Returning to Study

Some thoughts for Mature Aged Students and their partners

The decision to return to study after some time away is a momentous one, and one which will mean substantial changes for both you and those close to you. Experience has taught us that there are some issues which occur with sufficient regularity to warrant advance consideration by both prospective students and their partners.

Some of the issues raised by mature students are:

1. Mature Age Students Often Do Better;
   
   Research has shown that once a mature age student has adapted, the chances are that they will do better than the younger students.

2. The Value of Life Experience;
   
   Some mature age students express concern about competing with younger people, but your life experiences are much more valuable resource than you think, and can often more than compensate for time away from formal study.

3. Personal Growth;
   
   Learning can change one’s self-esteem, and alter what one values in oneself or others. While this is on the whole a good thing, it can also produce a significant amount of conflict among those who like you for what you were, not for what you are becoming.

4. Changing Relationships;
   
   Returning to study means that you will probably form some new, exciting, valuable and long lasting friendships. Mature students have found however, that family and close friends have at times responded with anger, depression, envy, resentment, and/or disinterest, rather than support and enthusiasm for their new venture.

5. Feelings of Incompetence;
   
   Some students who have been functioning quite competently in their work and private lives experience periods of feeling de-skilled, incompetent, emotionally out of commission, or just plain confused after beginning the course.

6. Feelings of Stress;
   
   Most students will experience levels of stress and anxiety that will disrupt their studies during some phase of the course.

7. Feelings of Isolation;
   
   Many students report feelings of isolation and a sense of being misunderstood at various stages whilst studying.

8. Work Load;
   
   Students generally find that they are investing at least several times more time and energy into their work than they expected to. Apart from class time, and designated study time it is wise when planning to take into account time required in the library for other research. These tasks can prove extremely time consuming, but are necessary for the completion of assignments.

9. Unresolved Issues;
When returning to study and student status, for example the issue of evaluation can trigger unresolved concerns from childhood as well as old school experiences, which can result in confusion and anxiety for the unsuspecting student.

10. Meeting Competing Demands;

The investment of energy and the opportunity for new experiences can prove troublesome for those who are used to a heavy share of the student's time and caring. Partners, children, and intimate friends are often confused angered, or envious, of this intrusive and academic course that has stolen their dear one away.

11. Finances;

For many mature age students the return to study means a reduction in their level of income. Some students experience difficulties when financial pressures extend over a long period of time and bills begin to pile up. This can be devastating for a person who has become accustomed to financial independence and a certain lifestyle.

12. Child-Care;

It is vital to organise child-care well in advance to ensure that all the arrangements meet with your satisfaction. Inadequate child-care facilities constitute potentially severe sources of guilt and emotional conflict.

Hints for those whose partner is involved in study

Although a mature age student may have filled out their course application as an individual, by default they have actually enrolled their whole family into the program. If you are one of these people, you may ask how you can best assist in making this a successful experience for all of you.

Try and be understanding. Students go through a good many transitions, and many avenues may be needed for support. As well your partner may need peer support, eg time spent with colleagues possibly working on joint projects, maybe counselling, or even simply time to withdraw and be alone at times.

Communicate as much as possible about what is happening in both your lives. Plan study timetables together, and agree on times for recreation and fun.

It is clear that if a student is to gain the maximum advantage from a course, then stressful things need to be settled in their families. Be prepared to discuss and negotiate areas of discontent. If necessary seek the assistance of a trusted person such as a priest, minister, rabbi, or counsellor.

In summary, a delicate balance between support and challenge is needed for individuals close to the student involved in mature age study. With a little thought and lots of opportunity to communicate, it will be possible to avoid some of the more painful or surfacing problems.

Assistance in these areas and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The Counselling Service can be contacted on 9925-4365 Monday through Friday, between 9am and 5pm.