

University: Is it worth it?

... and how to make the most of your time there

How do I become a cameraman? Should I go to university and, if so, what sort of course should I take? Most successful cameramen will have been asked these not-so-simple questions many times by young people keen to follow in their footsteps. Or maybe you have a son or daughter approaching school-leaving age who is pondering their further education options. Unfortunately there is no straightforward, 'one-solution-fits all', advice to be given, especially with the plethora of media-related courses around today. In this article, aimed at school-leavers, students and those on the receiving end of those frequent requests for advice, recent graduate Aidan Myatt argues that, despite challenging times for those entering or completing their further education, there are some things students can do to help them make the right choices and to secure employment after graduating.

Is uni the best option?

There are lots of depressing stories about the state of the graduate job market at the moment, and the future can look pretty grim if you're in education and considering your next steps. According to one recent survey, one in five new graduates is currently unemployed: a scary thought if you're just about to seek employment or considering university. So, is it even worth going into higher education or would you be better off sticking with the good, old-fashioned 'university of life' and hoping you'll be able to work your way up? (For more about this route, see the box from James Fulcher). Let's be honest, media degrees and the like have been criticised often enough publicly and even labelled 'Mickey Mouse qualifications'. These days a degree doesn't come cheap either (typically costing up to £27,000 for fees alone) and, after all that, it still doesn't guarantee a job.

Of course, there are many successful writers, technicians and presenters that didn't go to university, but most will agree that it certainly helps and, according to data released by the Office for National Statistics, those with degrees still earn more on average than those without. The reality of the current climate is that very few people enter any industry without some sort of qualification. Many employers expect all potential employees to have a degree, or at least a diploma, as a given, rather than viewing this as an extra selling point.

There is no denying that the media industry is extremely competitive, with many graduates, or soon-to-be graduates, asking the question: how can I stand out when more than 300,000 individuals are leaving university each year to start out in the world of work? The good news is that you can be proactive, and there is plenty you can do to get a head start. Below are some top tips based on my own experiences as a recent graduate and advice from more experienced colleagues who have told me what they're looking for.

The right course for you

Media Studies, Production, Global Media, Media and Communications and many other media-related subjects have become very popular choices for potential university students. Some courses approach media and broadcasting studies in the same way as you might study History or French – as an academic pursuit rather than because you necessarily expect to end up working as a historian, linguist or broadcaster. Others include a larger or smaller practical element to give an appreciation of different facets of the technicalities of filming and production. Only a handful really focus on teaching specific technical skills, taught by professionals who have themselves worked recently in the media. (One of the most common criticisms is the lack of real industry experience amongst lecturers and tutors, so this is something to look out for if practical learning is at the top of your wish-list).

The media industry is huge and these days covers a wide range of skills and expertise. There are so many courses to choose from, it's crucial that you select the one that's right for you. Read the individual course descriptions very carefully. This will mean looking into teaching and assessment methods; the ratio of practical to theoretical work; and whether the college offers any career opportunities and placements. Keep a track of your research, if necessary with a large piece of paper and spider diagram.

When universities offer open days, take the opportunity to ask current students about their experiences as this is often a good way to dig beyond the university's PR and find out what it's really like on a particular course. It's all very well a college boasting about its brand new studio facilities but these are not much use if there are no industry professionals to teach you how to use all this lovely state-of-the-art equipment properly.

It is a good idea to check out whether your chosen university

Join the GTC!

If you are pretty sure that the path you would like to pursue is to become a television or film cameraman – whether or not you choose to take the university route – then you really should take advantage of the student membership rate for the Guild of Television Cameramen. At £20 a year, this is without doubt the best and most cost-effective source of expert advice, knowledge and insight into camera technology, camerawork and the realities of working as a cameraman. See below for member benefits and how to join.

The GTC also runs an Award for students, the GTC Bill Vinten University Award. See: <http://tinyurl.com/amos4gb> for more information about the award.



