Supporting Mature and Part-time Graduate Students

YORK U

Graduate Studies at York University

A Place Where Knowledge is Made!

Contents

graduate studies | YORK U

Strong Start to Supervision
Supporting Mature and Part-time Graduate Students

Preamble

Cultivating an awareness of mature graduate students' individual circumstances can positively contribute to the quality of the supervisory relationship and to learners' success. Parenting and elder care responsibilities, demands brought on by outside work commitments and other non-school demands, rusty academic skills, or low academic confidence following extended absences from participation in formal education are common aspects of mature graduate students' experiences. Yet, mature graduate students come with a wealth of transferrable work- and life-skills and are typically highly motivated to succeed. An effective supervisory approach will be one that helps mature graduate students to translate skills developed through their lived experiences to the academic environment. It will provide timely referrals for wrap-around services and supports. And, taking an equity lens, it will flexibly accommodate students when challenges arise in their non-school roles. Supervisors who take a strengths-based approach to supervision with mature and part-time graduate students build trust and confidence between the supervisor and the student and help to establish and maintain a context that supports well-being and maximizes students' abilities to contribute to campus life and to the academic discipline.

The Supporting Mature and Part-time Graduate Students Guide aims to broaden awareness of the unique experiences of mature and part-time students while fostering open dialogue between supervisor and student. It is offered as a companion to the [Strong Start to Supervision Checklist](#) and recognizes that some components may be relevant to all graduate students but it expands the lens to focus on considerations salient for mature and part-time students.

The guide can be reviewed annually along with the Strong Start to Supervision Checklist at the beginning of the student- supervisor relationship and be revisited periodically to discuss additional items that become relevant, especially during significant changes in circumstances or committee membership.

graduate studies | YORK U

Understanding Mature and Part-time Graduate Students

Identities and Pathways

Including a research-informed profile of mature and part-time graduate students provides important context for understanding the diverse identities, experiences, and strengths these learners contribute to graduate education. Such awareness helps supervisors recognize the varied skills and pathways students may bring, supporting approaches to supervision that are respectful, inclusive, and responsive to individual needs.

Mature and part-time graduate students contribute valuable insights from diverse life experiences and workplaces and enrich scholarly inquiry and classroom or lab dialogue. Many mature and part-time graduate students are 25+ years old, often returning after time away from academia while balancing personal, family, and professional responsibilities. They bring rich professional, personal, and community experiences, along with strong time-management, prioritization, and adaptability skills. Some identities from the research include:

- Career changers
- Caregivers, parents or both
- Mid-career professionals
- First-generation university students
- Adults with disabilities
- Seizing a second chance and 'finally doing it for me'
- Advancing skills for career advancement or other employment
- Motivated by personal growth, relationships and life events

Strengths of Mature and Part-time Graduate Students

Academic and Professional Knowledge

- Deep subject matter knowledge from professional contexts.
- High levels of intrinsic motivation and goal clarity.
- Strong work ethic and time management skills.

Interpersonal and Relational

- Lived experience navigating complex responsibilities, for example, caregiving, leadership and advocacy.
- Emotional intelligence and collaborative problem-solving.
- Ability to draw interdisciplinary and real-world connections into research.
- Time management skills.

Learning

- Reflective learners who self-monitor and advocate for their needs.
- Resourceful and independent thinkers.
- Know their preferred learning styles and can adapt.
- Resilience built through personal and professional transitions.
- Passion for and commitment to learning, growth and improvement.

Common Challenges Faced

Academic literature identifies common challenges for mature and part-time graduate students such as balancing multiple responsibilities while navigating academic expectations and timelines. Understanding these challenges can raise awareness inspiring supervisors to foster equitable and effective supervisory relationships that are sufficiently flexible given these common challenges.

