

The story of my fight to get to University 1991-2005

This was originally written for the benefit of the two daughters who sadly do not live with me, for reasons which are outside of their control and my own. It turns out to be relevant to not just them, but to others around the world. A bit of a long read, but it's our history...

This is going to be a slightly long story - so why not get a cup of coffee, tea or a beer (or whatever the preference is in your part of the world), and I will begin...

The early days

Imagine a world without social media, indeed a world without the internet. When mobile phones were expensive rich man's toys, when looking up facts was not a matter for Google, but for a bus ride to visit a library. And a hope that you can find a book which was not too many years out of date! **The world of 1991.**

The story really begins back in the days when getting to university was the last objective I had, indeed even the idea was not in my mind back then. Survival was the only real objective in those days. And, not without good cause.

I am something of a maverick in my family; I am a modern 21st century man on the fringes of an outdated family who are almost 19th century in their outlook on life. They never showed much interest in me as a person, for them life essentially consisted of 'work, telly, bed'. Their monotonous and repetitious lifestyle was in itself a good enough reason to leave home, to keep a long story short.

And whereas (left to my own devices) I tend to be a man of principle, never afraid to disagree with others when I feel they are wrong, I regret to say that I often regard my family as being somewhat spineless, a rather supine bunch who the world has left behind in the past century. I was also not helped by the fact that I am an only child – there is nobody of my own age in the family whom I am really close to. With this kind of background, it is hardly surprising that progress was slow.

I left school in 1991 during a recession (just my luck!) and without A levels, I had a very bad time at boarding school, I was bullied a lot as I quite simply did not fit into the culture there. I was living with my parents until 1993 when I was 19, when I left home. I needed to be away from those who bullied me in the village where I had grown up also, and somewhere where there was some prospect of a job. I anticipated working in the electronics industry at the time. Of the nearest places of size, Bedford, Peterborough and Cambridge, I happened to opt for Cambridge as I

had ties to Cambridge already.

Cambridge and a wind of change...

It was mainly a job I sought in the early days. As Cambridge had an electronics industry, it seemed the obvious choice. At first, progress was slow, I was in a bad way, still haunted by memories of the recent trauma of boarding school, of the village where I grew up, and also the unsympathetic attitude of my parents "children should be seen and not heard" – that was a common saying among early 20th century parents here in the UK. All these things had

the effect of seriously damaging my confidence and self esteem. Indeed I had to depend on state benefits until October 1994 when I finally got my first job.

The jobs I had in the early days never seemed to work out well - however, nonetheless I did fall back on benefit until I next had work. No way was I going to accept defeat and go back to mummy and daddy (!) To be honest, working in the factories never really suited me - you do get a lot of people of limited outlook on life, but that is not part of my story.

However, being in Cambridge and having more money than previously did allow me to go out and socialise, I was beginning to gain in confidence to some extent. And this brought me into contact with students from both Cambridge University and Anglia Ruskin University as well as the academics who taught them. I had begun to realise that maybe, just maybe I could **probably** do it, at least in theory. But - there was a *major* obstacle which almost stopped me in my tracks.

Anglia Ruskin (nearly) says no...

The fact that I never had the chance to get A (advanced) levels, only a handful of GCSE's, seemed to be an impassable obstacle. So for now, the idea was shelved. Just imaging being able to make an excellent rabbit pie - if you could only first catch your rabbit! Frustrating in the extreme.

In the United Kingdom, O (ordinary) level exams were replaced by GCSE's (General Certificate of Secondary Education), with a grade C quoted to be equivalent to an O level pass under the old system. Honours degrees have always traditionally been graded as first class (1:1), upper second class (2:1), lower second class (2:2) third class (3:1) with anything less a fail.

What changed things later was a chance combination of events.

