

Too Old to be a Student?

by Lesley Dawson

Going back to college to do further training is difficult in any culture. There are lots of issues to overcome and attitudes to change. You are no longer at the top of your profession. Your opinion is only considered valid if you can back it up with something written in a research journal by people who were still in nappies when you joined the profession. You may have to sit in a lecture room for extended periods of time and can't get up for a smoke or a cup of coffee when it suits you, only when the class is over. You may be sitting next to a fellow student who is brighter than you think you ever were or will ever be, who is younger than your own daughter. You can see the pity in her eyes as you struggle to understand concepts new to you, which are very familiar to her.

All this is made more difficult because of the need to hand in assignments (not do written exams) online and search the appropriate professional websites to find information when, in years past, it took you three years to find your way round the library. But of course, it is not called a library anymore, whether it has books or not. It is now a resource centre, and you don't have to go there physically, you can access it at home, provided you have the appropriate IT skills.

Now imagine being asked to do this, go back to college, in the Middle East, where if you don't pass your Tawjihi (school leaving certificate) first time, you might get one more opportunity to retake it. You think back to the meeting held in your hospital or clinic last week, where you heard that Bethlehem University was starting a degree course in physiotherapy. You thought wistfully about your own diploma training many years ago, and wished you had the chance to apply.

Then you find out that the university is also planning to run, a part time BSc for people like you, who only have a two -year diploma, in parallel with their full time BSc. They are not doing this out of the goodness of their heart, because they know that in one year's time, they will ask you to take their degree students on clinical placement on your ward

or at your clinic. This top -up course is being offered, as a carrot, to all heads of departments of your age and experience.

This is something that needs to be thought about and discussed with family and colleagues. Younger family members make fun of the whole idea. You don't go back to college when you are forty years old. Think how you will lose face if younger colleagues find out. Your wife grumbles at the thought that you will be away from home each week. Your peers are divided about the idea. Some are angry that their hard- won diploma and long practical experience are considered inferior, but others see it as the route to a better job, and how can it be too difficult, they are bound to succeed.

Three years is a long time when you travel to Bethlehem one day every week, on top of your managerial responsibilities as well as being expected to produce written assignments almost every week. Whatever happened to good old written exams when you spent three hours writing all you knew on a topic?

Those travelling from Gaza and the north of the West Bank had to negotiate check points in addition to the long journey, requiring a very early start from home and a late return. To make matters worse, the soldiers on the check points, most of whom had not yet been to university, did not believe their stories about being students. They thought that their own fathers and mothers would not dream of lowering themselves to this level.

Their children could not understand that someone younger than their parent could be teaching them, someone who was also regarded as a friend. This confusion caused some interesting outcomes. One young boy being taken by his dad to buy a gift for his schoolteacher at the end of term, asked his father why he was not buying a gift for his teacher in college. What could dad do but agree with his son? I still have the beautiful black leather diary and notebook I received, as a consequence of this interaction.

Eventually graduation arrived, thankfully, and they all passed. Did they feel it was worth it? Yes, because they now had a degree certificate framed and hanging on the wall of their office and paper has more patience than people, when it comes to status.