Interview with a Mature Age student, Maria.

Hello my name is Lara and I am talking to Maria.

Maria returned to complete her science degree after having four children. She describes how she coped with the demands of her study as well as her family commitments and the break-up of her marriage.

What made you go back to study?
I had several stops and starts to my uni studies, but sheer determination has got me through in the end. In Year 11, I took Chemistry almost by mistake and was fortunate enough to have a very competent and stimulating teacher. This was the beginning of a lifelong passion for science.

In 1977, I started a Bachelor of Science majoring in Biology at the University of New England. I realized very quickly that while I enjoyed Maths and Physics, I did not enjoy Biology to any great extent. I was unable to settle down to study and I left after five months, so that I could get a job until I had a clearer idea of what I wanted to do with my life. For the next ten years of my life I trained and worked as a nurse, as well as having four children!

While I enjoyed some aspects of nursing, I felt there was something missing, and that I wanted to carve out a career somewhere in science. I spent any spare time reading extensively. I became fascinated by the lore of physics, and avidly read histories and biographies of the subject and its practitioners. Physics uses the language of mathematics to describe the workings of the physical universe. It’s a broad discipline and would provide me with an opportunity to work in many different areas.

How did you manage study and young children?
When my third child was ten weeks old, I started to study a science degree at Melbourne University as a part-time external student. Finding the money for fees and books was difficult when there was only one income.

I had little free time and I would often be feeding the baby as well as completing an assignment with the spare hand. I learnt to do a lot of work in my head, while I was doing routine tasks around the house. It felt good to be studying again and much to my surprise I did very well in my exams.

However, things did not go as smoothly as I had hoped. When my fourth baby (and this time definitely the last) arrived, I decided that with four children, a career in physics was out of the question until all children were at school. This resolution didn’t last however and a few years later I found child-care for my two youngest children and enrolled as a part-time student in the Applied Science Degree majoring in Physics at RMIT.

So organization must be really important?
Yeah, this time around I knew what to expect so I got myself and the children organised. When I had made the decision to return to uni, I got in the car and drove to every child-care centre within a 20-kilometer radius of uni to book in my two children. In the end just one centre offered me places for my children. I made a great effort to get the children into a routine and to get the older ones used to helping with jobs around the house and, much to my surprise, I was able to organize myself and the children without too much trouble.

Co-ordinating child-care with class times can be more difficult to accomplish. It’s really hard to know before Uni starts what the timetable will be. I decided on two days of care and then tried to pick classes that fitted into those days. When lectures occurred on days where I didn’t have child-care, I had to arrange alternative care. I found on those days, exchanging child-care with other people worked quite well.

Just before uni started I did feel very guilty about “abandoning” my children in child-care. I worried that I wouldn’t always be home to cook dinner or that I’d be feeling really tired. But these fears vanished once I started uni.

What was returning to study like for you?
A lot of women, especially older ones, feel out of place in a course which primarily has young males and it certainly felt totally alien for a suburban housewife like me. I wasn’t able to attend the orientation day because I had to take one of my children to the doctor. I remember waiting outside the lecture theatre with my two small children, so that I could catch one of the lecturers to get any written information. It felt better when one lecturer came up to me and said smilingly about my kids, “We don’t usually take them this young.” The staff have been supportive, encouraging and accommodating my needs.
Mature Age Student
Podcast

Were you able to use your prior study?
Applying for “recognition of prior learning” for my previous study turned out to be a long drawn-out affair. It can be a bit of juggling act trying to work out your program, as it can take many weeks or months to know whether you have been granted the recognition of prior learning. I worked on the assumption that I would get the recognition, so I picked other subjects to study.

I was knocked back for one subject, so I had to show the lecturer the textbook and course outline to convince him that I had already covered an equivalent content. It took me quite a while to get all the paperwork together. Later, I was also successful in gaining recognition for my nursing study in Anatomy, Physiology and Psychology.

How did study impact on your family life?
I soon settled into working well in my studies. You are probably imagining it was all smooth sailing from then on. As I began to cope well and gained more control of my life, my marriage began to fall apart and the difficulties that had been there for a long time came out into the open. My husband and I ran a business together and he began to put more and more obstacles in the path of my study. He’d want me to do things for him on the days that I was attending Uni and I’d say, “No, I’ll do it on the day when I’m not at Uni”. Or when I was doing an assignment he’d ask me to type him a letter and I’d say, “You’re watching television. I’ll show you how to use the word processor.” As I became stronger, he became angrier. By the second semester I was deeply depressed.

I realized if I didn’t get a degree, I’d be stuck with the choice of staying in a bad marriage or doing a job I didn’t like to support myself and the kids. I saw that other women had survived the break-up of bad marriages or been able to combine a career and marriage and I knew it could be done.

