

# **10 Tips for Mature Age Students Returning to Study**

## **1. Develop a Network**

One key to successfully returning to study is to develop a network of friends and acquaintances on campus. The CSU campuses can seem dauntingly large and impersonal, and you may initially feel somewhat isolated and alone. Although it may seem that the campus you attend is entirely inhabited by fresh faced 18 year old students, there are many mature aged students studying here.

Mature age students frequently fit their classes and study time around work and family commitments and may not spend a great deal of time on campus. Those who are studying part time may spend even less time on campus. Apart from the pleasant social aspects of having friends on campus, you need to develop a group of people with whom you can discuss lectures and assignments, collaborate on difficult tutorial problems, share references or borrow or swap notes if you miss a class. Colleagues can also be an important source of support when you don't understand concepts and need extra help or reassurance.

Make a positive effort to meet new people and develop a list of phone numbers in the first two weeks of semester when workloads are light. Attend faculty welcomes and other orientation activities. Greet people whom you recognise from your classes when you meet them on campus. Have a cuppa or lunch with classmates during the breaks.

## **2. Explore**

Important information about course structure, organisation and assessment issues is given in early lectures. Keep an eye on faculty noticeboards and check the faculty information on the web. The first few weeks are the best time to meet other people in your course and academic staff in your area. If you go to class, show some interest, and try to do at least some of your work, then your tutor or demonstrator is more likely to know who you are, and appreciate that you are making an effort.

Find the location of your faculty office, and your main lecture venues. Find a place in the Library where you feel comfortable to work. Check out the sports complex, the union building, Student Services and the various food outlets.

The more time you spend on campus, the more you will start to feel a part of the place. Remember that campus is your place too.

## **3. Plan Your Time**

Time Management is a crucial issue for all students, but particularly for mature age students who are often juggling study with work and family commitments.

A timetable can be a useful aid to help keep track of your time. List work commitments, other important commitments and classes. Then determine what time is available for study. Whatever course you study, there are routine tasks which need to be completed every week: preparation for lectures and tutorials, preparation and/or completion of labs or pracs, completion of problem or tutorial sheets, completion of computer tutorials and review lectures. Ideally, you should list all of these tasks on your weekly timetable. Assignment and essays are extra tasks, which need additional time.

Spend a similar amount of time each week on each subject. Diaries or weekly and daily “to do” lists are also useful aids to help you stay on track and stick to a plan. Whatever system you use, listing tasks in writing is a form of commitment to complete them.

Think about how you learn best. Do you prefer to work early in the morning or late at night? Are you happy to juggle several pieces of work at one time or are you more comfortable working on one essay at a time? Be realistic about your preferences. Don’t plan to get up early if you know you’ll never get out of bed and don’t plan to study after dinner if you always fall asleep on the couch by 8.30.

Use small chunks of time that you usually waste for completing minor study tasks. There is a common perception that you need a large spread of uninterrupted time to achieve worthwhile study, but there are many tasks, which fit quite well into the one hour time spaces between your classes. You can use this time to read for a tutorial, to review several lectures, to brainstorm an essay topic, or to complete one problem. Break large tasks down into segments, which are easily achievable. Suit the time to the task. Always be ready to make the most of good quality time – when you know you will concentrate well and be able to work. Save this time for thinking and writing or focussed reading.

Learn to prioritise. You can’t do everything, but you can always do something. Think about what is the most important task you need to get done in the time available. Set private deadlines for assignments, which are ahead of the true ones. This way you have some leeway of family emergencies, work deadlines or illness strikes.

You can’t work flat out on your studies all semester. Studying for a degree is a long haul and you need the support of your family over that time. Although study may appear to take over your life when assignments and exams are imminent, at quieter times during the semester your family deserves more priority. Plan time to spend with your children or partner. Make sure that there are times you can relax without feeling guilty. If you are well organised, it is possible to fit in several study blocks over the weekend while still including family time.

#### **4.Embrace Technology**

If you’re not comfortable using computers or surfing the internet, then returning to study provides a wonderful opportunity for you to upgrade your skills. Computer technology is used extensively throughout the university for teaching, learning and

accessing resources. Many departments now put much of their course materials and handout on-line and email is the preferred method of communicating with academics within the university. Increasingly you will also be expected to access on-line research sources to support your essays and some subjects require you to complete on-line tutorials. Also there are computer labs on campus.

It may be worthwhile to investigate student loans for obtaining your own computer, if you don't have one at home. Ask at the Division of Student Services to find out about student loan schemes.

Visit the Division of Information Technology and find out how to set up and use an email account. Attend some of their classes on using computers.

Join a Library tour and familiarise yourself with the library layout and procedures. Take time to practice using the library catalogue and searching for information on-line.

- What are the most commonly used call numbers for your area of study?
- What are the main journals or books in your area? Where are they kept?
- Learn to Bookmark the most important on-line journals and sites for your area of study?

## **5. Adjust Expectations**

Returning to study is a wonderful opportunity to think, learn and expand your knowledge. Many mature age students say this and spread their arms expansively as they say it!

As a mature age student, you will typically have very high expectations of yourself and want to get high marks. After all you have given up a lot to return to study. You may have career plans and the whole family is watching you.

At the same time you need to be realistic about what is expected of you, what you expect of yourself and what is possible. Most students undergo some transition process in adjusting to university life. You may initially feel frustrated by a lack of direction or explicit expectations and with such limited contact with academic staff. At the same time you may be grappling with the discourse of a new discipline and undeveloped academic skills.

