. Advertising
The award was well advertised. I received forwarded emails from four separate groups: Homerton College MCR, the Department of Clinical Neuroscience, the School of Clinical Medicine, and the Graduate School of Life Sciences. As a result, there was ample time to research the award, contact past winners and to prepare an application.

The information sessions could be improved: I could not attend the first, so signed up for the second, which was cancelled with little notice (due to illness I believe). However, the information supplied online is clearly sufficient so I question the need to hold an information session at all.

ii. Application and Interview
The application process was straightforward. I liked the online application form as it ensures all applicants conform in the length and design of their answers to keep the application process fair.

iii. Booking the Trip
This was the only occasion where the award felt disorganised. It took longer than I would have expected to issue the cheques for the award, which delayed the booking process and increased the cost. I eventually paid for the trip with personal funds and received the award cheque approximately ten days later. As the award is planned far in advance, I don’t think it would be excessive to suggest that the cheques are issued earlier, as soon as the award recipients have been confirmed. I think this is vital to make trips outside of Europe possible for £1500.

iv. Transport and Accommodation
My trip was particularly lengthy as I also used the opportunity to work with research collaborators in Los Angeles and Sydney. Understandably, this increased the costs of my trip – but the flights still cost £1390. I was lucky to rely on friends and family in each of the cities I visited for free accommodation and reduced travel costs. It would not have been possible to travel through the United States, Australia and New Zealand on the money from the travel award alone, let alone pay for accommodation, even on a truncated trip. I spent an additional £1000 on living costs, transport and accommodation over the course of my two month trip, in addition to the £1500 from the travel award. My trip to Austria was funded by the European Huntington’s Disease Network as I was attending a conference that coincided with the Vienna Freshers’ Event.

I think future award winners should be encouraged to link their trip with personal or study goals in order to fund trips outside of Europe. This practical approach will probably also make the trip more meaningful through connections based on professional and personal interest.

v. Independence and Confidence
I considered myself to be quite independent before the trip, but, as promised, the onus to connect with alumni on the other side of the world brought out a new confidence in communicating and meeting with strangers.

vi. Trip Promotion
Before I left for my trip, I established with the other award winner that we would publicise our trips with a new Instagram account. The account was set up was slightly delayed – soon after I
left the UK. I went to efforts to build the number of followers of the account by following as many Cambridge students as possible and liking their posts, as well as liking posts with interest-related content. I also changed the account into a business account. This produces detailed statistics about each post so that I could understand my audience and make specific improvements to posts and captions. At the end of my trip, the account had 125 followers and 36 posts. I hope that the account will continue to be used by future award winners, but it will require time to maintain. To grow the account it would be helpful if other Cambridge University-based Instagram accounts could repost or tag our account.

During my trip I also interviewed individual alumni and created short profiles about them. I then published these profiles on the Cambridge Alumni website, via Jennie or India. This allowed me to share something more meaningful than photos and short captions. The profiles were a great premise to meet with our busy, and sometimes high profile, alumni. It felt like I had something to give back to each alumnus who gave me their time. Constructing the alumni profiles was one of the most satisfying parts of the Student Travel Award.

vii. Support from Cambridge
I received good support via email from Jennie Hastie and India Thompson in the CUDAR office. Communication was sometimes a little sporadic due to the nature of summer term in Cambridge, and I am not sure that if I’d had an urgent problem whilst away I would have received a prompt response.

viii. Advice for next year’s travellers
1. It was stressful to try and plan meetings with alumni without knowing my travel plans. Book travel and accommodation in advance. Share these dates with alumni groups and then be patient and leave your days open. Previous award winners have also learned that alumni are not often keen to make plans months in advance, but if you forewarn them and then contact individuals again when you arrive, many are able to meet at fairly short notice.
2. Be flexible: be prepared to travel across the city at all times of the day to fit the schedule of an alumnus. They were often far busier than I was on the trip!
3. Give something back to each alumnus. It doesn’t need to be material; I found the profiles were great for this purpose. Words can provide a very genuine thank-you.
3. Report on the Alumni Network

i. Feedback on the Travel Award
All alumni were flattered to have been selected as the subject of my trip. This tells me that they don’t often get visitors from Cambridge, and are not often recognised sincerely for their (volunteer) work. I think the University could do a better job of recognising the groups in a genuine and personalised way. For example, highlighting several groups in the CAM magazine or on the website every month.

ii. Alumni Groups versus Individuals
It was clear that many alumni in California and Sydney are not part of the alumni network. They identify with the University but do not see that there is anything to benefit from joining a group, or do not believe that the network is run well enough to provide benefit in the future. Several independent alumni spoke of the Cambridge network in comparison to other universities, such as UCLA and INSEAD, and even the CJBS, and suggested that Cambridge could be doing a lot more to engage and retain involved alumni.

