WOMEN RETURNERS SCOTLAND

Project Report
June 2016

EQUATE Scotland

15 STEM returners supported via:

26 one-to-one career clinics

2 webinars (with 100% attendance)

2 training workshops

Site visits to life Science labs

1 networking event

▶▶ 6 STEM employer partners: ◀◀

7 returnship Interviews

2 jobs secured

4 paid returnships so far......

All delivered for a budget of **£15,000**

EQUΔTE Scotland
For Women in Science, Engineering & Technology

Women Returners: Project Report

"I moved from a story where I hadn't done any work for nine years, to a story where I've never stopped working, applying my skills, solving problems, achieving 'continuous improvement'."

– Woman Returner

"For the employer it is about a quality resource in the short term…and a high likelihood of feeding into the pipeline if the Returnship works out well."

– Scottish STEM Employer

Contents

Executive Summary

Women Returners Scotland was a six-month pilot supporting women to return to work in the STEM industries after a career break. It was delivered by Equate Scotland in partnership with Prospect, the trade union for professionals, and funded by Skills Development Scotland. It ran between December 2015 and May 2016. As well as offering opportunity to individual women and to businesses, the wider context for the project is a STEM skills shortage in Scotland – getting some of the many professional women who have taken a break in their STEM careers back into the workforce has the potential to play an important part in addressing that shortage.

Working with a group of fifteen women and six Scottish STEM employers, the project promoted a return to STEM careers through a structured support programme for the returners and active assistance to employers in creating and filling Returnships – paid work placements of between three and six months.

For the women returners, the project worked to build their confidence and develop practical strategies for returning to professional STEM work after a career break. For the STEM employers, the project focused on supporting them to explore the benefits of what is, at present, a relatively unfamiliar recruitment route.

The project achieved high levels of engagement with the women participants and good engagement with the employer partners. Both participants and employers valued the work done by the project. The women returners reported gains in confidence and valuable learning on practical issues related to returning to work. Employers were positive about the scheme, although also clear that establishing Returnships was not without its challenges. Not all employers were able to engage at the pace demanded by the tight time constraints of the pilot.

Over a third of the participants secured a Returnship or other STEM employment while the project was running and there were positive prospects for other participants securing opportunities as a result of project activity. Participants who neither secured a Returnship nor STEM employment during the life of the project were nonetheless positive about its value and believed that they were in a stronger position to achieve a return to a STEM career as a result of their involvement in the project.

The pilot delivered significant impact for a small cash budget of £15,000, with valuable work provided pro bono by Equate Scotland, Prospect and the participating employers. Overall, the project represented excellent value for money. Delivery at such a low cost was partly achieved by making good use of existing resources at Equate Scotland and Prospect. Costs were also kept down by setting out of scope some activity that would be essential to a sustainable, longer-term project, particularly around development of re-usable resources and external communications.

The pilot generated a number of specific learning points that can be taken into future Returnship schemes in Scotland for STEM and potentially other areas. The main lessons focus on: the sequence of the programme delivery; communications to ensure maximum clarity around expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities; and ways to further build momentum for the adoption of Returnships amongst Scottish employers.

Background

The project was launched against the background of concerns about a skills shortage in STEM and an awareness that many professional women who have taken a break in STEM careers could play an important part in addressing that shortage. (See Appendix: Skills Shortage and the Economy, for further facts and figures.)

Research commissioned by Prospect indicated that some of the barriers to women returning to a STEM career were relatively soft. These soft barriers were such that it seemed plausible that moderate and relatively low-cost interventions – confidence boosting, practical advice, connecting to employers, and the use of Returnships – could have a significant impact. At the same time, by providing a practical demonstration of how such barriers could be overcome, a successful pilot would be able to influence attitudes and build momentum for taking such work forward in the future.

