Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers

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Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers

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The Open University, as an online course, has access to a diverse range of learners, engineers and scientists who have varying levels of experience in STEM fields and have returned to STEM either as a result of a career break or to pursue a new path in STEM. Undergraduate students, returning to STEM from a career break, may find themselves in a similar situation to students returning to university after a break. In this article, we consider the findings of the Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers project, which used qualitative data to explore the reasons for returning and the support provided. The study used a mixed methods approach, involving surveys, interviews and case studies, to gather data from participants who had returned to STEM after a career break. The findings indicate that returning to STEM can be a complex and challenging process, with participants facing a range of challenges, including balancing work and family commitments, and accessing appropriate support. The study also highlights the importance of providing support and guidance to returning STEM learners, to help them navigate their return and achieve their goals. Overall, the research suggests that returning STEM learners require tailored support and resources to help them successfully navigate the transition back to STEM.

The context: women STEM graduates and returners

Return to Science Engineering and Technology

We carried out 23 in-depth interviews examining factors leading to reported outcomes which were analysed using an employability framework (McQuaid and Lindsey 2020). Explanations of employment and unemployment focus 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 postal survey was sent to 145 women who had taken the return to STEM course in 2015/6. They were all graduates in STEM subjects who were looking to return after a career break and had given their permission to be contacted. We were interested in their experiences and the support they received and how these affected their career development and employment.

The design of the course

The course is a core part of the STEM Learning and Development programme, which is a part of the STEM Learning and Development Programme. The course is designed to be flexible and allow learners to complete it at their own pace. The course is divided into four modules, each of which focuses on a different aspect of return to STEM. The course is designed to be accessible to learners who have a range of backgrounds and experience in STEM.

Funding from the EU Equal programme

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

Where next? The project team have developed an animated AI (artificial intelligence) to support students with employability. The team have been in discussion with the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum and the Careers Advisory service to identify ways to use this animated AI to support STEM graduates with employability. The team have also been discussing how to use this AI to support STEM graduates with employability. The team have also been discussing how to use this AI to support STEM graduates with employability.