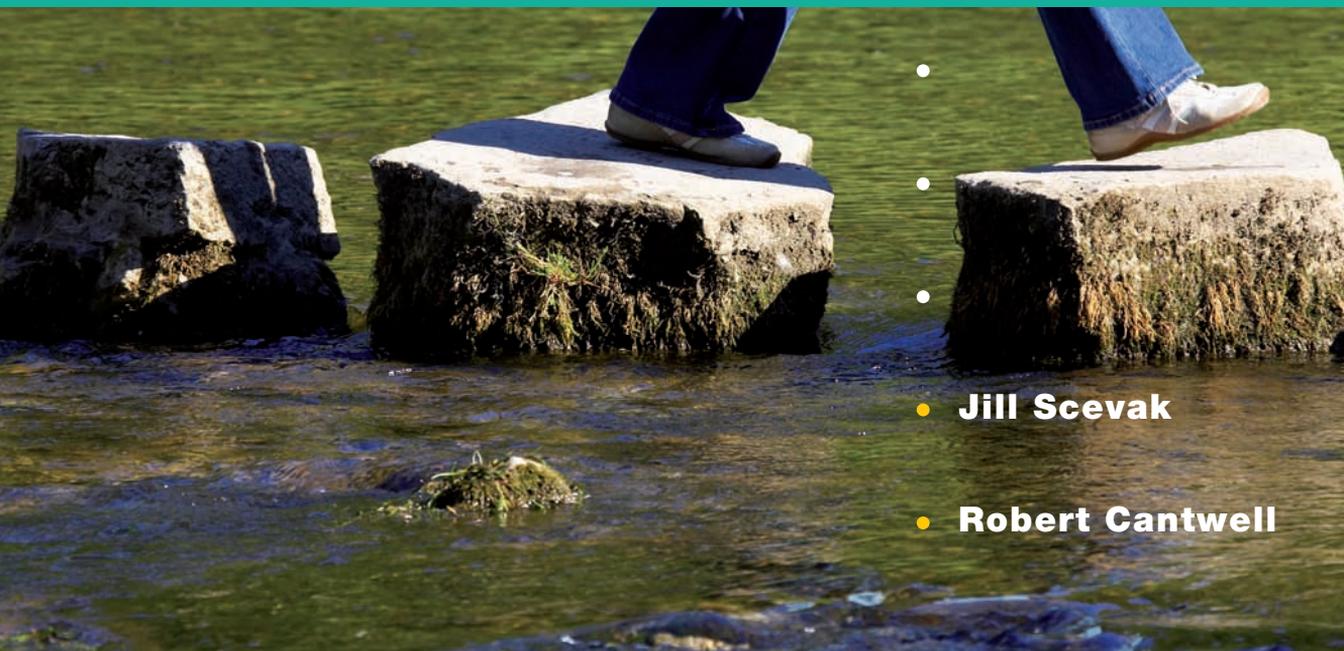


stepping stones



A guide for mature-aged students • at university



• **Jill Scevak**
• **Robert Cantwell**

Stepping Stones

A GUIDE FOR MATURE-AGED
STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY

Edited by Jill Scevak
and Robert Cantwell

ACER Press

First published 2007
by ACER Press
Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd
19 Prospect Hill Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124

Copyright © 2007 Jill Scevak and Robert Cantwell

All rights reserved. Except under the conditions described in the *Copyright Act 1968* of Australia and subsequent amendments, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers.

Edited by Renée Otmar, Otmar Miller Consultancy, Melbourne
Cover design and typesetting by Mason Design
Printed by BPA Print Group

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Stepping stones: a guide for mature-aged students at university.

ISBN 9780864314147.

1. Adult college students - Australia. 2. College students
- Australia. 3. Universities and colleges - Australia -
Admission. I. Scevak, Jill Janina. II. Cantwell, Robert Harley.