> **Returnships**
>
> 'Returnships' are paid short-term employment placements for professionals returning to work after a career break. Alongside the experience gained from the work placement, Returnship schemes can provide additional support for the returner, such as advice, career coaching, networking opportunities and peer support. Pioneered in 2008 for the US finance industry by Goldman Sachs (who have trademarked the term 'Returnship') and others, the approach has begun to gain popularity in other sectors, including STEM, as well as in other countries.

The pilot project was designed to provide informative answers to three key questions:

1. Can modest and low-cost interventions make a significant difference for women who are contemplating returning to STEM careers?

2. Are Scottish STEM employers open to the idea of Returnships and willing to commit time and money to running them on a recurrent basis?

3. Are there opportunities for a successor project / extended pilot, building on and refining the approach established in the Equate Scotland pilot, to make a significant contribution to the adoption of Returnships in Scotland in STEM industries and, by doing so, contribute to the wider goal of addressing the skills shortage in STEM?

While the project had an explicit STEM focus, much of the support work was more generic. So, as well as learning about the viability of this approach in STEM, there was scope to learn more about the viability of promoting Returnships, through a mix of support to women and engagement with employers, across a range of industries.

Building on Existing Work to Support Women STEM Returners

Equate Scotland has for a number of years undertaken a range of activity that has offered support to women wanting to return to STEM careers including: 'career clinics', webinars, and one-day courses on topics such as 'CVs, applications and interviews' and 'Returning to work' (looking at the potential barriers that returners may face and how to overcome them.)

The pilot allowed Equate Scotland to package some of these separate activities into a coherent support programme for the women returners and combine that with peer support opportunities. In addition, Equate Scotland undertook completely new work in liaising with six employers to seek to create short paid placement opportunities for which the women could apply.

Returnships in Other Parts of the UK

Equate Scotland does not know of any other returner programmes – combining preparation, support and employer-funded placements – operating in Scotland and believes the pilot to be the first systematic test of this approach. There are a growing number of initiatives operating in England, mostly around London and the South East. A number of these schemes have been developed or supported by Women Returners UK, whose expertise Equate Scotland drew on as part of delivering the Scottish project. The initial focus of schemes in other parts of the UK was weighted towards the financial and legal sector, but the scope has been broadening to include other sectors including STEM areas such as construction.

A distinctive feature of the Scottish pilot was that it drew together a number of different employers as part of one scheme. Employers, indicated that they valued the networking the project had provided and the opportunity to compare notes and learn from other employers. The participants indicated that they too had valued the participation of multiple employers, as it had given them the opportunity to grow their professional networks.

Returnships have proved popular with large corporates, although Women Returners UK has indicated a growing level of engagement by SMEs. For the pilot, the focus was on corporates and further work would be needed in Scotland to test the viability for SMEs which are strongly prevalent in the Scottish business environment.

The Pilot

The project secured six STEM employers across Scotland that were committed to engaging with a view to offering one or more Returnships within the six-month timeframe of the pilot. At the same time, the project recruited a cohort of fifteen women for the Women Returners programme.

Support Delivered to the 15 Women Returners

- Two training workshops focusing on 'return to work' skills and online networking via LinkedIn

- Two webinars looking at overcoming the obstacles of returning to work

- One LinkedIn support group

- One networking event for the women returners, employers and other partners

- Two site visits to local Life Sciences employers

- Twenty six one-to-one career clinics

Employment Outcomes

- Seven Returnship interviews with three out of six participating employers.
  (1 x Scottish Power, 2 x SSE, 4 x EDF)

- Four paid Returnships in place with three out of six participating employers.
  (1 x Scottish Power, 2 x SSE, 1 x EDF)

- Up to three further paid Returnships may follow (not confirmed at the time of this report)

- Two permanent jobs secured with one out of six participating employers and one employer not participating directly with the project
  (INEOS – a project partner – and Scottish Water – not directly linked to pilot)

Participating Employers

- Babcock International
- EDF Energy
- INEOS

- Scottish Power
- Leonardo (formerly Selex)
- SSE

The project also engaged with the University of Edinburgh as a potential employer. Due to timing issues, the possibility of offering Returnships was not viable with the pilot project period.

