

# Managing the Academic Needs of Mature Students Returning to University for Postgraduate Professional Qualifications

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# What is this about?

- We have increasing number of mid-career adult students with specific study skill needs and issues
- Why?
- What adjustments – if any – might learning advisers need to make?

# Background: sole learning adviser, ChCh School of Medicine (CSM)

CSM students about 80% postgraduates:

- Majority PG Cert, Dip, Master's, employed health professionals, studying part-time
- PhDs more likely to study full-time
- Undergraduates (medicine & physio) out on clinical experience

# Learning support and adult students: previous experience

- High needs: Adult Admission students entering tertiary education for first time
- Low needs: new graduates studying for further qualifications, especially professional PG Certs, Dips in same or allied discipline

# Recent uni recruitment emphasis

- 1) New graduates – professional qualification (e.g. Nursing, Commerce) regardless of first degree discipline
- 2) Mid-career professionals – further qualifications

# Recent advertising (1)

**Otago:** “Become a nurse – build on any degree”

M. Nursing Science (2 yrs)

**Canterbury/Ara:** “Do you already have a degree? Are you interested in Nursing? ...gain two qualifications in two years”

M. Health Sciences Professional Practice (Nursing) + B. Nursing

# Recent advertising (2)

## Canterbury:

“Looking for an edge in business? We’ve made it easy with three study pathways for whatever stage you are in your career”

UPSKILL

SPECIALISE

ADVANCE

Part-time or full-time study

## Discussion (1)

Why should there be increased focus on further professional qualifications:

- From university perspective?
- From student perspective?



# Domestic uni students 2008-15

(Ministry of Education, 2016)

## Domestic students: Undergraduates

Age group	2008	2015	Difference
18-19	19,795	21,620	+1,825
20-24	48,255	53,150	+4,895
25-39	19,135	16,080	- 3,055
40+	9,225	5,845	- 3,380

## Domestic students: Graduates

18-19	1,505	2,720	+1,215
20-24	10,200	13,780	+3,580
25-39	17,635	16,795	- 840
40+	13,190	11,510	- 1,680

# Assumptions

- Postgrads have proven study skills
- Motivated (costs, employment, promotion)
- Mature (can manage time, handle work + part-time study)
- Mid-career students have professional skills & experience to draw on

## Discussion (2): Reality

i) What learning issues do you think the new graduates might face?

ii) What learning issues do you think the mid-career graduates might face?

# My experience: practical problems (1)

- More distance students: more time-consuming, can be more demanding as feel isolated – but phone calls, zoom etc limited by both our working hours
- Employed students unlikely to attend extra classes

## My experience – practical problems (2)

- Hard for students to find time for appointments (shift work, distance from CSM, parking etc)
- Students can be defensive – used to being competent, in charge
- Sessions interrupted by pager – students on call for ward, operating theatre

# Solutions (1)

## Embedded teaching

- Only chance to teach class is to be part of credit course – need to persuade staff of value, keep up good liaison about student needs, expectations of assignments etc
- This year in 25 courses in 7 depts across CSM, 1-3 hour workshops

# Embedded teaching: reflection

- Good to have close liaison with depts – but takes time
- High exposure to students increases one-to-one demand
- Assignments & amount of time allowed to teach changes year to year – means rewriting presentations
- Some depts have opted to record session and put online instead of having me back – follow-up shows limited uptake

# Solutions (2)

## Flexibility

- Am half-time, but adjust hours to accommodate students' availability
- Longer appointments – most assignments complex & multi-part, 3000-5000 words, multiple student problems
- Email for short queries – not swamped as dealing with responsible adults



# Flexibility - reflection

- High approval rating from students
- Puts a lot of pressure on me (shifting appointments, changing work & personal plans)
- Small (non-distance) group wants to email work as much more convenient for them – resist (unless v.g. reason) as far more time-consuming for me

## Solutions (3)

Approach students as fellow professionals

- Take few minutes at beginning of session to find out where they work and what they do (often important background for assignment too)
- Acknowledge their professional expertise – explain how to tweak their material to meet academic requirements

# Approach - reflection

- All positive!
- Lovely group of students to work with
- Often two-way advice – tell me things I should be doing about my health

# My experience: study skills problems (1)

Difficulty with concepts of critical reading  
and writing:

- major emphasis at CSM
- central to health practice – literally could be life & death

# My experience: study skills problems (2)

Impatience with academic conventions & expectations e.g.

‘So I forgot to use 1.5 line spacing! It doesn’t make me a bad nurse!’ The attitudes to and experiences of a group of Norwegian postgraduate nurses to academic writing. (Johansen & Harding, 2013).

# My experience: study skills problems (3)

- Great difficulty avoiding unintentional plagiarism, especially in technical areas e.g. pharmacology
- Ignoring research lit in favour of summaries on health websites used at work
- Focusing on patient in case study at expense of literature, critique

# My experience: study skills problems (4)

- Seeing essays as chance to grind their own axe – especially in Public Health
- Writing in case note abbreviations, not formal sentences
- ESOL students' written English can be well below PG level despite professional position

# Some solutions (1)

In embedded teaching:

- Dept staff reinforce importance of academic conventions
- Skills training based on course work, not generic e.g. analysing assignment, research plan, developing argument etc



## Some solutions (2)

### In embedded teaching (cont)

- Critical reading and writing, plagiarism issues etc incorporated into all relevant classes
- Opportunity to emphasise issues like use of research lit, importance of referencing

## Some solutions (2)

Developed practical, step-by-step ways of teaching key skills e.g.

- Critical reading and writing (ATLAANZ 2012)
- Literature reviews (extended guide online)
- Avoiding plagiarism (ATLAANZ 2011)
  - Resources on courses' Blackboard, Moodle
  - Work in progress: extended writing guide to plagiarism and paraphrase

# Discussion (3)

Questions, comments and ideas