Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers

Conference or Workshop Item

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Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers
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Return to Science Engineering and Technology

The Open University

Innovative learning technologies to enhance social presence: Tutorial in Second Life

The design of the course was a crucial part in my journey towards getting involved in commercial work again. It was important in building up my confidence and helping me make key decisions about my own skills set and the opportunities available to me locally. I would recommend it highly.

The course improved my confidence... and got me in touch with other women in the same situation. It was great to know that I wasn’t alone. I managed to build a good network out of it, and most importantly for me, it helped me put together a successful job application.

We carried out 23 in-depth interviews examining factors leading to reported outcomes which were analysed using an employability framework (D’Mello and Lindsey 2007). Visual explorations of employment and unemployment focus solely on either supply-side or demand-side factors. This analysis uses a more holistic framework that includes individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors.

A post survey was sent to 145 women who had taken the return to work course in 2005/6. They were all graduates in STEM subjects who were looking to return after a career break and had given their permission to be part of longitudinal follow up study and to be contacted from time to time. There were 95 responses (65% response rate). Of these 63% were in employment or self-employed, and only 5 unemployed

After a 10-year career break to look after her two children, Rajni has now returned to a lab-based science career.

Practical Tools and Support for Employability

CV development  
Career Planning  
Goal Setting  
Interview skills  
Mentoring  
Networking

The project has been successful in many regards - delivery is on target and partnership agreement.

The funding from the EU Equal programme enabled additional support activities to supplement the online programme. These included: training groups and networking events in local venues; and enhanced online presence for the course which was free of charge. In addition large scale marketing for the course in the national press resulted in many more than the initial target of local uptake. The benefits and potential for improvement at the end of the course became “innovative” into the Open University’s curriculum. From that point on, all of the participants were submitted to tutorials from the UKRC. The UKRC also provided a range of expert presentations and support to ten women who were based outside the area of the study, which were registered and administered by UKRC staff in regional study hubs but were not included in our participatory programme.

The national partnership is the first of a new kind of network focusing, creating an integrated approach capable of responding to changing circumstances and issues.


The course was managed by a large scale but with local presence. Participants have come from all over the UK and Ireland. During the initial 3 years, just over 200 participants were observed. The course and all of its activities have been enhanced in terms of local uptake and attendance from 2004 to 2011 by the UKRC regional hubs and national centres.

The course is managed by the Open University in partnership with the UKRC and, to date, the course and all of its activities have been enhanced in terms of local uptake and attendance from 2004 to 2011 by the UKRC regional hubs and national centres.

The focus of the study was on innovative approaches to distance learning and what were seen in 2005 as innovative and innovative learning technologies. The 12 week module was developed so that it could be delivered to office-based individuals who were unable to attend a regular course due to their geographical location. Participants collaborated in an online environment, working through a range of activities to support their learning and understanding of a subject. The course was aimed at individuals who were managing their professional and personal lives.