Support Activity

Activity	Impact
Induction Event / Initial Workshop: 'Returning to Work' / Networking Lunch 9th February 2016	This was positively received, with participants highlighting how it built confidence, connected them to other women in a similar situation, and helped break down the steps required to return to employment in a clear way. "It has got me thinking about my past work history and where I am now. The skills I have gained from my previous employments and experiences."
Creation of LinkedIn support group February 2016	This resource was mentioned by some of the women in interviews with the evaluator. Several women indicated they intended to continue to use it beyond the life of the project.
Webinar: 'Returning to Work' 29th February 2016	This hour session was attended by all 15 women supported by the project. Participants appreciated the timing of the session and that it could be done at home. The feedback was generally very positive, although there were some adverse comments about technical issues and the limited scope for discussion / interaction in the session. Of the two webinars, feedback indicated that this one was generally found to be more relevant to the participants.

Activity	Impact
Webinar: 'Getting the Balance Right' 22nd March 2016	This hour session was attended by all 15 women supported by the project. Participants appreciated the timing of the session and that it could be done at home. The feedback was generally very positive, although there were some adverse comments about technical issues and the limited scope for discussion / interaction in the session. Of the two webinars, feedback indicated that this was one was generally found to be less relevant to the participants, although still valued overall.
Workshop on LinkedIn + Review of Learning Across the Programme 18th May 2016	This session received very positive feedback, with a number of participants surprised by how much they had learned and keyed up to make much more use of LinkedIn following the session. A number of participants would have liked a session on this topic to have been scheduled nearer the start of the programme rather than at the end. "After this course, I see the huge benefit of it, in terms of making contact, especially when it comes to finishing my placement."
End of project networking event for the women returners, employers and other partners 26th May 2016	Women returners and employers came together to discuss what had worked well on the project and what might be done in the future. There was a high level of engagement both in the formal session and during the networking lunch. The event also featured a contribution from Women Returners. (see Organisations and Useful Resources) which generated valuable discussion about the similarities and differences between a London / SE England based initiative and the Scottish-based pilot.
Two visits to local Life Sciences Labs Late May and Early June 2016	The opportunity to attend these sessions was greatly valued. Although not part of the original programme schedule, the project was able to set up two sites visits in response to requests from participants.

Activity	Impact
26 one-to-one career clinics Between February and May 2016	Up to two 'career clinics' were offered to each woman on the project. With 26 out of maximum 30 sessions, take up was high. Scheduling difficulties prevented some women from taking up one or both of their sessions within the lifetime of the project. Several of the women who took these sessions found them transformative, stating that they far exceeded initial expectations, and singled them out as the most useful aspect of the support programme. Quotes illustrating the positive response to these sessions are found in **Returner Perspective** below. There were only positive comments provided for the content of these sessions.

The Employer Perspective

Representatives of employers involved in the programme were positive about creating Returnships – i.e. paid short term placements – for women returners. Employers were able to make demonstrable progress to deliver commitments on workforce equality and diversity. While part of the positive attitude stemmed from a commitment to equality and diversity, this factor was matched - if not overtaken - by the 'business case'. So, although this was seen as an opportunity for employers to be doing the 'right thing' – and potentially to gain PR benefit from being seen to do so – it was also a case of them doing the thing that makes 'good business' sense.

Returnships were seen by employers as offering both short-term and longer-term benefits.

Short-term Benefits

In the short term, a Returnship meant:

> "a contribution to business projects – an extra pair of hands"

This was echoed by some of the women who had begun their Returnships during the pilot period:

> "Do I feel I am adding value? Yes. There are things that they really need. There are things that they really are wanting done. So I am taking some of the load off other people. I've been given real projects. That's great from the employer perspective and great for me."