I already had some knowledge of electronics, I was always an experimenter, and besides, I was interested in radio among other technologies. I had long been a listener to the worldwide shortwave bands, and also had radio scanners with which I listened to all manner of things, including air and shipping communications, the military and emergency services, cordless and mobile telephones, companies and utilities, and of course, radio amateurs all over the world. I also had a brief fling with CB radio, but the language and behaviour encountered there soon put me off, and I decided to take my radio amateurs exam. I sold off my CB equipment and invested in amateur equipment to get on air as soon as I was licensed. In those days, there were no foundation or intermediate licenses, you had to take the full exam in one go, and I passed with credit on both sections. My parents did take some limited interest here. But not a great deal.

However, one person I talked to on the radio fairly regularly was a lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University, and he said that although not in the prospectus that year, a foundation course was to be offered which was aimed at those with the potential to get a degree but for one reason or another had not got A levels. Suddenly, I began to take an interest...

I looked at the possibilities during that long hot summer of 1995 - , certainly I wanted to get out of a lifetime of factory work, that much was certain.

It turned out that I had one weakness even as regards being accepted for the foundation course. Although my English and Science grades at GCSE *were* good, my maths grade (an E) was rather weak and I was almost rejected even for the foundation course. I later learned

that it was the radio amateur's exam which saved me from a lifetime of being stuck in the factories.

The tutors in charge of the faculty of maths, physics and electronics almost rejected me even for the foundation course. But – the same lecturer remarked that the radio amateurs exam contained mathematics to roughly A level standard in the areas covered and that meant that I just managed to get accepted in the end! I knew that quite a few people were in for a shock. But until I had confirmation I maintained silence...

The announcement finally came in October of 1995. The reaction of my family was a mixture of stunned disbelief and pessimism (they never did have much faith in me and still don't to this day). I knew well enough that some difficult times lay ahead.

Although there were some difficulties (particularly with the maths, since I did not originally have the background here) I think I can say I am a fast learner and managed to get through. Indeed in February 1996 the first results told me that I *should* get through. Although my target was an upper second class honours degree (2:1) under the traditional British grading system, things did go wrong at the end, leaving me with a lower second, missing out on the 2:1 by less than 1%! Such is my luck. So, I graduated with a lower second class honours degree, BSc Electronics, but was in any case invited to take a masters degree if I wished. I accepted the offer, part time and, despite being forced to intermit for a year, was awarded a Masters' degree in Computer Science in 2004.

A move to London

At this point I was unclear whether to go into the electronics industry, or whether to go into research. I initially had a graduate job in an electronics firm which specialised in DSP (digital signal processing) technology – a lot of their products were based around the FPGA (field programmable gate array), which is essentially a very complex programmable logic device. However, trying to undertake this as well as continuing with the masters degree was difficult. In the event I decided to go into research. I was admitted to Kings Collage London to undertake a PhD, which was quite an achievement, however I was forced to pull out due to financial difficulties, and herein lays the irony – after a shaky start, I never failed academically but failed to attract funding. This is just a recurring theme in my life – a hard won achievement snatched away by ill fate at the last minute.

This explains how I came to be in London since 2005, and also this was to result in my meeting my ex-wife, a cruel twist of fate which set the scene for an abusive marriage, the aftermath of which I continue to live with at time of writing. Indeed that marriage set me back years; no way could I progress during all that time. As I have said since my undergraduate days, stress is the mortal enemy of concentration. And my ex-wife's loss is someone else's gain. I nonetheless did gain two very beautiful and intelligent daughters however, who will nonetheless remain part of my new life come what may. More of this later.

The way ahead

This brings me to the here and now. So, where to go from here in 2022? Well - I never have had much luck in the job market here in the UK, graduate or otherwise. And given that my own country appears totally disinterested in my skills, along with the cost of living here and brutal UK family law (which would still condemn me to a life of poverty even if I got a well paid job which was remotely secure), I decide to take my skills elsewhere and begin a new life. I have decided to use the skills I have to set up on my own, and to improve the lives of others.

And I have other justification for emigrating too, but that is outside the scope of this story. Suffice to say that right now, I am preparing to begin a new life in a new place, complete with a new family in a country which many have never even heard of. Sometimes, you just have to put the past behind and fight to make a fresh start. That is what my family forgot. The rest as they say is history.

David Norris, Thursday November, 2023