378.19820844

Visit our website: www.acerpress.com.au

Contents

About the editors *v*

Authors *vi*

- CHAPTER 1** Introduction
Being a mature-aged student in a university setting *1*
Jill Scevak and Robert Cantwell

SECTION 1

Taking the step: Some stories of success

- CHAPTER 2** ‘A bloke’s story’:
From an apprenticeship to a masters degree *6*
Alan Hales
- CHAPTER 3** A late blooming: A new career in later life *11*
Glenna Lear
- CHAPTER 4** Another world, not A Brave New World:
Is there a place for Aboriginal people in higher education? *16*
Stephanie Gilbert
- CHAPTER 5** ‘Slow and steady wins the race’:
A personal journey as an adult learner *22*
Julie Willems

SECTION 2

Some stepping stones: Strategies and skills for a successful learning experience

- CHAPTER 6** What have I got myself into?
About learning and being at university *28*
Robert Cantwell
- CHAPTER 7** Academic survival skills *36*
Jill Scevak

CONTENTS

- CHAPTER 8** Using personal capital to find your own path
to successful university study 47
Jeanne Dawson
- CHAPTER 9** The Imposter Syndrome:
'What if they find out I don't really belong here?' 57
Ros Martins and Lyn Anthony
- CHAPTER 10** If in doubt, get support 65
Rosalie Bunn
- CHAPTER 11** A beginner's guide to technology for study:
What should I have and how do I use it? 74
Greg Preston
- CHAPTER 12** The loneliness of the distance education student 83
Julie Willems

SECTION 3

More stepping stones: Strategies and skills for managing life with study

- CHAPTER 13** Dealing with the baggage: Stories of personal histories
and personal development as a mature-aged student 94
Jill Scevak and Robert Cantwell
- CHAPTER 14** Managing your life in hectic times 103
Pam Green, John Bowden and Jacqueline Rowarth
- CHAPTER 15** Changing roles and relationships 114
Ros Martins
- CHAPTER 16** How do you eat an elephant? 122
Dianne Kirby and Teresa Dłuzewska

SECTION 4

Afterwords

- CHAPTER 17** Preparing for life after graduation:
Learning for the unknown future 130
John Bowden and Pam Green
- CHAPTER 18** A final word 139
Robert Cantwell and Jill Scevak

About the editors

Jill Scevak is Senior Lecturer at the University of Newcastle in the discipline of educational and developmental psychology. Jill is also a registered psychologist in New South Wales, a member of the Australian Psychological Society and an executive member of the Newcastle Branch of the Australian Psychological Society. Her research interests are in learning and, in particular, individual differences in learning (academic and affective factors) in a variety of contexts: primary, secondary and tertiary.

Robert Cantwell is Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Newcastle. He specialises in studies of student learning across secondary, tertiary, professional and other adult contexts. He teaches in the discipline of educational and developmental psychology, with a particular emphasis on how learners go about and manage their learning. Robert has researched and published extensively in these areas, including a number of studies in mature-aged students' adjustment to university study.

Authors

(listed alphabetically)

Lyn Anthony is a psychologist working in student support services at the University of Western Sydney. She provides individual counselling to students, many of whom are of mature age. Lyn is also involved in various programs for mature-aged students, including facilitating a support group, teaching in the academic preparation program and as an adviser in the First Year Support Program.

John Bowden is Professor Emeritus at RMIT University of Technology and Adjunct Professor at Swinburne University of Technology. He has a long-standing interest in the quality of student learning, and has been instrumental in raising awareness of the importance of university teaching.

Rosalie Bunn is a Lecturer in the English Language and Foundations Centre at the University of Newcastle. She has taught sociology to undergraduates and social enquiry to enabling students for a number of years.

Robert Cantwell is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Newcastle. His teaching and research is in the area of learning. He has published widely on many aspects of student learning, including several studies of mature-aged learning.

Jeanne Dawson is an Associate Professor at Curtin University. She has lectured in both humanities and business studies since 1983, and since 2001 has been Associate Director of the Life Student Learning Support Centre. Student Learning Support addresses transition issues for all new students, including mature-aged students, both at the undergraduate and the postgraduate levels.

