

What I didn't learn from Alan

Toby Walsh

National ICT Australia and
University of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia
`tw@cse.unsw.edu.au`

Introduction

I had the luck¹ to study and work with Alan Bundy over a number of years. It is easy to recall the many things I learnt from him both directly and indirectly about how to do research. Indeed, many of his ideas like bluebook notes I unashamedly stole and have applied within my own research groups. I therefore wanted to focus on a much shorter list: the things I didn't learn under his pupilage.

You need to say “no” sometimes

Does Alan ever say “no”? I can't recall when I last heard him decline an invitation. Of course, I quickly learnt some of Alan's tricks like his great ability to delegate. He will, for example, get people to write the first draft of their own reference. He will agree to do almost any job, but always sufficiently far in the future that he can be sure to do it, . . . I also observed (but never fully learnt) how good Alan is at managing his time. However, there are only so many hours in *my* day, and even if I delegate, I've realized I might have to say “no” a little more often than Alan.

But you should never say “never”

Whilst you should sometimes say “no”, it was only after I left Edinburgh that I learnt you should never say “never”. I'm not sure if it was common knowledge or just an urban myth, but many people (myself included) believed Alan kept a letter in his desk draw threatening to resign if they ever made him Head of Department. So it was a little surprising to come back to Edinburgh and discover Alan as Head of School. However, it was clear he grew even into that job, and the resulting grey hairs only added to his political skills.

¹ I say “luck” since when I signed up to do a PhD with Alan, I didn't realize how lucky I was to have such a considerate and smart supervisor. Even when I finished, I didn't realize quite how hard it is to supervise students. Only after I had supervised several students myself did I start to understand how tough a job it is to do well, and how unique Alan is.

Every cloud has a silver lining

You don't have to deal with many knockbacks when you work with Alan. Grants are renewed, papers accepted, research is carefully directed down successful avenues, . . . I therefore learnt more about dealing with the downs (as well as the ups) of academic life when I *eventually* came to leave Scotland². I learnt some valuable lessons during this time. In particular, you eventually have to stand on your own feet and build your own reputation. Alan casts a long shadow so there comes a time when we all should step out into the light and face the world alone.

There are only so many papers you can write

As anyone who has worked with him knows, Alan writes quickly and clearly. I tried hard to write as many bluebook notes as him, but I never caught up. At one point, I believe my derivative was as large as his. But this only was because I was a postdoc with few responsibilities. I heard one senior member of the automated reasoning community³ suggest that Alan just pulled his next CADE paper out of his desk draw, dusted it off and sent it in. This is clearly unfair but you get the idea. It was only after I left Alan's direct care and had students of my own that I discovered that the best multiplier were students. You can only write so many papers yourself. Indeed, one of my most pleasurable experiences recently was introducing Alan to one of his academic grandchildren. Now that's a real multiplier!

Endurance is hard

After Edinburgh, I spent time working in a number of different research groups. One of the things that stands out about the Mathematical Reasoning Group from this experience is that it has lasted and prospered over such a long time. I've witnessed groups of people come together for a short while and be highly productive. However, it is very rare to see such groups last. Alan is to be commended therefore for sustaining the Mathematical Reasoning Group over decades. It requires a lot of unusual talents: the ability to raise continuing funds, to attract fresh blood, to inspire research via a common vision, . . .

Students thank you indirectly

Given all that he has taught me, I don't think I really thanked Alan adequately. I hope therefore that he gets a small satisfaction whenever one of his students does something right: publish a paper, edit a journal, chair a conference . . . He deserves it.

² For those of you paying close attention, leaving was itself a learning experience.

³ He or she shall remain nameless as they were speaking off the record.