

## Blind date

Russell Cowie is studying music at Durham University and considering a career in event management. "Up until about a year-and-a-half ago I was thinking I'd like to be a session player or a composer in residence," he says, "but then I got involved in organising a club night and really enjoyed it." While looking for a term-time job, Cowie had chanced upon an advert asking for a student representative to work for a local nightclub. "I started for very little money working on a night of the week when very few people come out," he explains. "But as I've proved myself the responsibility has increased and now I work on the most important night of the week."

He has also been involved in organising events and festivals at his university and his experience has made him think that a career organising events would suit him. "I love the thrill of the pressure and the deadlines and then seeing it when the whole plan has come together." His main interest is in working for a company that organises big corporate and private events.

We asked Liz Taylor, the managing director of TLC Ltd, a Manchester-based events management company, to "mock interview" Cowie for an entry-level job. "I've been doing this for 23 years," Taylor explains, "and in that time we've grown to become a company that will design and manage events for a range of private and business clients. We work all over Europe on anything from big product launches to celebrity weddings."

She says that to work successfully in the field you have to have two types of skills. "You have to be able to think quickly," she says, "and be able to respond to client requests straight away and in a positive and creative way. And then you have to have the resources to back that up. You have to know how to organise flying Lionel Richie over to perform or finding the best steel band in the country."

She also emphasises the importance of organisational skills. "The success of the company is in the office," she says, "in the administration and organisation." She points out that the job is not about sipping champagne at celebrity weddings. "We do have access to glamorous events and great entertainment," she says, "but putting them together is the key to our success. It's about remembering to tell someone if the numbers for a party have increased so you have enough chairs and plates for everyone. It comes down to common sense and communication, but not everyone has those skills."

The final ingredient is a good first impression. "I can tell from the moment I walk into a room if someone is going to be right," she says, "and Russell came over very well. He's confident, very communicative, he looked smart and



**Questions asked**

- What do you want to do when you leave university?
- Are you creative?
- What events are you working on at the moment?
- What examples can you give me of being organised?
- What examples can you give me of managing other people?

**Scorecard**

Appearance **9/10**; Preparation **7/10**; Employability **10/10**

presented himself really well. In our business, initially you're selling an idea to a client so you've got to be able to find the right level on which to talk to people. I look for a nice manner, being able to chat – and a strong handshake!"

Taylor says that experience isn't necessary for a career in event management – "I'd just as soon have someone with the right raw material who is quick to learn" – but says that Cowie's CV shows he is enthusiastic about the career he has chosen. "He does have lots of experience," she says, "and the only thing I'd suggest is that he should get some more working in an events office, so he can show he's had some time doing the real, nuts-and-bolts planning and organising, as well as running the events on the night."

But she was impressed by the success he'd had with his club nights and a portfolio of plans for a festival he showed her. "His strength is his persona," she says. "I think he's got a lot to offer. All he needs to do is broaden his experience a bit."

Cowie says he enjoyed his meeting with Taylor: "The first minute of an interview is always hell on earth" he says. "I think I'm worried about being asked a question I can't answer. But once I open my mouth, I don't shut it again."

**Alice Wignall**

**If you are an undergraduate or recent graduate in need of a career blind date, send your CV to [graduate@guardian.co.uk](mailto:graduate@guardian.co.uk)**

## Money spinners

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negotiating payment for further articles. "If you go in as a student and ask for money, people will laugh at you," he says. "But if you do something well, and people see you are good, then they will pay you for work in the future."

John Clifford, a second-year multimedia computing student, employed a similar tactic to source web design work. The 19-year-old worked on a couple of sites for free so he had work to show potential clients, and has now given up his part-time retail job to focus on web design work.

Clifford, who has also sourced paid work through studentgems.com, says the advantages of the projects he is working on are far greater than just earning money. "With project work, you can start work when and where you want and you don't have to travel anywhere. I used to have to travel two hours to my old job," he explains. "Also, I'm learning new skills and adding to my portfolio. I not only do the graphic design of a website, but also the back-end side as well. I don't really know which way I want to split so it is helping me decide what to do in the long term."

Graphic design graduate Ingi Erlingsson thinks that paid work can provide better experience simply because someone is paying for it. He signed up with an illustration agency during his second year at university, and was sent on freelance assignments with companies that included Orange, Camel and Channel 4.

