Distance travelled: supporting women returning to STEM careers

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At the Open University, as an online course to support women graduates, engineers, and technologists who have returned to STEM or are considering returning. The programme is called “Returning to Science, Engineering and Technology” (REST) run by the Open University’s Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum. It has been running for many years with about 1000 participants. The course was aimed at women returning to STEM at all levels of career, having experienced a break in their working life for any reason, and who wish to return to a career in the STEM sector. The course included topics such as:

- Understanding the career opportunities available
- Building your confidence
- Identifying your skills and experience
- Developing your career plan
- Networking
- Identifying your return policy
- Identifying your return package

The course was developed in collaboration with the REST Centre and the National Centre for Diversity. It is designed to help women returners gain confidence and develop their skills. The course is accessible to women returners from all backgrounds, including those with little or no experience in STEM.

The course is available online and is delivered through a series of modules, each of which includes video lectures, readings, and interactive activities. Participants can choose to complete the course in their own time and at their own pace. The course is free to participate in, and there are no formal assessments. The course is delivered by the REST Centre and the National Centre for Diversity.

The course has been very successful, with over 1000 participants taking part in each year. The course has been widely praised by participants, who have reported that they have gained confidence, developed new skills, and made valuable connections.

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We carried out 23 in-depth interviews examining factors leading to reported outcomes which were measured using an employability framework (KanQuid and Lindsey 2008). Visual explorations 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 185 graduates who had taken the REST course in 2005/6. They were all graduates in STEM subjects who were looking to return after a career break and who had given their permission to be contacted. They were contacted at a specific time during the spring of 2006. The survey included a range of questions about their experiences of returning to STEM.

The survey results were analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative methods included content analysis and thematic analysis. The quantitative methods included descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

The survey results showed that the REST course had a significant impact on the participants’ confidence and employability. The participants reported that the course had helped them to identify and develop their skills, and to make connections with others in the STEM sector.

The course had also helped the participants to gain confidence in their communication skills and to develop new skills in areas such as networking and job searching.

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