I do not have any ideas about how to address the alumni who do not see benefit in joining an alumni group. They appeared to have their own networks; through friends, work, family or other institutions, and it will be difficult for CUDAR to create a network to outdo these.

iii. Altruistic Alumni
Ninety percent of the alumni I met were keen to volunteer their time to work with current students and recent graduates. They are happy to share their career paths since leaving Cambridge and some even to mentor students/graduates. We need to leverage this willingness. The barrier is time: those I spoke with don’t have the time to organise such relationships. It could work if there was an option for current students to reach out to any alumni to ask for advice. It would be a great way to create organic ties between Cambridge and worldwide alumni, for each party to feel valued, and for alumni groups to increase membership. Of course, data protection presents another barrier.

I suggest the University creates an anonymous searchable database of alumni, searchable by location, interest, degree, college, etc… Students can search this database freely. Upon selecting their search parameters, a request is sent to CUDAR, and contact information about a narrow group of individuals within these parameters is privately shared with the student. Such a scheme could be automated and run with only part time moderation by staff.

iv. Contacting recent graduates
All but the San Diego group mentioned the problems they have had with recruiting recent graduates to their group. Brian Beeston (San Diego) studiously surfs LinkedIn to catch these alumni. However, this takes time, something which most alumni who run groups do not have. The GDPR laws currently restrict the sharing of private data such as email addresses, however, there must be a better way to reach recent graduates than is currently employed. From the perspective of many groups, it looks like CUDAR have this information but are sitting on their hands.

I am an alumna of the University, having graduated in 2017 with an MPhil degree. I received no memorable invitation to an alumni group in my UK home town, place of previous study, or country of citizenship. I wasn’t even made aware of the groups’ existence until I applied for this award. I suggest sending a more personalised information pack alongside the Cam Card – with location- and interest-specific information.
v. Communication

I used my cam.ac.uk email address to communicate with all alumni and the groups. Most people I contacted did not reply after my first email, and some did not reply at all. This was disheartening. If I was a recent graduate looking to join a group, I would have felt unwanted and would have turned my attention elsewhere. The group coordinators are volunteers, however, and cannot be expected to catch and reply to 100% of emails. Perhaps an automatic reply from the group’s committee members email addresses, including an alternative contact method if no reply is received within X days, would have helped in this case.

Some alumni shared their sporting memories from Cambridge. From top to bottom: Ben Tsuda wins the Varsity Football match, 2013; Brian Beeston with his Selwyn College Rugby Team ~1960; Kathryn Byrne (nee Farmer) with her Lightweight Women’s Varsity Crew in Ely in 2003.
4. Report on Alumni Groups and Individuals

i. Cambridge Alumni Society, San Diego
I met Brian Beeston and his wife Anita early in my trip. Brian was organised and thoughtful about our meeting: he collected me from my accommodation, we ate and drank at the beachfront La Jolla Shores Hotel, and then we walked along the coast as he told me about notable local alumni and his group. His group comprises 350 members from a large area: some alumni are based elsewhere in Southern California but choose to be part of this group. This speaks to the success of the group. Brian and his wife organise up to ten events each year, including large soirees, discounted group trips to events such as Shakespeare’s Old Globe, a Boat Race event, networking nights focused by age group, quiz nights with other alumni groups, and drinks or dinner evenings in the homes of group members. Brian works hard to catch new members through LinkedIn. Brian and Anita’s hard work is key in the group’s success, however, they will hand the reins on in the next year and there is currently no one to take up their role.

In San Diego I also met recent graduate Susan (Genevieve) Bouchard. She had attempted to join her local group by emailing Brian, without success. Clearly the use of LinkedIn does not catch all members (Genevieve has an active account). I also met graduates Kirsten van Fossen and Ben Tsuda. They were part of the group, but not engaged in it until my trip. I think my trip and genuine promotion of Brian’s group helped them to become more involved.

ii. Southern California Branch, Homerton College
In Newport Beach I met Angela Clark and Judy d’Albert. These two Homerton alumni are the only active members of this group. They were extremely friendly and Judy organised a full day according to our interests – a trip to Hoag Hospital Neuroscience Department, to Harbor Day Primary School, and to Sherman Gardens Restaurant and Library. They welcome new members, and even alumni or current students passing through to contact them. A potential source of students is the University of Irvine, where some Cambridge student may work or intern during their summers. Neither Judy nor Angela grew up in California and they have valuable insight in living and working around the world.

