

Returning to Learning

10 tips for mature age learners

1. Develop a network

One key to successfully returning to study is to develop a network of friends and acquaintances on campus.

Because the University of Melbourne campus can seem dauntingly large and impersonal, you may initially feel somewhat isolated. You may also think that the campus is entirely inhabited by fresh-faced 18-year-old students and you may wonder where you fit in. However, there are many mature age students studying here and many opportunities for friendships with a variety of people.

Mature age students frequently fit classes and study time around work and family commitments and may not spend a great deal of time on campus, particularly when studying part-time. This can make it difficult to connect with others in your course. It is important, however, to develop a group of people with whom you can discuss lectures and assignments, collaborate on difficult tute problems and share class notes.

Attending faculty welcomes and other orientation activities, and making contact with fellow students at tutes and lectures, are great ways to develop a network on campus. Visit the mature age lounges on the ground floor of the Frank Tate building and the fourth floor of Union House. Subscribe to the Mature Age newsletter and find out about special events (www.union.unimelb.edu.au/suas/06.html).

If you are studying at the postgraduate level, attendance at the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association (UMPA) <www.umpa.unimelb.edu.au> or the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) <www.gradstudies.unimelb.edu.au> programs is a good way to meet people. You also have access to the facilities and study spaces of the Graduate Centre in the 1888 Building. Postgraduate students can also subscribe to Gradflash, a weekly email bulletin containing information about events and programs <www.gradstudies.unimelb.edu.au/services/publications/gradflash>.

As your time on campus may be limited, keep in contact with others by building and maintaining a list of phone numbers and email addresses.

2. Explore

The first few weeks of semester are the best times to meet other people in your course and academic staff in your area. Important information about course structure, organisation and assessment will also be given in lectures and tutes early in semester. Don't be reluctant to approach tutors and fellow students at this time. It is expected that you will have many questions to ask and those early contacts can help you connect with your subject and your faculty.

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Find your faculty office, your main lecture venues, your department noticeboard and your faculty computer labs. Keep an eye on faculty noticeboards and check the faculty information on the web. Find a place in the library where you feel comfortable to work.

Check out the sports complex, the union building and the various food outlets. The Deep Dish Bar and Cafe at the rear of the 1888 Building or Brunetti's Café at the Potter Gallery, are quieter and more relaxed places to eat or to meet friends.

The more time you spend on campus, the more you will start to feel a part of the place. Remember, 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 weekly timetable can be a useful management tool. Begin by listing work commitments, classes, important family or social events and other responsibilities.

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 tutes, preparation and/or completion of labs or pracs, music practice or language lab work, completion of problem or tute sheets, completion of computer tutorials and reviews of lectures. Ideally, you should list all of these tasks on your weekly timetable. Assignments and essays are extra tasks which need additional time.

Treat your study like a full-time or part-time job, depending on your enrolment. 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 completing them.

Think also 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 study after dinner if you collapse on the couch by 8.30 and be wary of overly ambitious schedules.

Learn to prioritise. You can't do everything, but you can always do something

Rather than wasting small chunks of time, use them 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 tute, to review several lectures, to brainstorm an essay topic, or to complete one problem. Break large tasks down into segments which are easily achievable. Match 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. It is often the case that multiple assignments may be due at the same time. So, set private deadlines for assignments which are ahead of the true ones. This way you have some leeway if 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 and friends over that time. Plan to spend time with your children, partner or those close to you. 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 time for family, friends and personal relaxation.

4. Embrace technology

If you're not yet comfortable using computers or online tools, 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. Most courses now put much of their materials and handouts online. You will also be expected to access online research sources to support your essays and some subjects require you to complete online tutorials. Also, as there are so many computer labs on campus now, few departments will accept hand-written work.

Visit Student IT in Building 161 on Monash Road for access to computer labs or explore the range of online classes available <<http://www.studentit.unimelb.edu.au/itskills/>>. It may also be worthwhile buying your own computer if you don't have one. Ask at the Student Union (Union Building) and at Financial Aid (Student Support Services, Baldwin Spencer Building) to find out about student loans.

As email is the preferred method of communicating with academics within the university, set up your student email account as soon as possible. You can find out how at: <<https://webmail.student.unimelb.edu.au/>>.

Research is an important part of your work as a student and there is a considerable range of options for sourcing and accessing materials. Practise using the library catalogue and searching for information online. Join a library tour and familiarise yourself with the library layout and procedures <www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/>.

