

Joe's story



I'm Joe, I'm 58 and I'm married to Sharon and we have three grown up kids. They are in their 30s now so it's really just me and Sharon at home. I started studying Social Science online through Open Universities Australia at the start of this year, mainly because I've long been interested in helping people and I thought that if I don't do this now I never will. I've probably only got another 5-10 years in the full time work force, and I just want to spend the last few years of my working life time doing something I enjoy. Even when I retire, I can do youth work for free, doing voluntary work, then I can give back to the community, and it will also fill my time.

How I got started...

I was a finance officer for 20 years, then for the last few years I've been working in a tax office in a big firm. So I had done a Diploma when I first left school, but I had never thought about going to uni until recently. I suppose like a lot of people my age it took me a couple of years of thinking about it until I actually got around to saying "Ok, I'm going to do it". And there were other people at work that were doing degrees, and I thought "I might do it too". I saw some advertising on the TV about Open Universities Australia and then I looked into it to get an understanding of how it worked. It just seemed to be the way to go and it was very well-established, so it wasn't something dodgy that might end up in nothing or not be properly accredited. So then it was just a matter of finding the right time to start, when it was right, and that was the start of this year. I did an introductory unit at first. It was a proper unit but it was where you learnt how to do things a bit, so that's why I did it.

I tried to do two units at first but my job is very hectic and busy... I couldn't manage two units at a time, not in this job when I'm getting home at 7.30 or 8.00 at night. It's pretty hard to find time to study at all, so it's a weekend thing mostly. But I've got it worked out with my manager that two days a week I start at midday and then I work back late on those days, so that I can dedicate two or three hours those mornings to my studies. Then a couple of other mornings I can do an hour before work, and then on Sundays I can do about four hours. That gets me up to about 10 hours each week, but of course when there are essays due you have to find the time to do more than that, but usually that's enough. If I sit down and stick to that, then I can get a fair bit done and it's enough time.

It's turned out better than I thought...

I thought it would be difficult, demanding. I wasn't sure how well run it would be or if it catered for people without much experience or getting a bit older. I guess it was just one step at a time and see if it works. I was very nervous when I started the first unit and the first few weeks were pretty horrible. But I wasn't alone. There were a lot of people expressing the same things. But it's turned out to be better than I thought. I think it's very well run, but it's still hard. You've got to keep up with

it and you've got to be organised but it's not as hard in the regard that there's assistance there and you've just got to look for it. You've got to seek it out but it's definitely there. I'm always involved in those discussion boards, every week. It gives you the sense of being in a class, so I'm very interested in being in those, and I like to be a little controversial in some of the things I say, just to create a bit of debate.

Some things I've learned...

I've probably found out that I'm a bit lazier than I thought I was! I can get side-tracked a bit easier than I would have liked to believe. But, I think that if you stay on the proper track, then you're probably going to get better results, but it may not be as interesting as if you sort of go off on a few side-tracks and start chatting to people, and getting to know people by doing that. Sometimes that has prevented me from dedicating enough time to my studies. But I guess that is just my nature. Some of the other things I've learnt though is how to research properly and how to reference, and some of the terms that they use at uni I'd never heard of till this year, like "peer reviews". I wouldn't have had a clue what that meant.

At work, sometimes I use the fact that I am studying to inspire somebody to think about doing it. I tell them, especially the younger ones, that it's open to anyone really, as long as they have the dedication and a reasonable intelligence, so I'll say "Ever thought about doing a correspondence uni course?" I find that some of the younger ones at work have low self-esteem and think they can't possibly go to uni, but a lot of them could once they start believing in themselves, so it's a matter of building up self-esteem a bit.

I did very well in an essay at the end of my first unit. It was the first essay I'd ever written and the result I got back was good. It was really just getting the hang of it, and practising a bit, but you're never 100% sure what's required until you have a few trial and errors I think. So that gave me confidence to think that I could do it after all. And now I love writing essays! I've even learned how to enjoy researching, which I never used to. It always seemed so hard but now I'm realising it's not if you're organised. To get a good mark back sort of made me think "Ok, now I know how to do it, it's not so tough".

What keeps me going...

No-one else in my family has been to uni, so all of this was really very new to me. I don't actually talk about it very much with any of my family - my parents, my wife and so on - because none of them really know what it is all about, but almost everyone else I know has been very supportive and has considered it a good idea. I think probably because a lot of them have done degrees in different times of their lives or they are studying too, so they understand it's good to study. You're using your mind more and developing new skills and things that even late in life could lead you somewhere else. A couple of people thought I was too old to bother with it and that it was a waste of my time, but that was only a couple out of a lot of people. I've also got a friend who I met through the course and lives in a different State. She is really encouraging, and so is my supervisor at work, but I am also pretty self-motivated, so all of that keeps me going.

What the future holds...

I guess I think and hope that I will get where I want to go and be successful, if I just stick with it - which I am sure I can do as long as I don't overload myself. I think my future will be happier, in that

I'll be able to do something that I really like doing. The job I've got now is ok, but I really want to work with people and help make a difference to their lives. I'd rather just be talking to people and helping them find their own way, even if it's only for a few years. And I'm sure that people would be happy to have me volunteer in that area even when I'm in my late 60s. All my life I've been able to quickly build rapport with people and win their trust, and if I can learn skills on how to be better at helping them, then I will be much happier doing that.