

Tertiary studies - mature age students

Returning to study or starting tertiary study as a mature age student can present many challenges, such as juggling course commitments with the demands of work and family life. Despite this, mature age students usually enjoy the learning experience and do equally as well as other students.

Mature age students are usually highly motivated and keen to do well. This is great, although sometimes it can mean that they put too much pressure on themselves to succeed. Try to keep things in perspective. Study hard and effectively, but balance this with time for family and friends.

If at any time you feel that you're not coping, remember that tertiary institutions offer support services such as counselling.

Mature age students have different past experiences

Mature age students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a wide range of experiences. You may have:

- Taken a break for a year or two before starting tertiary studies
- Returned to postgraduate study after a break of many years
- Been away from any kind of formal learning environment since you left school, which might be 20 years or more.

If you are aged over 18 years and have been out of full-time education for at least a year, TAFE classifies you as a 'mature age student'.

Study aims

The study goals of mature age students vary. For example, you may have returned to study to:

- Obtain a qualification
- Upgrade a current qualification
- Update your skills
- Change career direction
- Further an interest.

Mixing with younger students

Some mature age students feel uncomfortable with younger students in their classes, while other mature age students love this experience. Don't compare yourself to others – it's simply not helpful. Keep an open mind; as the semester passes, you may find the class dynamics change and people mix more with others, regardless of their age.

Practical considerations

There are many things you can do to help with the transition and adjustment to tertiary studies. Suggestions include:

- Investigate on-campus services. For example, some tertiary institutions have on-site childcare facilities. See the student services department, student diary or the website for your tertiary institution for more information.
- Find out about financial support. Visit your local Centrelink office and find out about services you may be eligible for, such as government childcare allowance, Youth Allowance or Austudy. Scholarships may also be available, so enquire at your institution or visit their website.
- Try to arrange your class timetable so that it reduces disruption to your existing commitments. For example, some institutions offer flexible delivery of programs that may include evening classes, weekend courses or online subjects.

- Run household errands during breaks in classes – some institutions have banks, medical clinics, pharmacists and other shops.
- Take short courses to familiarise yourself with new technology if necessary. Some mature age students may not be comfortable with new technology; however, student life will be much easier if you can use computers and the Internet.
- Take a library tour to learn how to best make use of this facility.
- Find out if your tertiary institution has a student mentoring program.
- Talk to your lecturers and tutors about any concerns, particularly if you feel you are not coping with the workload. You may be able to apply for an extension of time if you are struggling to meet a deadline.
- Submit a 'Special Consideration' application if you've been seriously ill or experienced some sort of crisis during the semester: for example, death of an immediate family member, medical problems (either yourself or your immediate family), personal or family crisis. Speak to student administration, your lecturer or the student counselling service.
- Use your time effectively and be organised. This will help you arrange your study around commitments to family, work and class time. Time-management skills are essential to keep on top of your studies.

Build an on-campus network of classmates

Friends on campus provide support, social interaction and collaboration on difficult assignments and exam preparation. Mature age students often don't spend too much time on campus because of work and family commitments, and generally have fewer opportunities to make new friends. However, you will find there are enormous benefits in establishing a network on your home campus.

Suggestions include:

- Try to attend orientation activities and at least a few on-campus social events, especially those related to your course.
- Use services for older students. Most tertiary institutions have 'mature age lounges' for socialising or mature age student associations that you can join.
- Don't wait for friendships to evolve naturally. Actively seek out other mature age students and discuss the practicalities of forming a 'support network' for each other.
- Find a 'study buddy'.

Coping with family friction

When one partner decides to take up tertiary study, it can sometimes cause problems within your family. It's possible that your partner or your children may not be entirely happy with the time you spend on study. Your friends might find it difficult, too.

