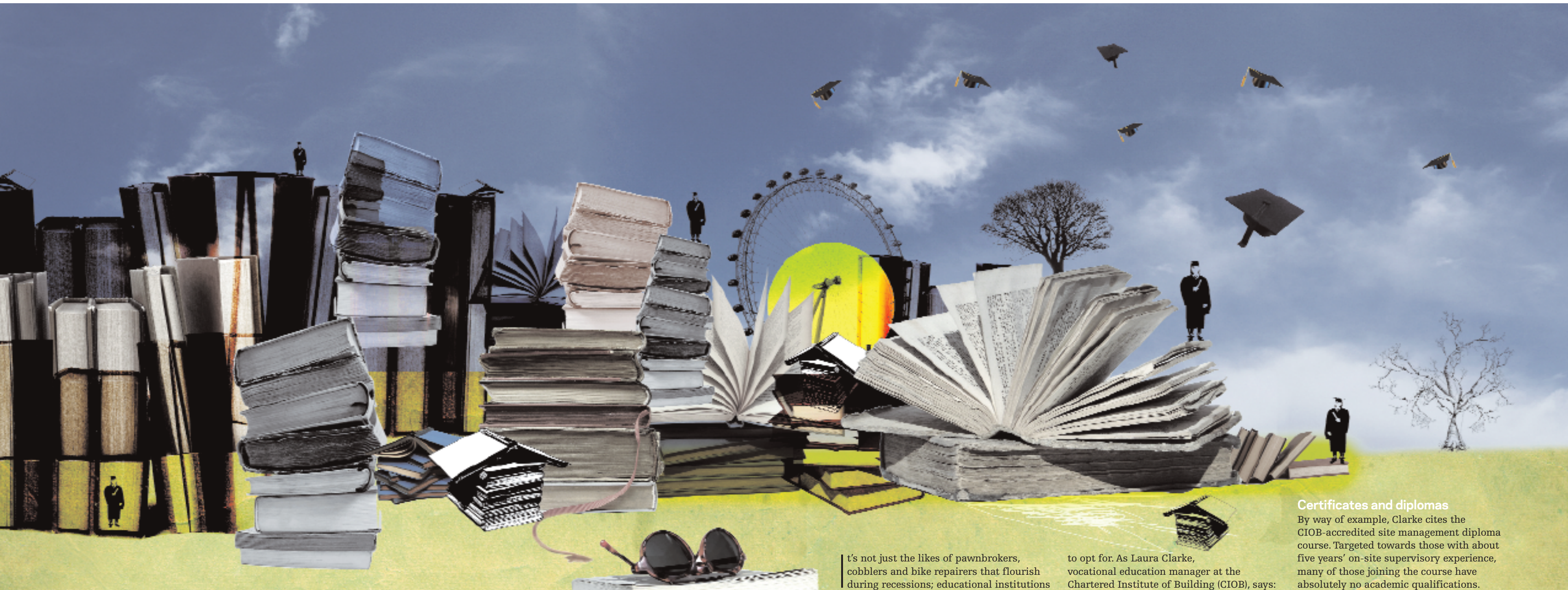


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BRICKS AND MORTARBOARDS

There aren't many positive sides to a recession, but while things are quiet it might be worth adding an extra qualification to your CV - whether it's an HND or a PhD.

Dean Gurden reports

It's not just the likes of pawnbrokers, cobblers and bike repairers that flourish during recessions; educational institutions are also seeing a renewed interest in what they have to offer. One of the positive ways that building professionals can react to a world of reduced hours and reduced workloads is to hit the books to equip themselves as best they can for when the upturn comes. And for those that have suffered the misery of being made redundant, studying for the likes of a diploma, HND, degree, masters or even a PhD offers a welcome diversion from sitting at home waiting for the telephone to ring.

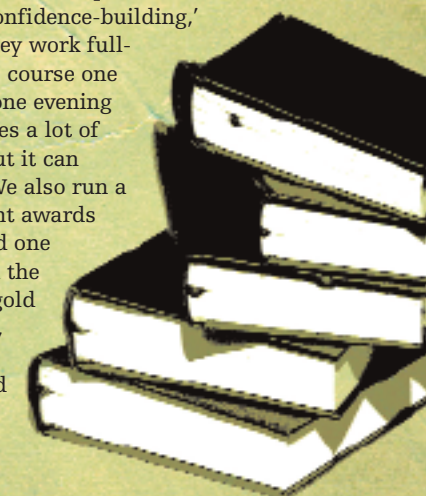
However, with a wealth of available courses out there, it's often difficult to know which

to opt for. As Laura Clarke, vocational education manager at the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), says: "We're inundated with queries at the moment from people who are looking to progress their careers and want to know where to start. We assess their skill sets, look at what academic and professional qualifications they have, and then advise them on what courses will best suit them."