University of life: Learning on the job

James Fulcher, GTC Co-Vice Chair and Student Liaison Officer

When I left school I was faced with two choices:

- Go to university: I had the grades to get into a good university but after extensive research I decided there was little to be gained from three more years of study that would significantly increase my chances of employment as opposed to starting work immediately.
- Go straight into work: But not having any contacts in the industry it felt a mountain to climb to even start talking to people in the industry. So, I decided that if I started off with a 'gap year' I could spend this time seeing how I would get on finding work without a degree. If nothing came of it after a year I could reconsider my options and nothing would be lost.

Before I set about seeking work as a camera trainee or runner, I spent about a month reading about and researching the theory behind the basics (exposure, white balance, framing, safety etc) and this meant I was able to derive some real value from my first few days of work as a trainee. I was also able to demonstrate that I was really serious about camerawork as my chosen career path.

The first advice I was given (by former GTC Forum Administrator Andy Smith) was to join the GTC. This was brilliant advice as it gave me the vital opportunity to make my first contacts in the industry. I signed up to the GTC Forum and attended as many GTC events as possible. In an industry

often seen as being a closed shop, the GTC was refreshingly welcoming.

Now, four years on from leaving school, my career has taken me to more than 30 countries and I frequently work with major broadcasters. I have a steady career that I am proud of and have had no second thoughts about the route I chose to get me where I am. In my opinion, university should be very seriously considered, and in many careers it will lead to the greatest opportunities but in my situation I don't think it would have added anything.

In my experience, there are no shortcuts to a career in TV; it is simply a ladder of hard work and dedication – and the only way to move up that ladder is to prove your ability and commitment. There are no particular hoops to jump through or diplomas needed, it is more a question of steadily and consistently proving at each stage that you are ready to take on more responsibility. For me, I can't think of a better way of proving my ability than starting up as I did, taking full advantage of the contacts and expertise on offer through the GTC, and always giving it my very best shot.



is part of the Creative Media Skillset Academy and also well worthwhile finding your way around sites like www.unistats.com, which offer both general information about the courses you are interested in, as well as more specific gems, such as Lincoln's School of Media comes up top in the UK for graduate employability!

If you already know exactly what you'd like to specialise in, then it's appropriate to find a course that matches this as closely as possible. A few universities, for instance Bournemouth, offer courses like *Film Production and Cinematography* and other specific programmes. The best of these universities may have strong ties to the BBC, or offer work experience at prominent companies in film and TV, so this is another thing to find out about. Bournemouth has the advantage of having been awarded as a centre of excellence in media practice.

However, if like me when I first started at uni, you know that you're interested in film or media, but don't yet know the exact

specialisation you want to head towards, you may prefer a broader based course. I chose *Media Production* at Staffordshire University, partly because it didn't put any pressure on me to commit to a specialism, such as editor, director or producer. Some universities offering similar courses expect you to specialise from an early stage, and for me this would have been a disadvantage as it doesn't allow you to gain experience across various disciplines. I enjoyed trying roles across the board: everything from director and producer to lighting operator and soundman. Some of my fellow students found that they excelled in a specific area, one discovering a gift for music production, for instance. Eventually everyone found their niche and we were able to support each other right across all the technical aspects of producing a first-rate film.

At Staffordshire the course was roughly 70% practical to 30% theory. I discovered from the practical work, for which we completed various exercises and productions working in teams, that my strength was directing. I found this the most creatively fulfilling and learnt that I enjoy the power of dictating shots and framing, and the challenge of guiding the movement from scene to scene. I also enjoyed the communication involved in conveying to the cast and crew how I felt the scene should be played.

A university education can mean a great deal more than training for a specific job. *Media Production*, and related subjects, are of most value when they develop a range of skills that kit you out for the most dynamic sectors in the modern economy. This can range from skills in research, presentation, communication and team-working, to the ability to think critically and creatively.

Stand out from the crowd

Having chosen your course, it is important to take every opportunity to build a set of materials that will help you in your search for employment once you graduate.