Also the standards at uni are high. You are studying in a more competitive environment and relatively few students receive honour grades for their work. Learn to value your own achievements and don't judge your progress solely on the basis of the marks you receive. Mature age students generally have more life experience and are willing to take risks and contribute to discussions, and for this reason lecturers and tutors value having you in their classes. The academic skills, which you may lack if you have not studied for many years, can usually be learned.

Allow yourself time to settle into your new study regime. Don't try to write the definitive article or produce your life work when 1000 words is all that is required. High expectations and goals are great, but being a perfectionist and having

unachievable goals will very quickly demoralise you and bring this exciting process to a halt.

## **6. Stay Focussed**

Rather than becoming anxious and getting lost in the detail of your course, try to see the “big picture” of how your course fits together as a whole. Focus on the objectives for each of your subjects. Examine your course outlines very carefully and try to determine how the topics fit in with the course objectives.

- What are you expected to be able to know or do, at the end of the course?
- What are the key issues or content areas in this subject?
- What is the logic of the way the classes are organised?
- How do the different topics link together?
- Are tutorials or lab classes parallel with lectures or arranged differently?
- What assessment tasks will be required of you? When are assessments due?

It's not unusual to lose motivation at some stage during your studies. Everyone gets bored with study and with putting the rest of their lives on hold while they complete their degrees. At such times it is useful to revisit your reasons for deciding to study. Focus on why you are doing this course or subject. Writing a list of your goals and current problems can sometimes help you to regain perspective.

## **7. Acknowledge Changes**

Attending uni will bring many changes to your life and to the lives of those around you.

Accept that this is the case. You have made the decision to go to uni and undertake this study, so take full responsibility for this and the associated changes! However, this doesn't mean you have to deal with everything on your own and bear all the stresses on your own.

Talk to your family, partner or others you live with and let them know what uni will involve for you. Let them know about your time schedules, your busy times, your need for quiet times, and your need for support (or even the occasional nagging). If they are fully informed, they are more likely to feel part of the process and will be in a better position to support you.

The timetable already mentioned is a good way to share your study with those close to you. Point out the changes it will involve and the times you will meet commitments, join with them and still be the same person they know and love!

## **8. Reward Yourself**

At uni it can be hard to gauge your progress. You may work for long periods of time without any feedback from academic staff. If you are studying arts or commerce subjects then you will likely have several assignments to complete during the first semester, but you are unlikely to have them returned to you before the end of semester. In other subjects there may be little assessment apart from the end of semester exams. At times you will undoubtedly feel frustrated by this apparent lack of structure, guidelines or feedback and with the limited contact with staff.

Reward yourself for submitting work on time, completing a difficult tutorial sheet, understanding a complex theoretical concept, participating in an oral presentation or simply for keeping on top of your work load, balancing work commitments and your family life and coping with the demand of a university course.

Take the opportunity to share your successes and achievements with the people who are important to you. Make the completing of a difficult study task the basis for a family celebration. In many ways you are not competing against the other students, but striving to find your own time and space to make progress in your chosen course of study. Recognise the progress you make and remember to give yourself credit for your achievements.

## **9. Stay in Touch**

Lecturers and tutors although busy with teaching, research and administrative commitments are interested in your progress through the course. It's important to let them know if you are having problems or need an extension or special consideration. If you fail to submit work or stop attending classes, they will have no idea what has happened to you, and may assume you have dropped out. If you need to contact one of them it is best to make an appointment either directly by phone or email, or through the faculty office.

## **10. Know Where To Get Help**

Many students run into difficulties at some stage of their course. At uni you are expected to be an independent learner, but that does not mean that you have to handle all of your problems on your own. There are lots of people on campus who can help you, but it's up to you to ask for assistance.

All faculties have a member of the academic staff designated as a Course Coordinator, and this person can often effectively deal with your initial problems or questions about course organisation. The School Liaison Officers contacted via Student Administration Office, are also great sources of information about credit points, subject combinations, advice about changing subjects or courses and procedures for special consideration.

If you are having problems with your work, other students in the course can often be a great source of help and support. Working collaboratively with others to solve problems or brainstorming ideas can benefit all members of the group. Some faculties facilitate the formation of study groups, or organise mentor programs where first year students are paired with later year students who can provide support. The Division of Student Services has Learning Skills Advisers and Maths Learning Skills Advisers available to help student with assignments and statistics. There are also Study Centres for Chemistry, Physics, Maths and Study Skills available on some campuses through the Division of Students Services.

If after trying some of these strategies, you are still experiencing real difficulties with course content then contact your lecturer in the subject concerned.

The Learning Skills Centre also provides academic support. It offers study skills classes, individual appointments and a wide range of material on study skills can be downloaded free from the web site: [www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/)  
You can also check out the web site on Avoiding Plagiarism at: <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/plagiarism/index.html>

Personal, emotional, health and financial problems can also impact on your study and affect your ability to keep up with the workload.

The Division of Student Services has a range of services that student can access. The Help Desk Team can direct you to an appropriate service to meet your needs, answer your questions and provided information. Call into the campus office of Student Services or check out the web site: <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/>

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Reference:

University of Melbourne, 2004, Language and Learning Skills Unit.

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/llsu/advice/mature.html>