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Introduction

As a reader of this book you are probably either already a mature student or will soon be entering a course of study as a mature student. This means, of course, that you are already successful in several ways. You have successfully reached a point in your life where you are able to become a mature student, you have succeeded in finding a course of study that suits your needs, and, in buying this book, you have shown your determination to capitalise on this position and succeed as a mature student.

Statistically, you are already in an enviable position: mature students tend to excel in their chosen courses, and there are many reasons for this. They are generally more focused than their younger counterparts and can use their life experience within their study. If all of this seems a bit too good to be true, it is also worth bearing in mind that some mature students struggle with some aspects of studying, and even if they succeed in the end, this struggle can make the journey far harder than it needs to be – and that is why this book has been written. It is designed to help you to identify your strengths as a student (and there will be plenty of these, even if they do not all spring to your mind immediately) and to make best use of them. If you have weaknesses (and all students do, in one way or another) then these too will be explored and practical suggestions made as to how you can overcome or eradicate them.

Of course, there is no 'typical' mature student: you might be in your early twenties or have recently retired; you perhaps have a young family or you may be living alone; you might be dovetailing paid work and online or part-time study or be a full-time student. Your situation in life is as unique as you are, but you will have some things in common with other mature students, however different their lives seem at first glance.

● Why this book?

At this point you might be wondering why this particular book is the best guide for you. If all students have some weakness, why do you need a guide specifically aimed at mature students? Beyond the practical aspects of such a guide – the examples in this book, for example, will more nearly fit your circumstances than those in a guide for less experienced students – it is also important for you to focus on your needs and strengths in a way that makes more sense to mature students. Younger students, fresh out of school or college, for example, are unlikely to need much help with understanding the principles of coursework, as they will have lived and breathed coursework for several years already. A mature student might be far less familiar with this aspect of education. What a younger student is likely to need, though, is a lot of help with basic time

management, whereas a mature student's life experience usually makes this less of an issue. This book does give guidance on time management, but in a way that makes most sense to those students who are already used to juggling life.

● **Why this author?**

I was myself a mature student when I first began to study. From A levels, through professional training courses, to a degree and finally a doctorate, I managed the demands of a working life, studying and a family. And I did it badly – for some of the time. Over the last ten years I have taught undergraduates of all ages and have devised and delivered professional development courses, including distance and e-learning courses; I have found out during that time that I was not alone in this. I wasted a lot of my time reinventing the wheel, trying to do things in new 'student' ways that I could perfectly happily – and far more easily – have done in my old ways. I worried about the wrong things, at the wrong times, and generally made life hard for myself; and I have seen countless mature students do exactly the same thing over the years.

So, that is what this guide is all about: helping you to avoid the pitfalls, encouraging you to use your talents, and guiding you through your course of study in the most effective way, to make it an enjoyable, and far more successful, experience.

● **You are not alone . . .**

Even on a course with a relatively high number of mature students, it is all too easy to feel alone, as if you are the only student to be facing your particular problems, or to be negotiating your particular hurdles. Although you try to convince yourself that others must be struggling in similar ways, it can be difficult to share your concerns with them, especially if you are studying on a course where you are outnumbered by younger students. As your course progresses you will find that the gap between mature and younger students is far less wide than you might have supposed. One of the joys of studying is discovering how shared interests break down barriers between people, but this may not be enough to help you when you are staring at a problem and feel unable to solve it alone.

The sense of isolation that this feeling brings with it is damaging, not only to you as a person, but also to the progress of your studying, but the sections in this book will show you that the challenges you face are quite usual in your circumstances. By seeing that you are not alone, I hope you will gain a stronger sense of yourself, your goals and your talents.

Feeling part of a mature students' community, which is spread throughout all areas of study and around the world, is a crucial step in achieving success. Drawing on the experience of others, and using the techniques that they have found effective, you will save yourself time and trouble, which will leave you more space in life to enjoy your success.

● **How this book can help**

You will probably use this book in several ways. You might be in a position, right now, to read the guide from cover to cover, which I hope you would find enjoyable. It is more likely that you will dip into it over the coming weeks and months. Whichever way you use it, I hope it is a book you will return to again and again as your course progresses.

With this in mind, the guide has been designed to offer you advice in several different ways. The text is deliberately broken up into manageable chunks of information: these chunks of information are intended to be used in various ways. The guide is divided into sections which can be used to give you an overview of an area or as a practical source of support. There are checklists to tick, tables to complete, charts to fill out – in short, this is a *doing* book as much as it is a reading book. It will also become a completely personalised book, too, allowing you to look back on the notes you made and the responses you gave earlier in your course, showing you how far you have come. The checklists may also be downloaded free from the following website, which will allow you to have as many copies as you like: www.skills4study.com.

If you feel confident in one area, you might just read the overview of that section so as to confirm what you know already. In other areas you will spend longer working through the exercises, but never too long: none of the exercises are too time consuming, so they will not take you from your studies for long. You are likely to read some sections in planning for a specific event, such as a presentation or an exam. In this case, you will find the checklists particularly useful, especially when you are at the stage of last-minute preparations.

Other areas will be useful to you as aids in the general development of your proficiency as a student. The step-by-step guides are designed to take you as easily as possible through key aspects of study skills, without the need to wade through yards of jargon or irrelevant theory; highlighted words will alert you to the key point of a section. After the general overview in each section, the exercises are designed to help you put the theory into practice. After most of the exercises there is a more detailed explanation, which you will only need as a support to that exercise.

Sometimes, of course, we all get stuck, knowing that we need some help but finding it difficult to work out just what guidance we need. This problem is particularly acute for mature students, who might be unfamiliar with some of the learning situations they face. For this reason, there is a list of suggestions at the end of each section as to where you might go next in order to keep developing your skills.

● **Whichever type of learner you are . . .**

You might be any type of student – you could be involved in an e-learning course, you could be a part- or full-time student, you could be undertaking a distance learning course or be staggering your learning over many months or years. Luckily, this book will be relevant to you whichever form your study takes. The exercises are drawn from many

methods of study, and there is a good reason for this. Although you might feel very different from a student who is studying on a course that is structured differently from your own, the fundamental skills you will both need for success will be similar – in many cases, they will be identical. There are plenty of academic-sounding names for these skills, but in essence they are related to your everyday experience as a student; they are the fundamental building blocks of your success, and that is what this guide is all about.

