

THE MATURE STUDENT RETURNING TO STUDY

Fears

Do not worry if you feel you may not be able to keep up. You may need to **relearn how to best learn**. Age is not a barrier to learning and although it is a bit harder to learn at 50 years of age than 15, it is not that much harder. Some students have enrolled in their sixties and seventies and managed both to enjoy themselves and get a degree.

Many mature students feel that they will look foolish or lose face or status by failing. Accept that if returning to study after some years away, a feeling of anxiety or fear is normal. You are not alone in having it and it is in most cases totally unwarranted. **You will probably laugh at your fears before to long.**

You should recognise **that you have strengths** that those with youth often lack. As a mature student you have many advantages over those straight from school. You may know where you are going in terms of money and career, or what you are giving up (such as free time, sleep or a social life) and will be more highly motivated to succeed. A strong motivation can more than make up for a very minor reduction in the speed at which you can learn new things.

Technology has advanced, and if you do not own or know how to use a computer you should keep reminding yourself that you are not too old to learn how to use one. Help is available to upgrade your technology skills. There are many courses available through TAFE and Community Colleges. These may be a valuable addition to your chosen study. Some of the finer points for example databases

available through the Internet, the World Wide Web may be explained in your course or through information technology services at CSU.

Learning

As a mature student you have to take responsibility for your own studies. At school teachers were prepared to take a lot of responsibility for what had to be learned and how we learnt it. At school there is the general understanding that if students do badly their teacher is open to criticism. By contrast, as an adult it is up to you to decide how much effort to put in.

Your lecturers do not assume responsibility for telling you what to learn or how to learn it. You have to manage these things for yourself. **You have to decide your own priorities; set your own targets and work out your own strategies** for achieving them (you can get help from Student Services Learning Skills Advisers).

What more, you have to take responsibility for deciding what views to hold. **Lecturers expect you to form your own judgements about the strength and weakness of various ideas.** Your studies are an inquiry into the nature of the world which you are undertaking. You have to be able to weigh up ideas not just learn them. You have to be able to argue for one idea against another, not just repeat both. The whole emphasis changes from being a passive receiver of 'knowledge' to you being an active seeker for 'understanding'.

One element of learning needs stressing. **It seems easier to learn by doing, rather than merely listening or reading.** Try to do additional work for yourself as well as reading the textbook and set reading material. This should involve actively doing

something if possible. It can take the form of spending more time drawing diagrams, drawing up tables, reading your notes and condensing them, going to the library and searching for information yourself on the topic you are currently studying, looking up alternative textbooks, checking encyclopaedias to see what they say about it and so on.

Recounting what you have just learned to another person is particularly useful as a way of reinforcing the information. If you have a supportive partner who will willingly listen, it helps a lot. If not, consider forming a group, (either by way of phone, fax, computer or meeting occasionally) with other mature students and working a study group, bouncing your latest ideas and information off them and reciprocating. If you are doing the same subject, you all benefit from both presenting and listening.

What are study skills?

There are many different aspects to learning how to study, all of which tend to be gathered under the general heading of 'study skills'. This is slightly misleading as it implies that they are all the same kind of thing. It also implies that they can be learned in the same way that you learn a physical skill, such as catching a ball. With that kind of learning you don't have to think a lot about what you are doing; you just keep doing it until you get the result that you want. Yet many of the skills you need to develop as a student are not skills of that kind.

Some of the capabilities you need for studying are **habits** of work, such as how to set out your study table, where you sit and when you take your breaks. You do not need to become skilled at these kinds of things, you just need to establish certain routines.

Other capabilities you need for studying are **techniques** for accomplishing particular tasks, such as the way you set out your notes on a page, how to file your notes, and so on.

Another set of capabilities you need are better understood as **strategies**. These may include such things as; the way you allocate your study time, or the approach you take in essay preparation. Capabilities are not produced by routine practice but by thinking, imagining and planning.

Also, to enable you to be effective in reflecting, predicting and analysing, you need some understanding of the processes of study. That is learning in the realm of ideas rather than skills.

Where the concept of skill is useful is in connection with the larger scale activities such as; writing an essay, finding relevant articles in the library, or preparing for an exam. These distinctions between the different uses of the word **skill**, is so that you are not presented with a range of activities to practice mindlessly, and that when finally mastered you will become a 'skilled student'. Instead it is suggested that there are resources (such as these series of brochures) to help you think about the different aspects of studying. Also they help develop a range of **strategies** for approaching your studies. There are resources that suggest various **techniques** you can try and **habits** you might need to develop.

Studying with other commitments

Probably the main thing to sort out is your immediate family and your relationship within it. You may have obligations, especially if you have partners, children or fulltime employment. If you have a supportive

partner, then they can take a lot of the burden off your shoulders.

You will certainly need to make some changes in your family life. A family does place some obligations on its members. Those with children and partners are prone to feel **guilty** about not spending the same amount of time with them the way they once did, or for delegating responsibilities. If you are aware in advance of the possibility of such problems, it helps to avoid some of them and cope with others. Keep reminding yourself that you are not the first person, nor will you be the last, to face these issues. Others have managed, and so can you, but it might need family discussion and joint effort.

Your job may be directly related to the subjects you are studying. Even if your employment isn't directly connected with the subjects you study, it may require you to use your mind imaginatively to solve problems and to grapple with new ideas. In this case, your brain won't feel rusty when you tackle formal study. Useful connections between your employment and your study can be particularly important if you are an external or part-time student with little opportunity to discuss your learning with teachers or other students. However, close connections between your work and study can sometimes create problems if, for example, you read a book which criticises teaching methods you use, or if courses you take for further job qualifications seem irrelevant.

The amount of energy you put into your job affects your energy for studying. The high level of energy and creativity which you devote to a satisfying job can carry over to your studies. If your studies are less stimulating than your work, you may

rapidly lose interest in them. The overall time that your work requires, the particular hours that you work and the travelling time from home to work, all influence your study. They affect your choice of courses, how much time you can spend on private study, and sometimes make studying difficult.

Allow yourself time to discover what university is like for you. Expect to feel both confused and excited in the first six to twelve months while you settle in, while you begin to understand what is expected of you and to define some of your own objectives. During this time, as well as trying to pass courses, put some energy into learning how to learn and to making contact with staff and other students.

<p>Division of Student Services Help Desk Albury 02 60516828 Bathurst 02 63384678 Wagga Wagga 02 69332405</p>
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Without wishing to re-invent the wheel in compiling this brochure, we have drawn on material from Australian universities and other sources for advice and examples. Particular mention must be made of the following:
Bucknal, K.B. (1995) How to succeed as a student, Griffith University:
http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/stubod/stuadv/stu_advice.htm;
Marshall, Land Rowland, F (1993) A guide to learning independently
Longman Cheshire: Murdoch University.
Nothedge, A (1990) The good study guide.
Open University: Milton Keynes, UK.