Teresa Dłuzewska is a psychologist working in the Counselling Services at the University of Newcastle. Teresa has extensive clinical experience working with mature-aged students. She has developed group programs for students returning to study.

Stephanie Gilbert is an Indigenous Australian experienced in teaching and managing enabling programs and in programs for Indigenous students. She is currently a lecturer and Coordinator of Yapug: Indigenous Enabling Program at the University of Newcastle.

Pam Green is currently the Director of Graduate Studies at Swinburne University. She is involved in research matters surrounding postgraduate students, postgraduate research supervision and the implementation of university level research and development strategies. Among a number of other areas, Pam has a strong research interest in transition, as well as language and literacy education.

Alan Hales undertook undergraduate study after completing an enabling program at the University of Newcastle. He has subsequently completed a Masters of Management and works as a Senior Graduate Studies Officer in the Office of Graduate Studies at the University of Newcastle.

Dianne Kirby is a psychologist working in the Counselling Services at the University of Newcastle. Dianne has extensive clinical experience and is actively involved in the support of mature-aged students.

Glenna Lear is currently enrolled in a PhD at the University of South Australia. She has previously completed a degree in adult education. Glenna has worked extensively as a tutor in the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme at the University of South Australia.

Ros Martins is a Lecturer in the Learning Skills Unit at the University of Western Sydney, where she has provided language and learning skills development for the past 15 years. As part of her role, she runs programs specifically targeting mature-aged students, including undergraduates and postgraduates. Ros is currently a candidate for the Doctorate in Education, researching mature-aged students' experiences at university.

Greg Preston is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Newcastle. Greg researches and teaches in the area of technology education and is nationally known for his expertise in the use of educational media.

Jacqueline Rowarth is Director of the Office for Environmental Programs at the University of Melbourne. The programs involve 10 faculties, over 150 academics and research projects with many different methodological approaches. She has been coaching, advising and supervising postgraduate students for over 20 years, in a range of disciplines including science, communication, design and business.

AUTHORS

Jill Scevak is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Newcastle and a registered Clinical Psychologist. She has researched and published on a wide range of issues to do with student learning, including studies of mature-aged learning.

Julie Willems is an experienced educator in the secondary, TAFE, university and community adult learning sectors, and is currently completing her PhD study at Monash University.

*Being a mature-aged
student in a university setting*

Jill Scevak
Robert Cantwell
University of Newcastle

Once, at our university, we enrolled a number of former tradesmen into a training course to become secondary school teachers. The course was compressed from three years' study into two years, and the students were really feeling the pressure. None of them had studied at university before. While all of them were feeling increasingly overwhelmed, they also believed that the difficulties they were facing were their own fault—their lack of competence compared to their younger peers. They were embarrassed that their younger peers appeared to be coping so easily.

Prior to a lecture one day, one of the editors was chatting to this group. They were talking about their reactions to university study, and were wondering if there was any 'sage' advice that could be given to make their lives a bit easier. There was no recipe, of course. On hearing that there was a complete literature 'out there' documenting exactly the feelings they were describing, on a national and international level, they reacted quite strangely.

'You mean to say that everyone feels like this, that we are normal?'

A brief 'Yes' was sufficient for them to say, 'Well, that's okay, then—we'll see you in the lecture'.

This anecdote represents a very important principle: the Principle of Normalcy. It tells us that events, experiences and situations can sometimes be quite confronting, frightening and distressing. Well, we knew that! This principle

also tells us that the effects of these events, experiences and situations are at their worst when we believe we are the only ones experiencing them. If, however, we understand that this is a shared experience, that we are not alone in our fears and confusions, we find a sense of comfort. If everyone is finding this experience, event or situation new, different, intimidating, then it must be something to do with the event, the experience or the situation—not the person! In short, this is normal.

