Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers

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Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers

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Between 2005 and 2010 the Open University was an online course to support women returning to STEM careers. The course was aimed at those returning to STEM after a break for family, professional, or personal reasons. The course was called 'Returners in Science, Engineering and Technology' (REST) was delivered, in partnership with the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), and via the ESTEM programme, a collaborative initiative between UK universities and the STFC to support women returning to STEM careers. The course was highly successful with hundreds of women returning to STEM careers. The course was highly successful with hundreds of women returning to STEM careers. The course was highly successful with hundreds of women returning to STEM careers. The course was highly successful with hundreds of women returning to STEM careers. The course was highly successful with hundreds of women returning to STEM careers.

The course had a strong mentoring component, with women returning to STEM careers being paired with experienced STEM professionals. The mentoring programme was highly successful, with many women reporting that the mentoring was key to their success in returning to STEM careers.

The design of the course was based on the needs of the women returning to STEM careers. The course was designed to be flexible, allowing women to return to STEM on their own terms. The course was also designed to be accessible, with women returning to STEM careers being able to access the course from anywhere in the world.

The course was also designed to be innovative, with the use of virtual environments such as Second Life to provide a platform for women returning to STEM careers to collaborate and learn.

Funding from the EU Equal programme enabled additional support activities to supplement the online programme. These included virtual groups and networking events in which women returning to STEM careers could connect with other women returning to STEM careers. These events were highly successful, with many women reporting that the networking events were key to their success in returning to STEM careers.

The national partnership, in the form of the University of Oxford, was crucial in creating an integrated approach capable of responding to the challenges faced by women returning to STEM careers.

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We carried out 23 in-depth interviews examining factors leading to reported outcomes which were analyzed using an employability framework (McQuaid and Lindsey 2008). Visual explorations of employment and unemployment focused on either supply-side or demand-side factors. This analysis uses a more holistic framework that includes individual, personal, and external factors.

A postal survey was sent to 185 women who had taken the return to STEM 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 a longitudinal follow-up study and to be contacted from time to time. There were 91 responses (49% response rate). Of these 62% were in employment or self-employed, and only 5 unemployed.

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

The design of the course made use of the EU funded eTwinning project to provide learners with online support and social learning opportunities. The 10-week course was developed so that it could be delivered through a series of online workshops, each led by an experienced STEM professional. The workshops were designed to help learners develop the skills and knowledge needed to return to STEM. The workshop was highly successful, with many women reporting that the workshops were key to their success in returning to STEM careers.

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