Suggestions for coping with family friction, if this occurs, include:

- Make sure each family member knows why study is important to you. Resentments and arguments can arise if your family does not understand your decision to return to study. Discuss their concerns, fears and misgivings openly to encourage communication.
- Ask them to respect your at-home study times and avoid interrupting you. It may help to hang an 'Enter at your own risk', 'Do not disturb' or 'Study in progress' sign on your door at these times, as a reminder.
- Show your family your timetable. Keep a copy on the fridge so everyone knows what you are doing on any given day. Make them feel included.
- Ask your family for support. Tell them how best to support you; for example, you might need quiet time alone or you may be tired and would like to be taken out for dinner.
- Write up a new housework roster and involve each family member in the process. Let them know that you won't be able to do as much around the house now that you are studying.
- Be assertive with friends until they get used to your student role.

Time with your family and friends

It is easy to be engaged with your studies and lose sight of your family or close friends when several deadlines are looming or around examination time. However, if you don't spend much time with your family, they might feel like they don't matter to you.

Suggestions include:

- Don't rely on spontaneity. Schedule regular time with your family. Plan something special for when exams are over. Arrange a proper 'catch up' with friends during term breaks.

- Plan for family time and write 'appointments' into your weekly timetable to help you enjoy yourself without guilt.
- Consider setting your own deadlines for assignments a few days earlier than the actual deadlines. A week or so of breathing space allows for the interruption of unexpected events, such as family illness.

Be kind to yourself

Mature age students typically take the decision to return to study very seriously and have high expectations of their performance. Unrealistic goals can lead to frustration, despair and dropping out.

Suggestions include:

- Expect to go through a rocky transition period. You have made sacrifices to return to study and campus life presents many challenges. Allow yourself a few months to settle in.
- Don't worry if it seems like you are the only one who answers questions or discusses things in class – this is something mature age students often experience. It's your education. Keep talking and learning!
- Explore the campus. Deliberately get lost! You are less likely to feel daunted and out of place if you know your way around.
- Be patient. Your academic skills will be a little rusty if you haven't studied for some time or you may need to learn new ways of studying. Don't be demoralised – regard it as a time when you are "learning about learning". Do the best you can; practice will soon improve your skills. Use learning support services at your tertiary institution.
- Have realistic academic expectations. Some mature age students hope for a high grade for every piece of work and feel very upset when the grade they receive is not as high as they wanted or expected. Try to remember that you are at university to learn, which means it's unlikely you will do really well all the time. Ask the person who marked your assignment for as much feedback as possible so you can do as well as you can the next time.
- Remember your long-term goals and remind yourself frequently of the good reasons behind your decision to take up study. Stress can make you question your commitment to study. It may help to write a list that you can refer back to.
- Give yourself little rewards along the way. Congratulate yourself and celebrate every achievement, such as handing in an assignment on time or successfully balancing work, study and home for another week. Involve those close to you in celebrating your successes. Stick your results on the fridge too!

Suggestions for partners

A mature age student's partner and family are affected by their decision to return to study.

Suggestions for partners include:

- Accept that the student has less time to devote to home life. They need time on campus, private study time, time to complete course assignments and time for social interaction with fellow students.
- Expect to do a little more around the house than you used to do during study terms and especially around exams. The student has less time to commit to household chores.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Negotiate family problems together. Stress and conflict at home will make it harder for the student to cope. If necessary, ask for help from a counsellor or trusted friend or family member.
- Work out a schedule to ensure that each week includes time for family and time together as a couple. Students do get breaks between terms – look forward to them.
- Write up a weekly budget if there's been a drop in household income. Returning to study may mean quitting an existing job or reducing working hours to part-time.
- Try to keep in mind the benefits of further study for your partner. These benefits may include their happiness, their future employment prospects and the possibility of increased income for the household.

Where to get help

- Student counselling at your university or TAFE institute
- Course advisers, learning skills advisers
- Lecturers and tutors
- Other student support services
- For Victoria University students, Counselling Services Tel. (03) 9919 4418, (03) 9919 2399 or (03) 9919 8801

- Centrelink Tel. 132 490

Things to remember

- Returning to study as a mature age student presents many challenges, such as juggling course commitments with the demands of work and family life.
- Studying as a mature age student can be a rewarding experience, especially when the student feels supported.
- If at any time you feel that you aren't coping, remember that tertiary institutions offer support services such as counselling.

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Victoria University - Counselling Services

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