Since you are now reading this book, you have most likely made the first and most difficult decision—you have decided to embark on a course of study at university. The decision to take a step is always harder than actually taking it. So we can begin this book by complimenting you on your success in achieving that first, critical step. Our concern now is to assist you through the next stage. How do you manage the challenges of the study program you have chosen to undertake? There is little doubt that over the time you spend in your study at university, many thoughts, events and experiences are going to occur that you will find challenging, and sometimes even threatening, to your continued enrolment. There is also little doubt that at times in your study you will experience a wonderful sense of exhilaration in what you are doing and have achieved. Through this book, we hope to draw on the experiences of former students and educationists to help you keep the balance in favour of exhilaration; to provide you, through the principle of normalcy, with a sense that the step you are taking into the academic world is one that you can cope with and can use to achieve your ultimate objective.

All change involves adjustment. In life we usually only need to deal with one change at a time, such as when we move house, and there is rarely a shortage of good advice and help in doing this. In entering a university environment for the first time, however, we are often entering a phase of change that is much broader in its effects than those changes we have dealt with previously. There is a new culture for us to adapt to—the academic world—with all of the learning and study demands and expectations that come with it. Our social and interpersonal world will often be challenged, our trusted support networks may not be familiar with the demands of the university environment and may be less able to be supportive than was the case in other situations. The balancing of work, study and family may become oppressive. Feelings of inadequacy, doubt and uncertainty may well influence our thinking and create a sense of there being almost insurmountable obstacles. How do we manage these ‘normal’ feelings and reactions? What strategies do we have available that will help us adjust to and ultimately master this new and challenging environment we have chosen to enter?

The aim of this book is to address the concerns of students highlighted in the questions above, and to help you be successful at university study and still achieve a balanced life. Every student knows that she or he will need to attend lectures and take notes, but how do you do that effectively? There are usually lots of required and recommended readings connected with a course. How do

I read and summarise the required readings to maximise my understanding of the topic? How do I balance the competing demands of relationships, family, work, recreation and study? How do I overcome the feelings of self-doubt, fear of failure and inadequacy? The chapters in this book aim to help you manage these concerns.

The experience of university will change you. You will change as a result of your learning experiences, both within and beyond the learning required for assessment tasks and exams. Your ways of thinking will change—you will see the world through a ‘different lens’, you will experience personal growth and development and will gain confidence at the end. Furthermore, you will achieve this within a context that is challenging, fraught with difficulty, potentially intimidating and often impersonal. It will be a huge step well worth taking.

The book is divided into four sections. Each section comprises a number of chapters around a central theme. You need not read the book sequentially; choose chapters on the topics you are particularly interested in.

Section 1: Taking the step: Some stories of success is about success; illustrated through the stories of four students who have experienced different kinds of challenges but who all prevailed. Keep their stories in mind as you read through the remainder of the book. The chapters in this section outline the experiences of mature-aged students who have taken the step to study, on campus or distance. We find out about their trials and tribulations, and how they overcame the challenges of university study, their self-sabotaging and the ways in which they juggled the demands of study, family relationships and financial needs. The section showcases four different success stories:

- Alan, a ‘bloke’ who made the transition from metal worker to a masters degree in management
- Glenna, who raised a family before returning to study
- Stephanie, who overcame a huge cultural transition to succeed at university
- Julie, who returned to higher education through the road of distance education.

They differ in age, gender, race, marital status and family backgrounds, but they all overcame common obstacles in their own unique ways. Let’s hope their stories will inspire and give you courage in taking on the challenges of your journey in university study.

Section 2: Some stepping stones: Strategies and skills for a successful learning experience is concerned mainly with aspects of the academic experience; with the skills, abilities and strategies you might learn and use in coming to terms with the academic demands of university study. It provides a wide range of practical strategies for success in learning at university. The section begins with a chapter on adapting to the university culture, outlining the unique features of this culture, as well as the expectations and rituals to smooth your transition into it.