At this stage I decided to drop one of my subjects, the one I considered to be less important, otherwise I’d end up failing both of my subjects. As it was past the withdrawal date, I knew I couldn’t withdraw without failure, and I told my lecturer, “I’m having a few problems at home. I suppose they won’t hold it against me forever if I fail this subject”. To my surprise he said, “Oh no! You can have an ‘incomplete grade’ and hand in the assignments at the end of January.” I guess he could see that there was something seriously wrong as I had lost about two stone in two weeks. I appreciated that I didn’t have to beg for help or have to tell everyone what was happening in my marriage. In subsequent years, I changed over to full-time study. My children went to four days of day-care and I paid for this by working as a peer tutor to students who were having difficulties with their Physics.

So time management must have been a big priority?
Yes, what helped me to succeed at Uni is being organised and never wasting a minute. Once the kids were in bed I’d study between 9 p.m. and midnight. While the kids were in day-care, I’d use every minute between lectures and labs to get work done.

You have to change your priorities about housework. If you’re one of those women who can’t study until the house is perfectly clean, you won’t have much energy left for study. While you can wash the dishes when you are feeling brain-dead, it’s very difficult to solve a Physics problem. So I found that sometimes I had to make choices about what was more important.

Women with children don’t really have time for the study techniques they talk about in books. Also children always get sick at the worst possible times. But just because you don’t have time, doesn’t mean that you should throw the whole thing away. You need to adapt those techniques which fit your situation and personality.

Mature-aged students sometimes take the lecturers’ advice about how much work is expected too literally. Lecturers are usually trying to scare the younger students into working harder. Mature-age students become discouraged when they think they aren’t doing enough work to meet the lecturers’ expectations.

I always worked on the most immediate problem or studying for a test. I did what revision I could as I went along. Sometimes I might only have had an hour, where I could do two or three revision problems. I didn’t let myself become discouraged that I didn’t do the 20 suggested revision problems.
It is surprising how much you can learn in a small amount of time. When you have young children it is a very rare thing to have even an hour or two of uninterrupted time to study. I became an expert at doing one-, five- and ten-minute study tasks with each household task. For example, I’d do the ironing while I was watching the children in the bath and I’d revise one concept. I’d put ten summary points on my iPod and list to it while cooking dinner or driving to university. While I was waiting in queues I’d review the lectures for the day. I put diagrams, equations, formulae and graphs next to the mirror and I’d look at it while I was doing my hair. I found that I could concentrate better in shorter periods of time and surprisingly I retained more of what I had revised and I seemed to be able to get my assignments completed in a shorter time.

While I was doing an assignment, I would also be using it as an opportunity to do a thorough revision of the topic. If you learn things thoroughly as you go along, there is only a small amount of revision for the final exam. I found past exam papers and invaluable guide to direct my study.

Do you have any advice for mature aged students?

Don’t have overly high expectations of yourself. Sometimes mature-age students feel inadequate because they don’t have the same background knowledge as students who have just come from high school. If you can’t understand a concept, sometimes a sentence of two from the lecturer after the class can help to clear up your confusion.

I used to worry that I didn’t know as much as some of the other students. Some of the younger students may be very vocal in class and it took me a while to realise that they were only vocal about what they knew, but they didn’t talk about the things they didn’t know, which was considerable because I ended up doing much better than they did in the exams.

While you occasionally meet people who ask why you aren’t at home with the children or imply you shouldn’t be in Physics, you learn to ignore them. My own family has been extremely supportive of my study. At the end of my degree, I won the Science and Technology Scholarship and I worked as a vacation scholar at the C.S.I.R.O. This experience helped me to decide that I wanted to do further research in the area of radioastronomy and I’ve enrolled in a Ph.D.

SURVIVE AND THRIVE AS A MATURE AGE STUDENT

Returning to study as a mature-age student can be both exciting and scary. Mature –age students who adjust well to university are usually pretty clear about the importance of further study in their lives. They have goals and a sense of purpose about being at uni, which they have made clear to their partners, family and friends. If key people in your life are “on side”, they are more likely to be supportive when the going gets tough and you have to spend extra time and energy on your studies.

One of the difficulties mature –aged students face is adjusting to the role of being a “learner”, particularly if they’ve already held responsible positions as parents or at work. Being a student again can raise feelings of anxiety, such as “maybe I’m not bright enough” or “I’ll never remember all this information”. To adjust successfully to tertiary studies, it’s important to “learn how to learn”. This means, in the first few weeks of university, picking up vital “academic skills” like knowing how to find a journal in the library; taking good lecture notes; knowing how to write an essay, and attending any “bridging courses” in unfamiliar subjects. Successful students are assertive, seeking assistance earlier rather than later.

Mature-age students who actually succeed at uni aren’t always the most brilliant. They tend to be people who are realistic, planning and managing their time well; they attend most of their classes; keep up with assignments and reports; and leave themselves time to prepare for exams. Successful students usually make friends with fellow students, so that they have a support system at uni, who can offer mutual encouragement in difficult times, share resources, study together, etc. Finally having a sense of humour makes it easier for people to survive and thrive at uni! Thanks for your time in listening to this podcast, I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP website, on the counselling service website and the study and learning centre website. And of course, you are always welcome to attend a workshop or come and speak to a counsellor or a learning advisor in person.

(Mr Ed Lukaszewski , Counsellor, University of Sydney, New South Wales)
(This script is taken from taken from Vivekananda, K. and Shores, P