

Advice for Mature Students

By Dr. Kevin Bucknall

If you are contemplating going to university, or going back to college, then take heart! You can do it! I went to university after being in the workforce for seven years, eventually got my degree, then built a career on it. You can do the same! But it will take effort and some adjustments on your part.

Recognise the fact that you have a lot going for you.

Maturity

Your greater age and experience of life mean that your attitudes are more developed and you are likely to make quicker and better decisions than younger people. A sweat shirt I recently saw being worn by a female student said "Next semester I'll be 35", so she did not seem to mind no longer being a teenager. In addition, you are not still in the process of growing up, or subject to hormonal changes that can produce sudden swings in emotions and moods, nor are you worried about the changes in your body and feelings. You might no longer be in the grip of an intense sexual force driven by the selfish gene and are probably not spending so much time dreaming about or pursuing those wonderful but elusive sexual partners.

Motivation and the mature student

The determination to succeed is one of your main and sharpest weapons. You will be a lot more motivated than many youngsters: you really want to get that degree, you know what you are giving up in the form of income, and you are aware of the costs in family terms. All this means you are prepared to work harder—and that is often worth more than mere youthful exuberance. Various ways of further improving your motivation were discussed in Chapter 2.

Experience and skills

You are probably able to notice interlinkages or causes and effects more easily than the less experienced fry swimming around you. On average, you will also have better communication skills and be generally more poised. The vicissitudes of life mean that you have had the rough corners knocked off, survived office politics or factory humour, and perhaps coped with the rearing of children. When faced with new ideas and knowledge, many propositions that can startle an eighteen-year-old may seem commonplace to you. A major plus is that the experience and wider information you possess provide hooks on which you can easily hang new knowledge and so learn more easily.

Sources of information you may have open to you

You are likely to have more friends and relatives with different experiences that you can call on for help or with whom you can discuss issues—and don't forget your ex-colleagues from work.

A supportive partner

You are also more likely to have an understanding and helpful partner than the typical 18-year-old, and he or she probably allows you enough time to study as well as strengthens your will to do so.

Financial security

You will probably be more financially secure than those coming straight from school, which means that you may not need to take a part-time job and work to supplement your income. If you have to work, you will probably earn more per hour and so not have to work as long. You may also be able to afford to buy all the textbooks and other recommended material, whereas some of the young students will be forced to go without or rely on finding those elusive library copies.

Boosting your self-confidence

You may feel insecure and uncertain, surrounded by all these bright eager youngsters. You might worry that you have been away from school too long and forgotten how to study. No problem! My book tells you how (see excerpt at the end). You can get a degree and a good one; all you need is confidence and hard work—but you might have to keep reminding yourself of that. Age is not a barrier to learning and, although it is a bit harder to take in new things at fifty years of age than fifteen, it isn't that much harder. We know that people who go to university after they have been away from school score better than those who go straight from school. And don't be afraid that you will be alone. Unless you are very unlucky, there should be plenty of people around your age; mature students are attending university in increasingly large numbers.

Some older students fear that they will look foolish or lose face by expressing a wrong opinion. If you have been housebound for years, you may feel afraid to join in discussions or say what you think in case you are laughed at. Fight this feeling! You are more likely to find that the younger students take your word more seriously just because you are older and more experienced. In fact, they're often rather frightened of you, but will rarely admit it.

And keep reminding yourself that as a mature student you have many strengths.

Coping with a lower standard of living

Your income will be less than previously, perhaps substantially so, and we all find it painful to reduce our standard of living. You may have to give up eating out and severely curtail spending on clothes and entertainment. If you have to stop smoking and limit your consumption of wine and spirits, so be it. It will hurt at first, so remind yourself the sacrifice will be worth it; think of the future and consider the better-paid jobs for which you will be eligible. Besides, smoking can be thought of as a disease that is usually cured by cancer, so you'll be better off in more ways than one.

Fighting feelings of inadequacy: we are not alone

Do not worry about any feelings of inadequacy or fear that you will be unable to get a degree. Keep telling yourself you will do it and shift your focus to the advantages you possess. Don't worry that you have forgotten how to study and have been away too long; OK, you will be rusty but your essential skill has not gone. It's a bit like riding a bicycle—after time away you can still do it, but it may take a bit of practice before you are able to do it as well again.