It addresses the fear of the unknown by making it known. Chapter 7 provides a range of tools to help you operate within this culture, take useful notes at lectures and learn to read academic texts. Chapter 8 suggests ways to put you in touch with your 'personal capital'; that is, to draw on strengths that you already have to overcome the challenges in this new culture. It's easy to lose touch with your strengths when you are in a state of anxiety or fear and in a new setting. Chapter 9 addresses creeping self-doubt—practical ways to minimise the 'culture shock'; that feeling that there is something wrong with you, that maybe you don't belong here. Chapters 10 and 12 provide ways to help you get in touch with the formal and informal support networks available in both on-campus and distance forms of study. Chapter 11 is the beginner's guide to technology and its use as a study tool.

Section 3: More stepping stones: Strategies and skills for managing life with study examines the experience of university study from a broader perspective, acknowledging that your academic work is only part of the total experience. How do you manage 'all of life' in such a demanding environment? Which strategies and skills do you need to employ in order to manage your life during university study? Chapter 13 delivers 'postcards from the other side'; real-life examples of the culture shock that students experienced and how they overcame it. It talks about managing your inner life, getting rid of that 'baggage' and that critical voice that may be leading you on the wrong path or sabotaging your road to success. Chapter 14 highlights ways to manage your outer life; the commitments you have to the outside world while you are studying at university. Chapter 15 looks at integrating a new role into your identity, one that you are now acquiring as a result of being a student at university. It also examines how this new role may impact on the nature of your interactions with friends, family and loved ones. Chapter 16 features real-life stories of how some students managed university study in their own ways.

Finally, in *Section 4: Afterwords*, we look beyond your time at university, and ask you to think of your future. Chapter 17 highlights the importance of planning for life and work after you finish your studies, and how this is related to what you currently do. This chapter reminds us that the decisions we make as students are the foundations for our planning for the future. The final chapter combines the themes that have emerged from the previous pages. Here, we stress the importance of having an optimistic view of your experiences. If you plan for the difficulties, they will have a tendency to be less confronting; if you plan for a successful experience, you will probably achieve it.

Taking the step:
Some stories of success

CHAPTER 2

'A bloke's story': From an apprenticeship to a masters degree

Alan Hales
University of Newcastle

With an apprenticeship in the metal trades behind me, I was working as a mechanical draftsman in a sector of the manufacturing industry that appeared to be in decline. Having decided to investigate alternative employment opportunities, I sought advice from the careers counsellors at the University of Newcastle. It was during this visit that I became aware of the Open Foundation program, which offered mature-aged students academic preparation for admission to undergraduate programs. I had left school after Year 10 and had not had prior aspirations to attend university. When I found out that Open Foundation required only two part-time courses to be completed over the course of a year, I decided to sign up, hoping that no one would notice my lack of academic pedigree. Until this point, my view of the world had been influenced largely by the media, and the little I had read. Prior to this I had never really had cause to question the views expressed in the evening news, nor had I recognised the possibility that there may have been an alternative point of view. All of this was about to change, as I soon found myself in very unfamiliar territory.

When I attended the orientation session for the program, it was a relief to discover that many of my future classmates were also doing their best just to blend in, and there seemed to be a consensus that people like us had no right to be there. I had chosen to focus on Australian history and legal studies, as had many others,

but I was unaware of the high attrition rate and that many of the people I had just met would soon fade away. My first challenges were finding my way around the huge campus and learning to navigate my way around the library. After the initial introductory sessions, everything became very confusing for me. There were no right or wrong answers and there appeared to be a complete lack of certainty. It seemed that authors writing about significant events in Australian history had alternative points of view, and it was unclear how they could all be right. As I left my Australian history lectures and tutorials, unsure of which author was right, I was disappointed to discover just as much uncertainty in my legal studies course. I had taken a significant step without realising it. I was beginning to understand that any body of written work is informed by the life experience, perspective, motivation and paradigm of its authors. Study at higher education level is about strength of argument and recognising that conflicting points of view can legitimately coexist, but this was yet to become clear to me.