Employers also talked about how managers sometimes had a backlog of moderate-sized projects that they did not have the resources to progress. Returnships were seen, in some cases, as means to push forward such projects. Because the women had good experience of managing and completing projects – both in their previous STEM careers and through the diverse experience gained during their career break – they were seen as credible candidates to take on such projects. The fact that some of their technical and / or IT skills might be a little rusty was not irrelevant, but nor was it a 'deal breaker'. There was also some discussion

with employers about the benefits of attributes associated with older and more experienced workers, expressed in terms such as "steadiness" or "well-rounded".

Longer-term Benefits

In the longer term, the Returnship was seen as:

> "an opportunity to evaluate that person. There might be a match. It starts to feed the pipeline of people coming in. Having multiple different routes in, pipelines, is a good thing. STEM staff can be a problematic area. If you have a pipeline coming in, it helps recruitment."

While no evidence of formal cost calculations was provided by employers, there was an impression that the Returnship route might be more cost effective than other recruitment routes:

> "I think it probably would be cheaper. The person is there, you know they are the right fit. You don't need a recruitment fee. It would be cheaper."

Future work could look to explore this possibility in more detail. As the interviewee noted here, if the employer had to find funding over and above the salary paid to the returner during their placement, that is to contribute to the cost to the Women Returners support programme, that might offset the benefits.

What was noteworthy about the employer reflection on this was that there was no sense that this route was going to be unattractive on grounds of costs and, if anything, the reverse. However, cost alone was not the only consideration. Employers commented that having a variety of distinct and complementary 'pipelines' into the workforce could make a real difference in helping them get the right mix of skills and experience.

The short- and long-term appeal were summed up by one employer's remark:

> "For the employer it is about a quality resource in the short-term (three to six months) and a high likelihood of feeding into the pipeline if the Returnship works out well."

'Pitching' Returnships Internally: Getting Managers on Board

When discussing with employers how easy or hard it was to 'pitch' the idea of Returnships in their organisation, the response was that managers were positive about the idea in principle but that it was important for them that the process be streamlined and efficient.

Employers showed understanding of the challenge for some women returners around confidence and how they presented themselves to an employer:

> "If you have been out, you can lose the language and the drive and the confidence. That can be the first thing others see."

Representatives of employers definitely showed a willingness to see beyond first appearances and recognised that they could be losing out if they did not. At the same time, where initial appearances were not 'strong' – or perhaps where they were not 'typical' of what would be a 'strong' showing in someone who wasn't coming out of a career break – they recognised that there was an internal challenge to overcome.

Employers valued the work of the project – it helped women to regain a sense of confidence, to have the language employers expect and to demonstrate their drive – because it meant that there was less 'work' for managers to see the value that was on offer. Employers noted that "managers aren't resistant, but they are busy. And if something is not what they are used to, it can take up more time".

The employer representatives who were most actively involved in the scheme found it valuable to have contact with other employers who were on the same journey. That this was valued could be worth bearing in mind in the design of future schemes.

Following the pilot, even taking into account some of the challenges to be expected when exploring new territory, employers assessed the project as worthwhile and indicated that they would like to participate in similar schemes in the future.

For those employers taking on Returnships that were able to give feedback during the pilot phase, the experience was already proving a positive one. Part of the positive experience was that staff who had only had indirect or no contact with the Equate Scotland project were becoming familiar with the idea of Returnships and gaining an appreciation of its value as a recruitment route.

Challenges for Employers

While the response from participating employers was positive overall, the internal 'sell' was not necessarily easy:

> "People aren't opposed in principle. If you talk to [managers] then they think it's a good idea. But, practically, managers are busy. That's where it becomes hard."

Reflection on what would make the internal 'sell' easier divided into three themes, one around structure and communications, one around the quality of matches, and a third around familiarity.

Structure and Communications

On structure and communications, the emphasis in feedback was on ensuring that the structure of the Returnship programme was very definite as well as clearly and concisely communicated. Employers liked the idea of definite timetables, with schemes perhaps setting out one or two annual recruitment drives with dates known well in advance. There was enthusiasm for employer-focused communication resources – flyers, web pages, or other – aimed at managers to help them quickly gain a concrete sense of the value they might get from a Returnship, what work it would involve for them and when that work would be needed.