For me, a good showreel is a must for any student looking to get into the film and TV industry. A showreel is a short film that combines the best snippets of your work to demonstrate who you are and what you can do. It should be used to grab the attention of potential employers while showcasing your personality and, to an extent, your level of experience.

Although employers don't always request a showreel, and may not view it even when they do, anything that



Lining up a shot for a short film 'Abolished' during undergraduate study at Staffordshire

KELLY-MARIE TILCK

might help catch their eye as they wade through a vast pile of applications and CVs has to be worth the effort. It's never too early to start putting together a showreel. While at university I was able to build a reel that included highlights of the films I produced there, all the time bearing in mind what I felt future employers would want to see. I tried to work out what would set me apart from the thousands of media students graduating each year. You need to carefully consider the material, timing, style and branding that will best sell you. Of these, content is probably the most important and you need to think long and hard about the types of films you include on it.

A typical student film

I discovered from sitting through countless student screenings in stuffy classrooms, that there was a distinct tendency towards a 'student film look'. Gaining 'maturity' in these films is an art and important to try and achieve as early as possible. I became somewhat obsessed with this as I wanted to avoid being instantly recognisable as a student filmmaker through undeveloped plots, shoddy visuals and poor editing.

Some examples of the areas in which student films most often fall down are these: Firstly, they tend to overdo the shot content, for example, a character wakes up, rubs their eyes, gets up, shot of the door handle as they leave the room, then another as they descend the stairs, the door handle of the front door is shown moving as they exit... and on and on. The scenes are over-elaborate, when all they really need is key shots – the person waking and then leaving the house.

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The audience doesn't need it spelt out. And then there is the plethora of horror films – a popular choice for students, but definitely one to steer clear of as it's so difficult to create any credibility.

Locations are also key to a good film. While I was dreaming up content for my showreel, I tried to achieve as much variety as possible and bore this in mind when selecting locations. Use your surroundings to good advantage, and always avoid the easy option of the student house – this shows a lack of imagination and looks lazy.

While at university I tended to be very critical of my own films, but now I find I can



Recreating a crime scene with a small crew and small budget: tough for any student film-maker

look back and appreciate some of the work and still select some of the better shots for my ongoing showreel.

Utilising what's available

It is also important to make good use of any equipment available to you. This goes beyond just course-related content and knowledge, it means everything from getting your hands on any available cameras to learning to use editing programmes. Universities often have industry-standard technology and equipment, mainly as an incentive to encourage students to study there, so make use of it! An average student will simply use the equipment when they need to; if you want to stand out from the crowd, you need to get your hands on it as often you can, to perfect your skills and become as familiar with it as possible (see also suggestions below from James Milligan about getting involved with university television).

Work experience

Try also to get as much work experience as possible. It is one thing having a strong showreel but you need a CV to match. Nothing demonstrates a dedicated and hardworking individual better than plenty of previous experience in the field, especially if this has been gained in their free time. Any experience in any area is good, especially as student terms leave a great deal of spare time over the various holiday periods. Expect this to be unpaid but view it as a stepping-stone. A quick Google search of 'runner jobs' will bring up all

sorts of opportunities and many production companies are keen to offer students some form of work experience.

Building contacts

As in many professions, you can be the best at what you do, but if people don't know about you, then you won't get very far. Networking has become an important part of the modern way of life. Websites like 'LinkedIn' provide an excellent way of keeping in contact with people you meet along the way. Remember, that the runner you met on set while doing work experience could become a useful contact who might be able to help you further down the line – or perhaps you will want to employ them on one of your productions. It's easy to be cynical about these sorts of site, and some experienced professionals may recoil against this advice as it can seem a bit calculating. It's also possible that overly

eager 'networking' might alienate some, but generally, if done sensitively, there are more positives than negatives to this avenue. It's a good idea to start building contacts as early as possible but do be aware that this isn't Facebook and you should take a professional approach to posts on these sites at all times. Using social media judiciously has proved to be successful and if you follow the rules and be sure only to link up with those you 'know, like and trust' it can become another powerful tool in your career-building kit.