For those wanting to balance studying with a full-time job, the type and style of study will often be dictated by their employer. Larger employers often favour the more traditional academic courses, while smaller firms tend to go for the more vocational courses that concentrate on competency and site-based experience.

Certificates and diplomas

By way of example, Clarke cites the CIOB-accredited site management diploma course. Targeted towards those with about five years' on-site supervisory experience, many of those joining the course have absolutely no academic qualifications. 'It's all about confidence-building,' says Clarke. 'They work full-time and do the course one afternoon and one evening per week. It takes a lot of commitment, but it can really pay off. We also run a site management awards programme, and one individual from the course got the gold award last year, then went on to do a degree, and is now doing ©



his final-stage professional review towards gaining his CIOB chartered qualification. He is also sitting on one of my main committees. It just shows that if you're committed to learning, the sky's the limit."

Alternative options are higher national certificates (HNCs) and higher national diplomas (HNDs), which are vocational higher education qualifications. While bachelor's degrees tend to focus on gaining knowledge, HNCs and HNDs are designed to give you the skills to use that knowledge in a particular job. They have traditionally been popular within the construction sector. However, with the government severely pulling back its support and funding of them, they are slowly falling out of favour. Instead, further education colleges are increasingly turning their attention to foundation degrees, which also have a heavy vocational emphasis. These involve two years of study, compared to the traditional three-year UK honours degree.

Degrees

The CIOB has recently accredited a foundation degree in construction management from Oxford Brookes University, which was developed in consultation with an industry partner to give it a strong vocational element. Naturally, this is just one of many courses offered by the university. Michael Hill, field chair for undergraduate construction courses at the institution is keen to sell the benefits of a traditional degree to those in the building industry. "I'd say the advantages of getting a degree, especially during the economic downturn, is that it's an opportunity to perhaps refocus your career. Most of the construction management degrees are very broad, in that we teach a little about an awful lot, and the pathways that follow from it can be very different and varied. A degree can genuinely open up areas that individuals may not be so familiar with, and they can look at alternative career paths."

As with many other institutions, those in full-time employment are welcome to do their studies on a part-time footing. Hill says many students negotiate with their employers to go part-time and then pay only half the fees of a full-time student – about £1,500 per year over five or six years. The more experienced students from industry who can show their skills match some of the modules can even exempt themselves from those parts of the course, which shortens the length of the degree. Generally though, part-timers are probably looking at attending



THE INDUSTRY HAS BEEN VERY SUPPORTIVE OF STUDENTS WHO ARE DUE TO GRADUATE THIS SUMMER – NOT ONE OF THEM HAS SUFFERED REDUNDANCY

DR EZRA KURUL, OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

the university one day a week, with additional work to be done outside of this time as well.

Hill adds a cautionary note that doing a degree part-time is probably the hardest way of going about it. "By the very nature of the work, it's generally a long and demanding working week in the construction industry, and trying to balance this with a degree isn't the easiest thing. Having said that, the fact you have industry with you and you're practising what you're learning at the same time makes for very strong students. They bring a lot to classrooms because they have experience and can share that with students who have yet to go out into industry."

Masters degrees

Further up the academic ladder, Oxford Brookes has also been offering a part-time MSc in project management in the built

environment since 2007, designed specifically for those in work. It is two years in length and about 60% of the students are sponsored by their companies. They dedicate about one-and-a-half days a week to the programme, including three weeks spent at the university in the first year and two weeks in the second. Tellingly, the university will be offering the MSc full-time from September 2009 due to the demand created by the downturn.

Industry has often complained in the past that masters courses have been too academic and devoid of any practical application, something that Dr Ezra Kurul, programme leader for the MSc at Oxford Brookes, is quick to deny: "Our course is very much centred on problem-based learning and the industry has been very supportive. And looking at our second-year students who are due to graduate at the end of the summer, not one of them has suffered redundancy. It's obviously a difficult time, but our students seem to be faring quite well."