The next major challenge was to learn how to present written work in the correct format, using the appropriate system of referencing. This was a significant hurdle, as I had never previously attempted to write an essay. Having a set word limit in the thousands seemed incomprehensible to me. One of the strengths of the Open Foundation program was that the tutors provided lots of feedback and gradually built on a series of tasks that were each more demanding than the last. This guidance was ideal preparation for the demands of undergraduate study, and I remain convinced that without this preparation I would have really struggled at undergraduate level. Full credit should also go to the library staff, as no question was too trivial for them as I stumbled around the building, attempting to understand the Dewey decimal system and to interact with the electronic catalogue and reference materials. I also had a lot to learn about the role of the lecturers. I left each lecture with writer's cramp. I would have learnt so much more if I had just put down the pen and listened to the lecturers, rather than attempting to get every word down on paper in a vain attempt to record the quote that would allow me to pass the final exam simply by quoting it. This was the next major lesson for me, as the lecturers rarely told us what they thought, but rather pointed us in the right direction to help us make up our own minds. Higher education is largely about self-directed learning, which teaches one how to scrutinise various arguments and define one's own position, based on the points of view expressed across a body of work.

It is fair to say that very little made much sense during the early stages of the program, but with the feedback I received for each piece of work I attempted, things began to become clearer. This was reinforced by discussions in the tutorial sessions, which were often robust. Various positions were advanced and defended in these sessions, and reluctant members of the group were encouraged to participate. Soon, I found my confidence growing and I was becoming less concerned about the final exams that were rapidly approaching. Preparing for

the final exams was nerve racking because the examination process at this level was also unfamiliar to me. I had come a long way over the course of a year, and there were significantly fewer of us at the final exams than there were at the induction sessions. All went well for me, and I achieved good results. Based on these results I gained admission to a bachelor of arts program, which I hoped would be a stepping stone to gaining entry to the combined arts/law program. With the support of those friends and family who didn't think I had taken leave of my senses, I took on a full-time study load in the bachelor of arts program.

The Open Foundation program had truly set the foundations for undergraduate study and, although I was still not fully aware of the lessons I had learnt in the previous year, I was able to at least apply some of these principles to new areas of study. I was familiar with the campus and the library, and I thought I knew how to present work using the appropriate referencing system. The program had also provided me with valuable experience in researching essay topics and the structure of an essay—without which I doubt I would have lasted a semester. There was, however, a significant change in the dynamics of the student body that I had not anticipated. There were clearly two groups of students: those straight out of school and those, like me, who had taken up higher education after a gap in their formal education. The Open Foundation students had, in many respects, been driven by a common purpose and were prepared to help each other along the way. This was very different to my experience at undergraduate level, where there was clearly more open competition. School leavers and mature-aged students were not only in competition for books and the material available on short-term loan in the library; there was a level of resentment evident between the two groups that I did not understand but certainly experienced.

Having initially chosen the bachelor of arts program, it was difficult to choose from the many disciplines of study available. History seemed like a safe choice in addition to my having some interest in the discipline, English looked interesting and sociology also appeared to have something to offer. I was completely taken by surprise by the work demands of each course, which seemed overwhelming, and I was glad that I had chosen to take just three courses each semester, rather than four. If I learned nothing else in my first year, I very quickly became skilled at time management. There simply was not enough time to devote to every aspect of everything covered in each course. I had to determine which components of the courses required detailed knowledge and which only cursory attention. The tutors seemed to have an uncanny knack of zero-ing in on students unfamiliar with the required reading, and so I found myself caught out on a few occasions before I got the balance right. In addition to coming to grips with the required reading, I was learning that an essay topic was not simply an invitation for me to provide my opinion, but rather an opportunity to engage with an existing body of work.

