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Empowering women to return to their SET careers: using e-learning and other innovative support measures for the successful reintegration of women into SET employment

Abstract

The workshop explored a range of measures that are being used to support women returning to SET careers after a break. These include the innovative online Open University course and a mentoring scheme run by the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET and JIVE. The workshop consisted of a number of short presentations followed by a question and answer session and discussion. Panel members included

1. Clem Herman and Ruth Carter (The Open University, Faculty of Maths Computing and Technology) who have been running the award winning Open University online course for women returners to SET (T160) since October 2005.
2. Louise McInnes (JIVE South East Mentoring Co-ordinator) who is involved in delivering the JIVE mentoring scheme for returners in the South East region
3. Clare Jones and Lucy Obwaye (OU students and returners) who spoke about their own experiences of returning to SET

Background

The rationale to support the retention and return to employment of women with Science Engineering and Technology (SET) qualifications and professional work experience is based on the findings of the Greenfield Report: SET Fair (1) and the Maximising Returns report (2), highlighting the large numbers of women with SET qualifications who no longer work in these sectors. This research shows that at least 50,000 UK women with SET qualifications are not active in these sectors and estimates that approximately 16,000 are likely to return to work annually into non-SET employment. Other research highlights the difficulties faced by women seeking to return to academic and research careers (3, 4)

The Open University T160 Course

In response to this need, the Open University in partnership with the UKRC for Women in SET developed a new course entitled Science Engineering Technology: A course for Women Returners. The first course began in October 2005 and by the end of 2007 over 750 women had participated. The unique distance learning method combining online materials with local tutorial support meant that students from even the remotest areas could benefit. However one of issues raised by some women was the lack of suitable employment in the regions that they live and the fact that they are not able to move because of family commitments.

The course runs over 10 weeks and is studied entirely online through a dedicated website and includes an audio CD which features stories of nine women who have successfully returned to their careers in SET. The course includes innovative use of computer conferencing for online group work and features visiting experts from industry who participate in an online question and answer panel. The course provides generic content, and focuses on the development of skills for getting back into work with an emphasis on SET employment, rather than updating of specific SET knowledge.

Above all the course supports women by raising confidence and offering a chance to support each other through group work and extending their own networks. Much of the course involves reflection on past experience and developing skills and techniques which will help once they have completed. For many it introduces them to the idea of personal development planning

As one student commented:

"the whole philosophy of the T160 course allowed me to think, almost gave me permission, to believe that I could still have a career in SET. Before I was involved in this course I felt that there were no opportunities for me to go back to a career in SET, and that that was due to my age, and the fact that I had only worked part time since having a family. .. I learned about other women who had been or were in the same situation and how some of them had succeeded [...] in spite of age, children and lack of experience. I also discovered about all the opportunities that are there for women in similar circumstances to mine, and that was very uplifting since I didn't know about them before."

Participants are encouraged to think about their lives in a holistic way and to identify what their aspirations are in terms of work life balance as they begin to contemplate major changes in their lives.



Within this process they are encouraged to value unpaid work – all too often women feel that they have nothing to show for the years out of the workplace yet many have transferable skills. For example one of the role models describes her own voluntary work:

“I worked for the school PTA [Parent Teacher Association] and I became a school governor, ending up as Chair of Governors for a few years When I came back into engineering ... I felt that the skills that I had learnt there and developed there were particularly relevant to taking a more senior job at work. The project management and the financial skills don't have to be acquired in the workplace they can be acquired anywhere and I think they are just as valid”

The students use an ePortfolio software tool to collate records about what they have done and achieved, which includes work, education and a range of information that they might need for their CVs or future job applications. They can keep this electronic portfolio after the course ends and are encouraged to keep it up to date

Additional Measures

Following the course, students are invited to participate in a number of support measures provided as part of the RETURN campaign in partnership with the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET, including work placements, mentoring and face to face networking events. These additional activities are made possible with the support of EU Equal funding enabling participants to be reimbursed for childcare and travel costs. A network of regional partners across the UK are involved in supporting women in their return to employment.

References

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3. Institute of Physics (2004) Career Breaks
4. Athena Project (2003) Asset Survey