Academic and Institutional

- Re-adjusting to academic writing, research, and technology.
    - Supervisors may consider sharing links to the Writing Centre, SPARK (Student Papers and Academic Research Kit) and YorkU Library along with normalizing the learning curve, encourage low-stakes practice (submit an informal draft) and model technology.
- Limited access to full-time campus services and events when offered or open during typical business hours.
    - Supervisors may be supportive by offering meetings or check-ins outside typical business hours when needed; sending key information via email to ensure students do not miss out.

graduate studies | YORK U

- Academic progression may be at a slower pace for part-time students as well as mature students when they face interruptions to their progress and need to take time to address issues outside of school. Both situations can impact funding and networking.
- Attendance policies with no flexibility.
    - Supervisors may consider allowing reasonable flexibility and asynchronous alternatives.
- Class locations that are difficult to find or get to.
    - Supervisors may consider organizing a short campus walk or virtual tour, sharing campus maps before classes begin and pairing new students with peers who can help them navigate.
- Often do not have the same amount of time to commit to the whole student experience due to the balance of graduate school, personal and work responsibilities.
- Fear of failure.
    - Supervisors may be supportive by encouraging students to focus on progression, not perfection; reassuring students that challenges, uncertainty and revisions are expected in graduate studies and are not signs of inadequacy; and fostering an environment where students feel comfortable discussing issues and feelings without judgement. Supervisors can share the Graduate Student Wellness Services website information as well.

Personal and Life Circumstances

- Managing multiple responsibilities such as employment, family and caregiving.
- Balancing ascribed and achieved roles.
- Parental stress and guilt, letting go of the idea of 'doing it all'.
- Finances, limited access to scholarships and funding.
- Time constraints and time scarcity.
- Social isolation, social exclusion and feeling 'out of place' in an environment of younger students.
- Self-confidence, resiliency.
- Fear of failure and/or pressure to perform.
- Age disconnect and stigma in higher education environments.
- Double-transition which is mature and part-time students experiencing educational changes at the same time as their children.

graduate studies | YORK U

Supervisory and Relational

- Mature and part-time students may have professional expertise, leadership experience, or seniority in their own careers, which can shift or challenge the traditional supervisor-as-expert and student-as-novice dynamic. At the same time, they may feel uncertain when navigating unfamiliar academic norms, technology, or research practices.
  - Supervisors can be mindful of these dynamics and foster mutual respect and value the student's expertise while providing clear guidance in areas where they are less experienced.
  - Supervisors can create space for dialogue to acknowledge expertise of both people and avoid assumptions about authority and capability.

Benefits of Pursuing and Succeeding in Graduate Studies

- Personal transformation through engagement with higher education, in particular for women.
- Increased confidence leading to a greater sense of personal independence.
- A positive influence and role modeling on the children of mature and part-time students with potential impacts for future generations.
- Establishing new peer relationships which can provide mutual support and foster retention.
- Feeling proud and persevering.
- Have better organizational and multi-tasking skills as a mature student.

Effective Practices for Graduate Supervisors

Build Trust and Respect

- Use strengths-based language, for example, 'your opinion is worthy' and thus, avoid deficit framing such as 'you are out of touch'.
- Acknowledge and value prior expertise and professional experience. Recognize that each student's journey to graduate study is unique and all pathways bring valuable strengths and perspectives to academic work.
  - *"I'm interested in learning about your prior academic experiences. Understanding your background will help me tailor my support to your needs and expectations."*

graduate studies | YORK U

- Co-create definitions of academic or milestone success that reflect individual goals.
- Empathize with the barriers that mature and part-time students must overcome.
    - *"I recognize balancing grad study with other responsibilities is tough and I'm here to support you in making it feel more manageable and meaningful."*
- Share your supervisory style (.pdf) and be flexible and willing to adapt it to meet the unique needs of individual students over time.
    - *"I'd like to share my supervisory approach with you. I tend to be…"*

Career and Professional Development

- Explore how mature and part-time students' prior work and life experiences enhance their current research and goals.
- Discuss career goals beyond academia such as mid-career transitions, promotions, and entrepreneurship; normalize nonlinear trajectories in career planning.
    - *"I'd like to hear more about where you see your career moving, inside or outside academic, so we can align your graduate experience with that vision."*
- Connect students to mentorship, academic and professional networks, and opportunities aligned with their interests or next steps.

Community and Belonging

- Normalize diverse pathways in graduate studies and consider that graduate students may arrive through diverse academic, professional, and personal pathways, each bringing unique strengths and perspectives that can enrich the supervisory relationship.
- Encourage participation in mature and part-time student groups to avoid feelings of isolation along with transition support, mature student orientation and becoming familiar with the Atkinson Centre for Mature and Part-time Students (ACMAPS).
- Embed inclusive values in lab (.pdf) or research environments.
- Encourage peer mentorship, cooperative learning and intergenerational learning.

Communication and Planning

Offer flexible meeting times (e.g., evenings or asynchronous check-ins) and consider the life circumstances and availability of the mature and part-time students when doing so.

