



STUDYING LAW AS A PARENT AND A MATURE STUDENT - A DAUNTING PROSPECT?

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Introduction

This article discusses my decision to study law as a mature student and parent, following a 13-year career within the banking sector. My interest in studying law has its basis in personal experience. When my marriage broke down, I found it difficult to obtain the legal advice and help that I needed. My faith in the legal system was tested and the turmoil and despair I felt at the lack of legal advice available to me inspired me to learn how to help myself. I hope that this article will give confidence to other mature students, who may be concerned that their family commitments will prevent them from getting the most from their degree.

The First Steps

I decided to research the prospect of studying law at Plymouth University. I looked at the entry requirements and realised that despite having a range of GCSE's graded A-C this was not going to be enough. I felt defeated but decided to go to one of the open days, when I discussed my circumstances and the entry requirements with lecturers. This is where my journey began, as I found out that I could complete an access course which would enable me to meet the entry requirements. At this moment it was as if a light had been turned on. I enrolled on an access course with Plymouth City College to study social sciences.

Studying: A New Phenomenon

On my first day at college I realised how much the education system had changed since I was in education and had advanced with time and technology. Many students

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no longer attended lessons with pens and note pads as I had, they were prepared for class with laptops and mac books. Learning was completed remotely and work was submitted online. The days of handing in a written assignment had gone. For me this was a novel experience, which made me feel apprehensive and anxious. I questioned whether I was capable of learning in this way. The pace was fast, and I often felt like I could not keep up with the teaching or the other students. In addition, using technology to learn was not a skill I possessed. It had been many years since I was in an educational setting, and everything seemed so far out of my reach.

I made the decision from the beginning to be open and honest with my teachers about my strengths and limitations and I how I felt I might be compromised during my studies. I expected to be looked down upon by peers and teachers. I assumed that the expectation regarding mature students was that they would require less help and guidance. However, I was pleasantly surprised by the response and support I received. I continued to write my notes from class using pen and paper, and I became more efficient with each lesson. My teachers encouraged me to get to grips with Google Classrooms, showing me how to navigate the site and find my assignments and where to upload my work.

It was not until I received my first marked assignment back that I had any belief in my ability to complete the course successfully. Seeing the grade distinction written alongside my work was very rewarding. The hours spent reading textbooks and the writing and rewriting of drafts had paid off. As the year passed, I learnt how to study using a variety of sources. I took on board all of the feedback I received from teachers and applied the relevant points to each new piece of work.

Studying for a Law Degree at Plymouth University

When I started my law degree I felt as out of place as I had done on my Access Course. The university campus seemed so intimidating and moving between buildings for different lectures was a new experience. There were very few mature students on the course, and I felt like I had little in common with many of my younger peers. I found it difficult to form friendship groups in the beginning, as I did not have the free time to socialise due to family commitments. I found myself alone between lectures, so I would go to the quiet room in the library and write up my notes or complete the reading. Subsequently I felt lonely and isolated during this early part of my first year.

Over the ensuing weeks I formed some friendships. This changed the way I spent my time between lectures, so that instead of going to the quiet room alone I would meet with my peers and discuss the topics we were studying. I no longer felt solitary or insular. However, not all the friendships were enduring, due to the difference in our lifestyles. My family commitments were always my priority. This meant I was unable to join the extra-curricular clubs and societies the university had to offer. Despite this, I had formed a strong friendship with a fellow mature student who was also a parent. This common ground enabled us to share the stresses and challenges we faced studying full time whilst running a home and raising a young family. The bond between us made it easier to have someone to turn when it felt difficult to undertake all that was being asked of us. We shared strategies for studying and had study sessions, enabling us to bounce ideas off each other.

The lecturers were very understanding of the issues that mature students and parents faced and would often offer support and advice on managing the workload. The university careers hub was also extremely helpful. During a session with a careers adviser, I expressed my concerns about not being able to participate in the clubs and societies within the law school. I felt disadvantaged in some ways, because as a student we were often told how belonging to such societies and groups made individuals stand out on applications to law firms. I was advised to participate only in activities that worked with my family commitments. This advice alleviated some of my concerns and I started to prioritise events that were important to me as a student and as an individual.

I subsequently attended networking events, in order to gain the experience of being around legal professionals and to gain insight into the legal profession, especially that of a solicitor. The networking events also helped me to make connections with professionals from different firms across Plymouth. I participated in mock interviews to experience the interview process, as it had been so long since I was in that position. I took the positive and negative feedback from these and applied to take part in this process again, so I could draw upon my previous experience, particularly the negatives, to make the necessary changes. This was an enlightening experience for me. I found that I was able to utilise my life experiences and apply transferable skills from my previous career.