## So you want to study A master's in medieval studies



The middle ages is a period often only touched upon at school, if at all, so it's perhaps not everyone's first choice for a historical postgraduate course – but maybe that's what makes it a bit special. The chance to work with original manuscripts dating back hundreds of years must surely be fascinating.

### What will I study?

**David d'Avray, professor of history teaching MA medieval studies, University College London**

The MA has four elements; a thesis, a medieval language – usually Latin – and two other units. Students can take the usual kind of medieval graduate courses, for example medieval magic, medieval papacy or early medieval identities. They can also, however, get much more intensive technical training in reading and using medieval manuscripts, and in the scholarly languages a professional medievalist needs. Professional medievalists need palaeographical and linguistic skills, and few have them when they graduate with BA degrees in history or English.

**Frances Eustace, MA medieval studies student, University of Bristol**

I'm taking a two-year, part-time course including compulsory core elements, three options and final dissertation. Core texts include Chaucer and

Boethius. I'm also studying Latin and paleography. I opted to take further Latin, old French, medieval English drama and medieval secular song.

**Julie Kanter, MA medieval history graduate, King's College London**

I studied the required subjects of materials and methods, Latin – intermediate and advanced – and palaeography, as well as my chosen optional classes of English royal government and Magna Carta. My dissertation was an analysis

of the household account rolls of Edward I.

### Why do medieval studies?

**D'Avray:** Many of the things that made the modern world, such as the nation state, the idea of Europe, universities and international banking techniques, began in the medieval period. Some students on the course have acquired a taste for medieval studies as undergraduates and want to understand the period at a more profound level.

**Eustace:** I am a professional musician, specialising on historical instruments and this, combined with a move to an area of Wessex with a great deal of medieval history, led me to an interest in the culture and history of the period.

**Kanter:** I chose to study medieval history because I am fascinated by it. I find the emergence of bureaucratic administration quite interesting. I also really liked the fact that my course allowed me to actually handle medieval source material.

### What are the job prospects?

**D'Avray:** Academic jobs in medieval studies are scarce, though some of the recent graduates of the MA who are currently completing doctorates are likely to be near the head of the queue. Some make different choices, however. Some go on to become lawyers.

Several others have become archivists. The archival profession has concentrated so much on electronic resources that it is very short of the manuscript expertise that graduates of this MA have acquired.

**Eustace:** I plan to continue to be a freelance musician, but hope to include more education workshops and other more integrated programmes of performance combining music, literature and contextual cultural history.

**Kanter:** At the moment I'm continuing my studies in medieval history by pursuing a PhD at King's College London. The title of the thesis I am working on is Analysis of the Itinerary of 13th Century English Kings. To go for a doctorate, it was, of course, necessary to have first completed my MA. Ideally I want to lecture in medieval history at university level.

### Can you get funding?

**D'Avray:** In the UK, the main source of funding for postgraduate work in the humanities has always been the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The competition is incredibly intense, but this MA has done well.

**Eustace:** I'm funding myself, hence the need to be a part-time student.

**Kanter:** As a US citizen I was not eligible for any funding. I was, however, able to get student loans at good rates.

## 'If you're getting paid, there's the pressure of working to a certain standard'

The 25-year-old graduated in 2006 and currently works as an art director, a role he is certain he would never have reached without a bulging portfolio. "Probably the most important thing for me when I graduated was having client experience working on real projects," he explains. "If you are getting paid then you have that pressure of having to produce work to a certain standard. Sometimes people just let work experience people work on stuff that might not be the end product because they are struggling to find something for them to do."

National Council for Work Experience director Heather Collier agrees it can be difficult for students to find placements that aren't a waste of time when competition is so fierce.

"There are lots of employers competing with each other in a small talent pool in the construction, engineering and financial sectors," she says. "But on the other side of the coin you have media and creative industries where there are lots of people clamouring at the door for the same placements."

She recommends those looking for unpaid placements seek out employers that have established work experience programmes, such as the BBC, to ensure their time will be spent working on worthwhile projects that will enhance their CVs.

As a student, it's not easy to find paid opportunities that add to your employability. But it's not impossible. The key is learning to market your skills and being able to use any work you've already done, whether paid or unpaid, to secure more opportunities.



**Student John Clifford did unpaid work to begin his portfolio David Sillitoe**