Into the workplace

The climate was, and still is, hard for any graduate and unfortunately looks likely to remain that way for some years to come. Along with many others, I found it hard to find work at first. Some companies will use this to their advantage when it comes to setting wages for graduate employees. While I accepted that my work experience would be unpaid during my university days, I also understand how this can be detrimental to students/graduates when companies start to take it for granted and I can name situations where this has happened to people I know. However, at the same time I am grateful to be able to write on my CV, for example, that part of my work experience was with the British Society of Cinematographers. Not only good for the CV but also great experience and a real eye-opener into the industry.

When it came to looking for employment, in the end my showreel did turn out to be a key factor. I'm currently working full time in production with a digital media sports company, Perform. The short two-minute clip I had compiled to display my university work helped me to stand out from the crowd and, just as I had hoped, ultimately to secure the job.

Fact File

Aidan S C Myatt graduated with a BA Honours in Media Production and an MA in Film Production, having studied at Staffordshire University and Canterbury University. He now works for a leading digital sports media company Perform and has also set up his own company Artistic Eye Media (www.artisticeyemedia.com), filming weddings and corporate/promotional videos. His showreel can be viewed on Youtube under the title: 'Aidan S C Myatt Showreel 2013'. Please feel free to contact him at: aidan187@hotmail.co.uk

Get involved in university TV

James Milligan, GTC Social Media Officer and GTC Forum Mediator

Rather than follow a degree in media production, I decided to do one in Computer Networking, and to gain experience in my spare time as much as I possibly could. Since starting at university, I've been on a huge range of shoots, from smaller self-produced videos to directing crews on multicamera shoots, with the university's TV station.

I'm involved with the station as both a cameraman and technical co-ordinator, working with the station manager to procure kit, as well as run the technical side of larger productions. I'm asked to organise multicamera shoots, which often start out quite simple, but rapidly get more complicated as I try to push the boundaries of what we've done before, whether it be using different equipment or more cameras. Not only have I gained a ton of experience by filming for PSTV, but also from undertaking other roles, like vision mixing and directing. This is helping me to be better prepared and ready to understand what will be expected from me.

I've also been hired on professional shoots as part of larger crews, and I've worked twice on an annual music event, which gives me a huge amount of experience each time even though it's only 3 days long (I got this spot from posting on the GTC Forum!). I've also covered other events, such as a charity flashmob, as well as having some news footage broadcast on *BBC North West Tonight* – the highlight of my career so far!

Chris Kneller is another student member of the GTC, who works as a cameraman at the university TV station. He is studying Philosophy and

is thinking of doing a Masters in either Documentary Production or TV Production. Both of us have the same advice: if you're at university and there is a TV station, try and get involved; if there isn't a station, try to start one! Usually the students' union will be able to help out on the money side as long as there are people interested in getting involved.

If you're not at university yet, there's absolutely nothing to stop you becoming a cameraman – Doug Allan is a renowned wildlife cameraman, who started off as a diver, then worked as a scientist, before being inspired through working with Sir David Attenborough to become a cameraman. Both are also GTC members!

James Milligan – www.milligan.tv; **Chris Kneller** – cknellertv.foliohd.com



Why join the GTC?

GTC membership will give you:

- career development opportunities: workshops and training days by accredited trainers
- member-level access to the GTC website: www.gtc.org.uk
- free online CV and showreel listing on www.gtc.org.uk
- two issues of the highly regarded magazine Zerb
- four issues a year of the informative members' newsletter GTC In Focus
- expert opinion and advice from the GTC Forum
- prestigious annual awards celebrating the best television camerawork
- discounted carnets and PAT training
- networking opportunities at events and through the GTC Forum

How to join

To find out if you are eligible for membership and more information

Visit: www.gtc.org.uk

Email: membership@gtc.org.uk

Tel: 0300 111 4123

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