- *"Let's set up regular check-ins to discuss your progress. How often would you feel comfortable meeting—weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly?*
- *"Here is a Meeting Agenda (.docx) template and a Meeting Notes (.docx)   template that we can use together."*

graduate studies | YORK U

- Initiate discussions to understand the students' preferred learning styles.
  - *"Let's discuss your preferred learning style. Do you work best independently, or do you prefer more structured guidance?"*
- Collaborate on supervision agreements that reflect realistic pacing and shared responsibilities. Use the Strong Start to Supervision Checklist (.pdf) as a beginning.
- Co-create a supervision plan with realistic timelines taking into consideration the students' commitments, responsibilities and availability.
- Provide clear expectations for the supervisory relationship, milestones, feedback, assignments, research, and creative works.
- Share conflict management resources with students such as the Faculty of Graduate Studies Conflict Resolution policy and Quick Tips for Difficult Conversations (.pdf) .
  - *"Conflicts can happen in any working relationship including graduate supervision. If something isn't working for you, please bring it up so we can address it together."*
- Use shared technology tools to streamline collaboration and engagement for example, calendars; project management tools (Mural); Teams; Google docs.
  - *"How do you prefer to communicate? For example, by email, in-person meetings, or online platforms?"*
  - *"I aim to respond to emails within [X] days. If it's urgent, please let me know in the subject line or follow up if I haven't replied."*
- Discuss absences, sick time and vacation time of both supervisor and students as early as possible to help with personal and academic plans and arrangements.
  - *"If I'm unavailable for an extended period, I'll let you know in advance andsuggest alternatives for support."*

Responsive Academic Supervision and Support

- Encourage self-investment so that mature and part-time students understand their value enough to believe that personal growth, learning and education are needed and deserved.
- Offer structured, regular feedback and scaffolding, especially during early stages of graduate studies and supervision to enhance confidence and respect the commitments and schedules of the students.
  - *"I appreciate your hard work on (a specific task). Here's what I think you did well, and here is an area to focus on improving."*
  - *"For draft feedback, I usually need (X) weeks."*
  - *"I want to provide you with feedback that is constructive and helpful. Is there a particular way you prefer to receive feedback?"*
  - *"What approach to feedback would you find most helpful?"*
  - *"The reasonable expectation to receive feedback from me or your committee*

graduate studies | YORK U

for submitted work is normally up to 15 business days and depends on the size of the document and timing of submission."

- Consider your supervisory style (.pdf) and the possibility of adjusting throughout the supervisory relationship to meet the needs of the students.
- Revisit discussions periodically and reassess the effectiveness of the current supervisory approach as mature and part-time students may need different levels of support as they move along the graduate studies journey.
  - *"Do you feel you're getting the right level of support and feedback? It not, what can be improved?"*
  - *"Let's revisit our discussion about learning styles and supervisory approaches. Has anything changed since we last talked about this?"*
- Offer a variety of assessment methods rather than assuming mature and part-time students will simply adapt to systems not designed for them.
- Encourage early connection with the writing centre or academic workshops on campus.
- Support skill-building in research tools and academic technologies.

Wellbeing

- Acquaint yourself with the Supporting Graduate Students in Distress: A Response Guide for Supervisors (.pdf) for more information.
- Share with students Where Can You Go for Support? (.pdf) and How Are You Feeling? (.pdf).
  - *"I'd like to share that there are wellbeing resources available if you ever need them. I'm happy to help connect you with anything you might find useful."*
- Encourage students to visit FGS' Graduate Wellness Services website as well as the Student Wellness section of the Graduate Supervision Toolkit. Graduate supervisors may visit the Supervisor Wellness section for more information, tools and resources.
- Model and foster work-life balance.

Reflective Questions for Graduate Supervisors

- Have I consulted the Principles for Graduate Supervision at Ontario Universities for information on my supervisor role and responsibilities?
- Am I making assumptions about the mature or part-time students' availability or readiness?
- Am I willing to be an advocate for my students?
- Do I understand these students' reasons and motivations for graduate study?

graduate studies | YORK U

- Do I understand the connection between mature student motivation, persistence and retention in graduate studies?
- Have I adapted my expectations to accommodate their other life roles?
- Do I recognize the strengths these students bring to their research?
- How can I align my expectations and feedback to build on their autonomy and motivation?
- Am I acknowledging and meeting the individual needs of these students?