The most valuable scheme for me to date was the mentoring programme that the

university offers. I was assigned a solicitor who helped me to create my LinkedIn profile and update my CV. She also helped me find a work experience placement. This was both exciting and daunting. My placement was at Nash & Co Solicitors in the family care team. I was given the opportunity to complete a full week with them and attend a hearing at Plymouth Crown Court. Before my work experience commenced, I was invited into the office to read the case file, so I was familiar with the circumstances of the case. I found this fascinating and wanted to understand as much information as possible. As it was the first time, I had read such formal documents I asked many questions, so I could make sense of the notes and the abbreviations used in the document. Being in the workplace and seeing files was very different to learning about law in lectures. For the first time I saw how the knowledge gained from a degree was put into practice. When I returned the following week for my work experience, I felt prepared for what was going to happen in the court room. I had many questions during the week that were answered by the solicitor from the firm and the barrister dealing with the case. Although I feared asking questions constantly was a hinderance to the professionals, they were happy to give all the information I sought.

This experience allowed me to see how theory and practice work together and how the role of a solicitor combines time in the office and time in the courtroom. When my work experience with Nash & co came to an end, I knew this was the type of firm I wanted to find a career with. I contacted the firm after my work experience ended asking if there was an opportunity for me to do work experience with them again. Subsequently I had an informal meeting with the managing partner and the officer manager. We discussed my goals and my aim to become a family solicitor after graduation. They asked what had led me to the change in my career and how I saw myself progressing. Within a few weeks I received a phone call from Nash & Co, offering me a part time paralegal role within the family care team. I was overjoyed to be given this opportunity at this stage of my academic career.

The Key to my Success So Far

Throughout my studies, the key to my success has been organisation, determination and knowing my strengths and weaknesses. Raising a young family is very demanding in itself. I have six children who ranged in age from three to nine when I started studying and are now between the ages of seven and thirteen. To cope with the competing demands of family life and studying, organisation was paramount, from

planning meals, preparing for school, organising lifts to and from clubs, to the daily running of a household. I organised my study timetable around my family life and commitments. Where possible I would treat each day as a full working day, using the time between lectures to prepare work, complete reading and write up notes. This not only allowed me to focus on the task at hand but also allowed me to spend quality time with my children each day. It meant that I did not miss out on hearing about their day or reading them a bedtime story. There were times when it was not possible to maintain a typical eight hour working day, because I had to collect the children from school or take them to medical appointments or one of the many tasks faced by parents every day. On these occasions it would mean late night studying after the children went to bed. Whilst these may not have been the most productive times, they were necessary. Organising time to study during holiday and festive periods felt impossible to begin with. However, it was crucial to my wellbeing to have a break from studying and enjoy the festivities with my family. I would organise my time so that I continued my studies whilst my children were still in school. I would set myself a target to complete one task, such as submit one piece of coursework. This meant my focus was streamlined. I found this approach worked well for me because once that piece of work was submitted, I could enjoy a break before starting revision for the exams that often took place after the holidays. A strategy that worked when preparing for exams was to create spider diagrams and revision tables and attach them to the kitchen units. This meant I could read over the information whilst preparing meals, doing the ironing, and even putting the shopping away. The visual aids helped me memorise the information both consciously and subliminally.

Knowing and owning my strengths and limitations has been a major factor in my achievements so far. I have learnt over the course of the past three years what study regimes work for me. Whilst one of my strengths has been my ability to memorise information, I struggled to articulate this and convey the point I was trying to make concisely. The way I dealt with this weakness was to practise writing, doing numerous past exam papers and asking lecturers for feedback so I could learn where I could improve academically. This proved to be successful, as I became familiar with structuring my work and setting out the information in a logical format. It also became second nature to check and double check my work for simple grammatical errors that would often lose marks. Throughout the last three years I have often thought it a weakness to continually ask questions and ask for help when I have struggled to grasp a concept or understand how a point of law operated. However, I have come to realise that this is not a weakness and that in fact it can be viewed as a strength.

In my role as a paralegal I would often apologise for asking questions because I saw it as a hinderance to other members of staff, but the fact I asked questions gave my manager the reassurance that I would never take a task beyond my capabilities. Being organised and knowing my strengths and weaknesses would not have been enough without the determination to succeed and complete my degree to the best of my ability. There have been challenges along the road. There have been times where things have not quite gone to plan, or despite my best efforts I have not achieved the grade I had hoped for. However, I never lost the determination to do better in going forward. The struggles helped me to build resilience and in turn gain confidence and accept that there will be some areas I find easier than others.

The Impact of Covid 19 on My Studies

The Covid situation was a tremendously worrying time. There was so much uncertainty about how life as a parent and as a student would proceed. I found myself faced with the task of home schooling six children whilst trying to complete my own studies. This proved to be a very stressful period. Organising a timetable where seven people needed to study at home was not an easy task. I found myself having to play the role of a teacher as well as a student. With children at varying ages and varying abilities it was an extremely challenging task to work with them on their syllabus. There were highs and lows during this time but as a family we persevered and got through the difficult time together. I struggled with the lack of face-to-face learning and worried that I could not achieve my best results under the circumstances. However, I finished one of my modules with one of my highest grades. Reflecting upon my studies throughout this period, I realised how many transferable skills I relied upon and used without a second thought.

Conclusion

My experience as a mature student with a young family has been positive. Whilst I had many fears and faced many challenges along the way, achieving my degree was attainable with hard work, self-discipline and commitment. I am now well on my way to building a solid foundation for a successful career in law.