Avoiding monopolising discussions

If you happen to be one of the extrovert and assured mature students, be careful not to monopolise discussions as this tends to annoy people. A good group leader should prevent this, but young tutors often lack experience and if younger than you,

they may find it hard to rein you in. Be aware that you can get a bad reputation for continually saying “when I worked in ...”, and telling strings of anecdotes.

Finding a study-buddy matters more for you than for the youngsters

It will help you if you seek out someone about your own age with whom you can work and discuss your concerns. You are looking for a good, compatible study-buddy, not someone who whinges and complains—you need support, not membership of a mutual moaning society. Note: if you are already in a relationship, it’s best to choose someone who will not provoke sexual temptations unless of course you like to live dangerously!

Learning by doing—the more the merrier

If you worry that your brain might find it slightly harder to take in new things, as part of the learning process you can compensate by actively doing stuff, rather than simply reading. To widen your approach, try:

- condensing your notes regularly.
- making your notes memorable by adding things like coloured highlights or underliners. (If you have the skill, small cartoons in the margin might help trigger your recall when you want it later). Finally, read the notes frequently and you might be able to get a visual image of them.
- practising drawing diagrams, figures etc. from your textbook and lectures.
- making up your own tables of relationships or whatever, from the textbook and lectures.
- making flashcards of important vocabulary, diagrams, formulae, etc. and going through them on the bus, on the train or anywhere where free time is available.
- going to search in the library for your own information for a set period each day
- going through different textbooks and comparing explanations of the same point.
- meeting daily with your buddy to explain what you have learned (this is *really* a good way).
- when you get home, telling your partner what each lecture was about (if they look bored, stop at once—you do not need an alienated partner!)

Sorting out your family relationships

This should be a main priority because a supportive partner will make learning a lot easier. Before you start at university, sit and discuss who will do what, e.g. pick up the children, cook the meals, wash up, shop, and clean the house. You might find it helps to make a roster so it is clear who is in charge of what at each time.

Despite your best efforts, you may have to cope with feelings of resentment from your family if you stay up half the night to finish an essay then sleep in the next day, particularly if you were rostered for some domestic task. It is imperative that you avoid letting things fester, and you might choose to set aside time, say every Sunday evening, to discuss how things are going, what irritates the others, and decide what adjustments can be made to put things right. Keeping the family happy, or at least out of active revolt mode, can only help you.

The possibility of shortening your course

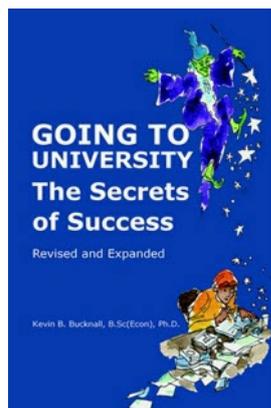
With your experiences, you might find things you have achieved in the past can gain you credit towards a degree, so that you could finish more quickly. Activities like setting up and running a business, working in a foreign country, managing a department, or gaining professional qualifications might qualify. It is worth asking in your departmental office—you never know, you could get lucky.

Finance and the more mature student

Mature students often have financial commitments over and above day-to-day living expenses; the following are some ways of helping to deal with these.

- If you have dependent children, you may be able to claim benefits from the state while you are at university.
- If you are paying off a mortgage, think about changing to an interest-payment-only version for your three years at university, as this will reduce your monthly outlay.
- Have you a marketable skill that will allow you to earn part-time?
- Can you get a part-time job somewhere you worked before?
- Do you have any relatives or other contacts who can offer you work?
- If you have already built up a stake in your house or flat, you might consider taking out a second mortgage.

The author's latest book is *Going to University: the Secrets of Success*, 2nd Revised and Expanded Edition, Kewei Press, UK, 2009. The recommended retail price is £9.95. An excerpt can be downloaded from www.keweipress.com A Kindle version is now available, priced about £3.09 (inc. VAT), or in United States dollars around \$4.79. Details and links on the site below.



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