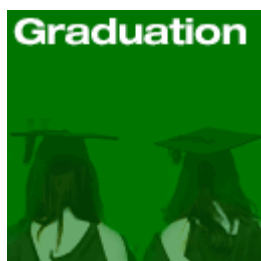




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The short answer

Students often see a full-time postgrad course as the only way to go after a degree. But, says Clare Adler, night school can give you skills that make you just as employable



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Each summer graduates leave prestigious universities brandishing certificates boasting supposedly enviable qualifications. But many have no clue what to do next. If you are one of them, a short course ranging from two days to several weeks could bolster your prospects and focus your talent.



Interest in short and part-time courses is on the rise. The number of people logging on to hotcourses.com, which is one of the most comprehensive sources of information on courses in the UK, rose by 179% in the first half of 2006, compared with the same period last year. Another site geared to non-degree courses, Floodlight.co.uk, experienced a 147% rise in traffic over the same period of time.

Whether it be copywriting, TV presenting, documentary making, photography, interior design, speechwriting, event management, or just writing a business plan, a short course is not so much a commitment as an experiment. Such courses are more practically orientated than most university learning; demonstrate that a graduate is well rounded; and are great for making contacts. Not only will they give you a competitive edge, they may unearth talents you never knew you had.

As with many graduates who have succeeded and thrived in the school and university system, Miriam Feyer feels rather lost now she has graduated with a first in psychology from Birmingham University. "I walked away

from my graduation ceremony yesterday with a hugely valuable piece of white paper," she says. "But I have no idea what to do next and how to get started."

For me, a short course in feature writing at the London College of Communication (LCC) following my degree was a turning point in getting my own career off the ground. At university, the careers officers were unable to help me find clarity and direction. A computer-generated careers program even suggested I become a factory inspector.

I learned more about how to turn my studies and experience into a living during my two-day LCC course than I had done during the sum total of my years enjoying a quality international education. I made crucial contacts, including one who commissioned my first article for this newspaper while I was on the course.

Those two days empowered me to pursue a career I had not considered beforehand and showed me what to do next. Learning intensely with people of varied experience levels and giving and receiving feedback in a small group was also pivotal in giving me the confidence I needed to move things forward.

As a careers consultant and the founder of City-based CareerBalance, Simon Broomer is a firm believer in short courses and says they offer graduates numerous benefits. A solicitor by training, he attended a two-day telephone sales course early on in his career, which he says impressed employers. It also gave him precious practical and transferable skills for his job search and enabled him to phone prospective employers with more confidence.

"A short course can be a little key to a door," says Broomer. "Even if it's a hobby, it shows discipline and commitment on your CV. On the other hand, so many people say I'd love to do this or I'd love to be that, and I often recommend they do a short course just to dip their toe in rather than diving in at the deep end.

"Short courses tend to be practical and you often meet people who are self-employed and paying their own way. Work is on the agenda."

So, is a short course a viable alternative to a second degree? Bettina Strenske, who attended a career in photography course at the LCC last year, recently won first prize in the London mayor's annual anti-racism photographic competition.

"Photography was a hobby for me, but this course was definitely more of a launchpad for my career than my BA or my MA in screenwriting had been," she says. "It was

highly practical, while university learning is more theoretical. I now regularly sell images to a photographic agency specialising in ethnic images. The course gave me the certainty that I could do things I never thought I could."

It was two days of birthing coach training that completely changed the direction of Nadine Stark's further education plans. Already a qualified teacher, armed with a BSc in psychology and an MA in education from the Institute of Education, she became interested in the natal arena after the birth of her first child.

"I plan to continue my studies in the future," says the self-employed birthing coach. "But I had always thought if I did a PhD, it would be in education. As a result of my two-day course, I now know I'd like to pursue my interests in women and health studies."

Although short courses tend to be cheaper than Master's degrees, some can be expensive. So, always be sure to choose carefully and investigate the quality. "Verify any claims that course organisers make about arranging work placements before spending lots of money," says Broomer. "The City Lit has a good reputation for creative courses. Check the credentials of the teachers and whether they are working in the industry now."

Such a teacher is Sally Gray. As well as teaching short courses in TV presenting at the London Academy of Film, Radio and TV, she has her own show - How to Find a Husband, in which she dates 70 men in 50 days - which will be broadcast on UKTV Style in September.

"The TV presenting courses here are fantastic value for money; you make your own showreel and find out if TV presenting is what you really want to do in your heart of hearts," she says.

The academy offers more specialised short courses in TV presenting and for a nominal fee you can attend regular networking evenings.

"Short courses like these are a great alternative to trying to get in by banging your fist on a massive iron door," says Gray. "If you go on a course with the right attitude you can take what you've learned and go full steam ahead. The proper drive and energy always reaps rewards."

Gray always knew she wanted to be a TV presenter, so after her degree in media studies, she started as a secretary at the BBC and took a one-day course in presenting.

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