PhDs

Even higher up the academic ladder, Milan Radosavljevic, director of enterprise for the School of Construction Management and Engineering at the University of Reading, is also at pains to point out the practical nature of his PhD courses: "A PhD is a project with all the constraints and complications you would find undertaking an industry project. In completing a PhD and returning to industry with all the experience and skills that you wouldn't normally acquire in a more traditional building framework, it gives ex-students a huge advantage. They have proved they are capable of both practical and academic rigour. During the PhD you're exposed to so many different tools, techniques and theories. You learn to thrive in a variety of different situations."

Radosavljevic adds that many companies have been surprised when taking on PhD

employees: "They didn't realise these skills were available and they're amazed at how capable these people are."

Again, like many of his peers at other educational institutions, Radosavljevic reports a renewed interest in his courses. "During the boom years, we were starved of suitable candidates. Obviously the salaries in industry were much higher than anything the academic world could offer. Admittedly, it can be a bit of a Spartan life for the three years of study, but people are now starting to realise that it gives you immense credibility later on. Those students that have completed their PhDs and returned to industry seem to fare much better than their peers."

Having said this, Radosavljevic does voice his frustration at the fact that most of those taking up PhD places are international students, a problem affecting the whole academic world. "If we could even get 10% of our intake composed of British students we'd be doing well; and this is despite there being plenty of funding opportunities available. In fact, we even have our own funding within the university where we can cover the tuition fees and living costs, and they're tax-free."

With the financial support there for the taking, Radosavljevic's zeal even has him suggesting that the three or four-year duration of any doctoral studies could be seen as the perfect place to escape from the recession and the taxman, with the added bonus of coming out the other end with a much improved position.

He's also keen to sell so-called Case (Co-operative Awards in Science and Engineering) PhDs, which are linked to a specific industry partner. The university has just started offering a four-year engineering doctorate where students spend 75% of their time working for the partner. The idea is that the company has a specific need or problem and the

doctoral student solves this problem with the help of the academic body. This has something in the range of a non-taxable £15,000-per-year stipend from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, plus a top-up from the company, depending on the calibre of the student.

WE EVEN HAVE OUR OWN FUNDING WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY WHERE WE CAN COVER THE TUITION FEES AND LIVING COSTS, AND THEY'RE TAX-FREE

MILAN RADOSAVLJEVIC, UNIVERSITY OF READING

Distance learning

All of the courses highlighted so far can be undertaken on a part-time basis, but for those that want even more flexibility, the College of Estate Management offers construction and real estate courses up to MBA level on a distance-learning basis, as well as degree programmes validated by the University of Reading. The average age of their students being 34, participants are generally in work, with their employers picking up the tab. In fact, in a sign of the times, the college has just set up a bursary fund to cover students who suffer redundancy while studying, whereby the college pays up to 75% of the tuition fees. They've had a number of

applications already.

"A lot of our students have entered the industry and progressed up to a level where they need a qualification to take the next step up, particularly into managerial posts," says Ben Elder, director of business development at the college. "We've also recently started seeing a number of students returning to us. They started, then dropped out or suspended their studies while the industry was booming, and have now returned because they've got more time on their hands. They also see the academic and professional qualification as more important now that the industry is more challenged. It's no longer a luxury, but a prerequisite."

The total cost for the BSc programme at the College of Estate Management is £6,500 and runs over a four-year period. Considering that a full-time "in-house" degree can cost upwards of £3,000 per year over three years, it is proving a popular method of study in these straitened times.

The degree of flexibility the courses allow has also made them attractive to employers, as Elder explains: "They seem to like this method of study because the students remain flexible workers. If they were attending a traditional university they'd have to travel to the institution regularly, whereas we can deliver the course anywhere in the world. We actually had some students who moved from London to Dubai, where the market at that point was still holding up. We simply amended our database and allowed exams to be taken in the local British Council offices."

The only downside of the distance-learning format is that you're missing out on the networking opportunities that attending a university or college, however sporadically, allows. It's a point made by Louise Barrington, director at the Centre of Construction Law, which offers MScs and a certificate in adjudication. "The intake on our courses come from all areas of the industry, so you're meeting intelligent, keen, open-minded individuals all the time. We've had people on the course who have said it's changed their lives. Our youngest students are in their mid-20s, but we've also got students in their 60s, so it's never too late to change your career."

You may not want to change your career, or your life for that matter, but there can be no denying that further and higher education offers some wonderful opportunities to give your professional life a boost in these recessionary times. Why not order that prospectus now?