iii. Los Angeles Alumni Group
Prem Sundaram heads this group. He is a busy man but was able to efficiently organise a pub meet up in the three days I was in Los Angeles. I had an thoroughly enjoyable dinner with several members of the group. The LA group is huge – 500+ members – and communicates via a mailing list. The biggest struggle of this group is organising events across such a large city (10 million people). Traffic is truly horrendous in Los Angeles, and Prem suggested that local sub groups could more successfully hold events that reach more alumni and increase participation in the group. I met with Natasha Lepore and her research group at Children’s Hospital LA as I returned to England via Los Angeles. We discussed our work and some potential avenues for collaborative work which is exciting – I would recommend this for future graduate student recipients of the travel award.

iv. Cambridge Society of New South Wales (Sydney)
This group is well organised by Suzie Ruse. Suzie is the paid administrator of the Cambridge and Harvard groups. Members pay an annual fee to join the group and also pay for some of the events. The group runs approximately five large events each year. I attended the winter feast: a fellow Cambridge graduate, author and historian, Michael Pembroke, spoke at the event which was held over a two-course dinner at the Royal Sydney Golf Club. Approximately 80 members attended, with a range of ages and professions present. I was also told about some of their other successful events: “Talks at Twilight”, a less formal version of the Winter Feast where a
Cambridge alumni speak to the group about their work, and “Tinder for Oxbridge,” an evening organised by the young alumni, for the young alumni of Oxbridge and the Ivies. The cost of the group appears the biggest deterrent for independent alumni in Sydney. These alumni are aware of the NSW group but have generated their own networks and contacted fellow alumni on their own terms. More funding from Cambridge could solve this problem. I think the University could also better communicate when academics are travelling through Sydney so such individuals can be approached to give a talk to the group.

v. Churchill College Group of Australia and New Zealand
I met only one member of this group on my trip: Prof Roy MacLeod. Roy has been an absolute delight to get to know. He has been hugely generous with his time, knowledge, and network, and we recently met for a formal dinner at Churchill College. Roy does immense justice to Churchill College, this alumni group, and the University as a whole, despite also being a founding member of several other universities and a Professor Emeritus at the University of Sydney. He doesn’t appear to be hugely involved in the Churchill group, but the College do support their alumni well and I think this is a small, well maintained, group.

vi. CJBS Alumni Network, Sydney
I get the impression this group is spearheaded by young leadership. The events are held in the city, to facilitate attendance after work, and always involve drinks. This is appealing because the events are relaxed and they are focused towards networking. Ian Kok leads the group and he also organises speakers. I was able to put Ian in touch with Michelle Baddeley (Caius alumna and ex-Professor, now head of the Institute for Choice in Sydney) to give a talk on her recent book.

There was a problem with a last minute visitor from Cambridge, where the group was expected to organise an event for the visitor with less than one week’s notice. Unsurprisingly, the group could not accommodate this. The CJBS and/or University should communicate travel information well in advance if they hope to rely on volunteers to host events.

vii. Cambridge Society of Auckland
Karen Swainson organised a lovely event in central Auckland where I spoke about the Boat Race and my PhD research, as well as life in Cambridge. The event was fairly well attended by middle aged alumni and a handful of Freshers too. The group was very friendly and several members emailed me to introduce themselves, even though they could not attend the evening. I was also invited to row with two alumni on Lake Pupuke, but unfortunately I was ill on the weekend we’d organised.

viii. Cambridge and Oxford Society of Austria
I had a serendipitous opportunity to attend the Freshers’ event in Vienna when it coincided with a conference I attended for the European Huntington’s Disease Network. I’d also met Michael Milkowits previously, at the Alumni Conference in July in Cambridge, which helped to make plans. I went to the evening event at Café Landtmann with a fellow Cambridge PhD student and spoke to the Oxbridge freshers and current students about the travel award and life as a Cambridge graduate student. The event was quite well attended: approximately 30 students were present and it felt like a great send off prior to their departure. The event was catered and drinks were provided, and a brief careers presentation with internship opportunities was given. In my opinion, the Austria group is successful in retaining young members because of these features, however, Michael still spoke of the difficulties in reaching all alumni in Austria, attributable to the strict data protection rules in Europe.
In conclusion
Overall, the groups are well placed to provide individualised advice to students and graduates that is tailored to their location. I doubt CUDAR could improve on this. The biggest barriers to growing the groups are the time restraints of the volunteers who run the groups, and the data protection laws which prevent groups from knowing when alumni have relocated to their city, or whether students and alumni are passing through.

Regarding the first barrier, the groups feel isolated and independent of the University currently. I believe genuine gratitude from the University would make the group committees feel more valued, possibly in the form of in-person visits, more organised event templates and speakers, and, of course, some funding for such events to be held. The second barrier could be overcome by a more comprehensive sharing of information by CUDAR, or even the acknowledgement that CUDAR do not have the necessary information (if this is the case).