

# From graduation to graduate



**“Oh, I love the theatre”...**

## **A**CTUARIAL STUDIES TO ACTUARIAL PRACTICE

The world is filled with people who view the glass as half-empty and those that view the glass as half-full. And then there are the actuaries, who will not only measure the volume of liquid in the glass to confirm it is exactly half full, but will have this decision peer reviewed before informing the consumer of said-beverage that the volume of liquid has a 75% Probability of Sufficiency of meeting their thirst requirements. This is the world you enter when moving from university actuarial studies to the actuarial workforce.

When first asked to write this article about the exciting transition from actuarial studies to actuarial practice I experienced a rush of nostalgic memories. University days filled with late night caffeine-fuelled cramming before exams, frantic note-taking from lecture recordings and using all possible sources for study tips on exams. And yes I did pause to smile, but only for a moment as I had to ask my colleagues for exam tips before going to my lecture ahead of an all night cram session. How life has changed! As any actuarial graduate knows (or will soon learn) graduation is only the beginning of further study.

## **ACTUARIAL STUDIES... WHAT?**

As a first year actuarial student in university I remember going to parties and being asked what I studied at uni. To this I would always reply that I did actuarial studies, which would bring on the inevitable: “what is actuarial studies?” This happened in all but one instance where I received the response: “Oh, I love the theatre”, to which I was so embarrassed I just nodded and smiled. In any case, I certainly didn’t pretend to be starring in a one-woman play premiering the following week to which I promised all the party guests front-rows seats and told them to invite their friends.

So to answer the inevitable question of what is actuarial studies, in my first year of uni I would describe it as ‘statistics on steroids’. When this answer met with further confused and blank stares I decided that it was time to come up with a better answer. Hence, I used my natural powers of deduction coupled with the high-calibre research skills of a first-year uni student and promptly memorised the first one-sentence answer that showed up on Google. And for the remainder of my first year of uni I would inform people that one day as an actuary I would “use mathematical models to predict and manage future financial risk”. This answer would impress people... right up until the point where I was asked follow-up questions, and I would suddenly realise it was time for me to leave as I had to



rehearse for my upcoming one-woman play. It wasn't until my later uni years that I started to understand what the actuarial field was all about. It's amazing to look back at how your understanding of the actuarial field changes even between your first year and graduation.

### CLOSED BOOK TO OPEN BOOK

Upon graduation my friends with non-actuarial degrees burnt their textbooks and exam notes. Whilst I may have been slightly tempted to burn my textbooks and calculator, the knowledge that they would be required for future study stayed my hand... well, that and the fear of the effects of inhaling smoke from my calculator's alkaline batteries. So, putting pyromanic calculator fantasies aside I engaged in the joyous task of cataloguing and storing my textbooks, secure in the knowledge that whilst I maintained every record of every item learnt during university there was obviously no need to actively retain this knowledge in my mind.

This blissful period of wilful amnesia lasted until the first semester of Part III study. One difference for Part III students and working actuarial analysts is that we go from memorising all of our notes for closed-book exams to the glorious double-edged sword of Part III open-book exams. For my most recent exam I arrived with a trolley of exam notes. Lacking the upper body strength to physically carry all of the material I was left with the choices of bringing a trolley, employing my closest 17 friends as textbook Sherpas for the day, or carrying the books myself by becoming heavily over-exposed to gamma rays and hoping to find myself very angry. Naturally, I chose the most logical option, but upon finding out that university physics labs do not lend out unstable radioactive materials even when you use the word 'please' I quickly abandoned my plans to go Hulk-style and found myself a trolley. With my actuarial omnibus in tow I was convinced that my brilliant plan could not fail because no matter what the exam asked, the answer would surely lie somewhere in my 6,500 pages of notes. This plan may have worked, except that during the exam I was so consumed with writing (in what must have appeared as an obsession to keep Parker pens in business) that I barely had time to even glance at my notes.