On receiving the results of my essays early in each course, I decided to ask my tutors how I could improve on my results. Although, as with most things, the significance of the advice I received was not immediately apparent, it was one of the most significant pieces of academic advice I was to receive. An essay question is set within the context of a body of written work and rarely exists in isolation. It is, therefore, very important to read widely across that body of work and to formulate a response to an essay question within the context of that body of work. When encountering an essay topic, it is important to examine the various academic perspectives and present an argument addressing these perspectives. This is not to say that an undergraduate cannot have a valid opinion outside of an existing body of work, but rather to say that an essay addressing existing arguments demonstrates a scholarly ability to engage with a discipline—which makes university a rewarding experience. As I began to understand this, my results improved and I started to question what I saw around me. The evening news became less 'black and white' as I considered the possibility of alternative perspectives and the likelihood of alternative perspectives gaining a voice.

First year turned into second year, which quickly turned into third year, and even though I never gained admission to that combined arts/law degree, I did qualify for a bachelor of arts degree and felt that by the end I had earned the right to be there and that I had achieved a great deal despite my lack of academic pedigree.

Despite the important lessons learned along the way and what I saw as a valuable experience, it became clear that my employment opportunities had not improved significantly with a bachelor of arts degree, and so I relocated to Sydney to address the situation. Soon after gaining employment it appeared that a vocational postgraduate qualification might help to improve my prospects, so I sought and gained admission to a graduate diploma in management and subsequently a master of management at a university in Sydney. On the basis of my achievements at undergraduate level I felt academically prepared for postgraduate coursework, but it soon became evident that the focus and objectives of postgraduate study in a business school were very different to those at undergraduate level in the humanities. Almost every coursework unit in the business school required a significant amount of group work and therefore the focus of the overall program was largely on group dynamics in situations in which a group had a common purpose. There was an expectation that each member of a group would contribute more or less equally to a project and much time was spent negotiating each member's contribution and the roles of those in a group. It seemed less academically rigorous than an undergraduate degree in the humanities, but it was just as demanding and certainly had more vocational outcomes.

After initially leaving school to take up a trade and having no aspirations to go to university, I certainly have taken a curious path with the completion of

a tertiary preparation program, a bachelor of arts and a master of management. It was only after completing these programs that I began to fully understand what I had learnt along the way. Within an academic environment there are often no right or wrong answers, and each argument is judged on its merits while legitimately coexisting with conflicting arguments. The role of a lecture is to draw your attention to the various arguments surrounding a particular issue, in order to facilitate the development of a personal position based on critical analysis. This is one of the most significant aspects of higher education, as you learn to think independently and approach a problem from a variety of perspectives. As a mature-aged student entering university after a significant break in my formal education, the main obstacle for me was a lack of belief in myself, which I overcame only through perseverance and ignoring any negative influences I encountered. I would encourage anyone of mature age to embark on this journey and, who knows, you may surprise yourself as much as I did.

*A late blooming:
A new career in later life*

Glenna Lear
University of South Australia

Completing a university degree was something I had wanted to do for most of my adult life. I had unsuccessfully attempted some university subjects while at teachers college many years ago, and put my failure down to immaturity. I also had not completed the fifth year of secondary school, which at the time was optional. After several years of teaching and travelling, I realised that I was capable of achieving my dream. But then marriage and full-time parenting intervened and yet again it seemed unachievable, particularly as we lived on a farm in remote rural South Australia.

Life changes. By the time I was 50 the farm had been sold, my four sons had flown the nest and I re-entered the workforce as a casual, part-time instructor at TAFE. We no longer went scuba diving and now, instead of being physically active, I chose a more sedentary interest, which required me to sit down and stay in one place. After devoting much of my adult life to my family it was time to develop a new and independent identity to take me into the next stage of my life.

In 1997 I applied to the South Australian Tertiary Admission Centre (SATAC) for admission to the University of South Australia as a mature-aged, adult education student, a surprisingly easy process. Although the first semester had already started, I soon received my first package of study material and was 'in business'. At the time, my aim was to prove to myself that I could achieve at university level. I wanted to understand current thinking on the political, economic and social changes taking place in societies throughout the world.