Take an information skills class and explore the library's online tutorial options. This can save you time later and will give you access to material from around the world. SuperSearch, for example, is the newest addition to the library's online search process and the library offers both online and face to face training <<http://buffy.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/infolit/libclass>>.

Familiarise yourself with library sources relevant to your discipline.

- What are the most commonly used call numbers for your area of study?
- What are the main journals or books in your area?

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- What databases are most relevant to your area of study?
- Learn to bookmark the most important online 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. However, it can also be a confronting experience for many students. As a mature age student, for example, you may have very high expectations and want high marks in all your subjects. Or you may be anxious about your academic ability if you have not studied in a while. At the same time, you may be struggling with the discourse of a new discipline and you may feel frustrated by limited contact with, and direction from, academic staff.

It is important to recognise, however, that most students undergo a transition process in adjusting to University life. Part of that transition is discovering how the University operates and recognising that independent learning, coupled with active questioning, is encouraged. Similarly, it is important to understand academic expectations at this level. For example, the University is a competitive environment and relatively few students receive honour grades for their work. This is particularly so in first year as it takes time to develop academically. So, you need to be realistic about what is expected of you, what you can expect of yourself and what is possible.

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 discussion. 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 and learn new skills. Don't try to write the definitive essay or produce your life work when the word limit is 2000 words. 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 tutes or lab classes parallel with lectures or arranged differently?
- What assessment tasks will be required of you? When are assessments due?

Focus on why you are doing **this course or subject**

It's not unusual to lose motivation at some stage during your studies. Everybody 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.

Sometimes, these changes can bring challenges on both a personal and relationship level. Try not to deal with these challenges all alone. Talk to your family, partner or others you live with and let them know what being at uni involves. Let them know about your time schedules, your busy times, your need for quiet times and your need for support. 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 time you will need to meet commitments. 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.

Talking with others is a great way to address issues, think up solutions and just share your experiences. Classmates and other students may share some of the challenges you face. The Counselling Service here at uni is also a great resource for support
<<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/>>.

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 probably have several assignments to complete during 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. This frustration can be compounded if you are a postgraduate student working long, lonely hours in the lab or writing a thesis.

Reward yourself for adhering to your time schedule, submitting work on time, completing a difficult tute sheet, or understanding a complex theoretical concept.

Congratulate yourself for balancing work commitments, family life and the demands of a university course.

Take the opportunity to share your successes and achievements with the people who are important to you. Make the completion of a difficult study task the basis for celebration – with family, friends or on your own with a movie and popcorn. In many ways, you are not competing with 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 are interested in your progress throughout the course. It's important to let them know if you are having problems. 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 a member of academic staff it is best to make an appointment either directly by phone or email, or through the departmental 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 doesn't 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 coordinator for first year students, and this person can often effectively deal with your initial problems or questions about course organisation.

Course advisers, contacted via the faculty office, are also a great source of information about credit points, subject combinations and procedures for special consideration. They can also advise on changing subjects or courses.

Other students in the course can often be a source of help and support if you are having problems with your work. 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. Some departments, such as maths, biology, physics and chemistry, also have first year learning centres where you can get extra help in areas of the course you find difficult.

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Postgraduate students returning to study may find the services of UMPA or SGS useful. SGS runs programs that address issues especially relevant for postgraduate students. They also provide study spaces and access to the services of a library research consultant. UMPA offers special computer and printing services to postgraduate students and can assist with issues of advocacy, academic advice and support.

The Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU) also provides academic support. It offers workshops and seminars, individual tutorials and a wide range of resources that can be downloaded from the website. The LLSU has developed online resources that can help to refresh your memory if you haven't studied for a while, or explain the concepts if they are new to you. Try some of the courses at: <<https://airport.unimelb.edu.au>>.

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

Personal, emotional and financial problems can also impact on your study and affect your ability to keep up with the workload. The University recognises this and offers a variety of services for students here on campus (for example, counselling, chaplaincy, financial aid, careers and legal aid). The Virtual Service Centre can direct you to available services <www.services.unimelb.edu.au>. The back of your student diary also lists contacts and services. The information office (ground floor, Union Building) can also refer you to appropriate services and is able to provide emergency financial assistance in extreme cases. A mature age adviser who understands the specific needs of mature age students can be consulted on request.