### COLLEAGUES, TUTORS, MENTORS AND 'DAD JOKES'

But studying aside, the actuarial working world is an exciting place for a new graduate. When I

had my first valuation report handed to me to read, I accepted it smug in the knowledge that my double degree with Honours, coupled with a whole 18 months of part-time office work had surely prepared me to master all in this report. Hadn't it? Well maybe not quite, but any first-day jitters quickly disappeared when I realised that all of my colleagues understood exactly what I was going through and were only too eager to help by passing on their Excel tips and actuarial know-how. I found that the modelling and statistical skills I acquired from my university studies provided me with the essential tools to start my actuarial career. Embarking on an actuarial career is a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding journey, filled with colleagues and mentors and tutors to help you along the way. I think the only truly scary aspect of starting actuarial work was discovering that somewhere along the way I had adopted a 'dad-joke' sense of humour. By my second week the double entendres of "How's life" vs "How's things in general" seemed hilarious and I would sometimes respond to lunch invites with the phrase "I'm actuarially a little busy".

### EXCEL MASTERY, CALCULATOR MONOGAMY AND PARTY TRICKS

As I look back on those first few days as a graduate, probably the most mind-blowing feature of starting work was watching the Excel mastery that surrounded me. I remember watching an analyst use Excel without ever touching the mouse. At the time I briefly felt tempted to shout 'witchcraft!', but not being in 17th century Salem I settled for complimenting the analyst as being a 'human macro' instead. Little did I know that it does not take long to develop this innate connection with Excel. In fact, I still recall the day that I was 'Excel'ing at my work (another actuarial dad-joke) when computer problems deprived me of Excel for the day and I experienced phantom-limb syndrome at its loss! As I proceeded with other work I mournfully watched other analysts joyfully vlookup-ing and relishing their arrays. I was painfully reminded that only minutes earlier I too had been one of those lucky people and I questioned why bad Excel happens to good analysts. To give those of you still at uni an indication of the analyst-Excel relationship, I've added 'Excel' under 'languages spoken' in my CV. I know that mankind anxiously awaits the arrival of the first half-human half-computer cyborg, but if mankind really is looking for that missing link between computers and humans, one need

look no further than the actuary.

But despite my torrid love affair with Excel I haven't forgotten the years invested in my long-term (and mostly monogamous) relationship with my calculator. Working means I have graduated from being the nerdy caffeine-addicted university student who used to count a graphics calculator as being an essential when packing her shoulder bag for the day and blossomed into the nerdy caffeine-addicted actuarial analyst... who carries a graphics-calculator around in her purse, just in case. "Just in case of what?" I can hear you ask. Well, I can think of several instances that would require immediate access to a graphics calculator. For example, if I were at a party and people began showing party tricks such as palm-reading or juggling I would sadly find myself without a party-talent unless I was able to whip out my trusty graphics calculator and show them my self-illustrating parabolic functions. Naturally, I blame my lack of party invites on not having a graphics calculator constantly on hand. Now, I know you're going to say "Alissa, what if you find yourself at a party of actuaries? Won't everyone else know that trick?" Obviously in this instance such a trick would fail to impress and I would be forced to pull out my sad impersonation of a peg-legged pirate dancing the Nutbush as a back-up party trick.

### ACTUARIAL CAREER PATHWAY... I'M ON MY WAY

But putting thoughts of calculators and Excel aside, embarking on an actuarial career has been a challenging but highly rewarding path. Having passed the graduate phase of my career I am looking forward to the next exciting phase of the actuarial career cycle. Becoming an actuary is a career decision where you have the opportunity to apply the skills you learnt during university while being surrounded by supportive, helpful and like-minded colleagues. Working as an actuarial analyst has enabled me to develop professionally and be in a position where people listen to and respect my professional opinion. Having started on the actuarial path I can't imagine ever wanting to do anything else. So to all the young actuarial students at university reading this article, I hope you consider the actuarial path after graduating, because I guarantee it's an exciting career unlike any other, and that's not just a guarantee with a 75% Probability of Sufficiency. **A**