Reflective Questions for Graduate Programs

- Do we understand the mature and part-time students' reasons and motivations for graduate study?
- Do we provide guidance on how to access funding for these students and is it well-known and easy to find?
- How might we adapt our program offerings to better reflect the needs of these students and learning preferences?
- Have we created or expanded the pathways and opportunities for these students?
- How do we actively target mature and part-time students when planning for or communicating about campus services, information and resources as traditional marketing techniques do not often work for these students.
- Have we created an orientation program specific to the needs of these students? For example, do we include details for relationship-building activities; program expectations; goal-setting activities; information for technology, computer skills, library research, study skills and strategies; available campus support services; counselling and wellbeing services at FGS; inviting families to campus; networking opportunities and career counselling?
- Do we offer forms of guidance about the research process, technology and software, ethics, presentations, and submissions of work for these students at the beginning of and throughout the graduate studies and supervision journey?
- Do we foster practice discussions for graduate supervisors on how to supervise mature and part-time learners?
- Do we offer guidance or other services that mature and part-time students can access outside of the standard 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday schedule and how many times per academic year?

graduate studies | YORK U

YorkU Support Services

- [Atkinson Centre for Mature and Part-Time Students](#) (ACMAPS) ACMAPS mature student success [workshops](#)
- [Academic Advising](#)
- [Career Centre](#)
- [Funding](#)
  - [Academic Excellence Fund](#)
  - [Bursaries](#)
  - [Scholarships and Awards](#) and [Award Search](#) based on student information
  - [York Internal Awards](#)
  - [YUGSA Funding and Financial Aid](#)
- [Graduate Studies](#)
- [Graduate and Postdoctoral Professional Skills](#) (GPPS)
- [Graduate Wellness and Counselling](#)
- [Learning Skills Resources](#)
- [Mature Student Orientation](#)
- [Peer Mentorship Programs](#)
- [Student Accessibility Services](#)
- [Student Counselling Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Writing Centre](#) and [SPARK](#) (Student Papers and Academic Research Kit)
- [York University Library](#)

graduate studies | YORK U

Bibliography

Bailey, K. J., Peck Parrott, K., Long, M., Brannan, E., & Burtch, T. (2022*). Exploring best practices in supervision of graduate students. *College Student Affairs Journal, 40*(2), 94–106.

Butcher, J. (2020). *Unheard: The voices of part-time adult learners* (pp. 1–52). Oxford, UK: Higher Education Policy Institute.

Block, P. (2023). The dropout crisis of mature part-time doctoral students: a critique of the insufficient support and supervision provided by UK university doctoral schools. 10.13140/RG.2.2.20480.61447.

Cliplef, L. (2015). Mature Students in Community College: Two Supports to Improve Student Success. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, *7*(2), 60–67.

Fragoso, A., Goncalves, T., Ribeiro, C. M., Monteiro, R., Quintas, H., Bago, J., & Santos, L. (2013). The transition of mature students to higher education: Challenging traditional concepts? *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *45*(1), 67–81.

Gongadze, S., Styrnol, M., & Hume, S. (2021). *Evidence review: Supporting access and student success for mature learners*. Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO).

Haley, A., Holmqvist, M., & Johansson, K. (2024). Supervisors' competences from doctoral students' perspectives – A systematic review. *Educational Review*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2306938

Jacobsen, M., Neutzling, N., Lorenzetti, L., Oddone Paolucci, E., Nowell, L., Clancy, T., Freeman, G., & Lorenzetti, D. L. (2024). Examining graduate student perspectives on supervision and peer mentoring across four professional faculties. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*.

O'Shea, S & Stone. C (2011) Transformations and self-discovery: mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33:3, 273-288.

Tett, L., Hounsell, J., Christie, H., Cree, V. E., & McCune, V. (2012). Learning from feedback? Mature students' experiences of assessment in higher education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *17*(2), 247-260.

Van Rhijn, T.M., Lero, D. S., Bridge, K., & Fritz, V. A. (2015). Unmet Needs: Challenges to Success from the Perspectives of Mature University Students. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *28*(1), 29–47.

Wu, Y., Chen, Z., & Zhang, D. (2025). Supervisors' academic supervising behaviors and graduate students' academic thriving: The mediating roles of admiration and task engagement. *Behavioral Sciences, 15*(6), 754.

graduate studies | YORK U