Quality of Matches

On quality of matches, to the extent that this was an issue, it was a product of relatively small numbers of women participants in the scheme. The cohort of fifteen women covered a range of STEM areas. Consequently, not everyone in the cohort would be a match for every potential Returnship.

The quality of matches issue would be improved by a larger-scale programme and perhaps also by programmes with thematic streams, e.g. a stream for biomedical sciences, a stream for energy, etc.

Familiarity with the Returnship Route

The familiarity issue is something that can only be tackled by continued work to promote and support the introduction of Returnships, e.g. by follow-on pilots and/or other moves to mainstream Returnship support work.

> "In the future – a regular scheduled programme might help. It would help managers get it into their heads."

"[This Returnship is] working very well… The manager will be an advocate. But you've got to push these things. If you dropped it and didn't do another one, there'd be a problem. Momentum is important."

Changing the Story

A theme that emerged from employers is that there is more than one way to tell the story of what a Returnship is and what costs and benefits it can bring. With a Returnship, one employer suggested, you have to ask:

"Is it a three-month cost? Is it a burden or a liability? Or is it a good value contractor for three months, someone at lower than standard rate, but that's to account that they might take a bit of extra time to 'get up to speed'? But it also brings a new person into the recruitment pipeline that I've been able to try out. And the try out period means I reduce risk if I want to take someone on long-term."

Other story themes that employers were exploring included whether to think of the scheme as primarily serving to further their diversity and gender equality agendas or as primarily a recruitment strategy that made good business sense. In practice, employers saw it as both. In some contexts it is going to be more helpful to lead with one story thread rather than the other.

The pitch also stands to benefit from conveying a sense that Returnships are a 'normal' and 'mainstream' recruitment practice that plenty of employers are using and that they are straightforward to implement. This would be in contrast to a story where they are 'novel' and 'experimental'.

A final story theme was around flexibility. Employers recognised that the 'default' assumption about a good or effective employee is one that makes few or no demands around flexibility (on either hours or holidays) and who wants to work full-time. A working pattern that deviates from this 'standard' or 'default' can be seen as a 'deficit' pattern, as falling short of the ideal. A contrasting story is one that emphasises achieving the desired results and focuses on the desired ends rather than the specific means. As one employer put it at a networking event:

"It's not about presenteeism, it's about getting the job done."

Representatives of employers suggested that their managers were open to adopting new stories, but that it took work to bring about this change. The project, by delivering concrete examples of Returnships, was contributing to that work.

Accelerating Returnships into the Mainstream

The pilot showed that employers are ready to engage with the idea of Returnships. The amount of 'push' required to create concrete opportunities was relatively modest, although not without challenge. What has been learned from the pilot can be used to make it easier for employers to engage and to 'sell' the idea internally to their 'busy' managers.

There is, then, an opportunity to continue to build momentum and accelerate the adoption of Returnships. At some point in the future, it is possible that a 'tipping point' will be achieved where Scottish employers are completely familiar with Returnships and, if they have not tried them out themselves, they will know of other employers who have. However, the pilot suggests that in STEM, and most likely across the board, Scotland is some way off that tipping point.

Women Returners UK – an organisation that has geographical focus mainly around London and South East England and a subject focus that is weighted more heavily towards financial and legal than STEM – provided some commentary on 'tipping points' at a project

networking event. In their market, they indicated that they have reached a point where companies have started come to them (a 'pull' action) rather than the organisation having to strongly pitch and promote Returnships to the employers (a 'push' action).

The experience of the pilot was that 'push' is still something that is needed in the Scottish context. The London / South East England experience suggests, however, that once a certain level of momentum is achieved, much less 'push' will be required.

An explicit goal for future projects could be to present Returnships as something that is seen as very much a 'mainstream' option for recruitment, that can sit alongside graduate recruitment programmes, apprenticeships and internships. By providing clear templates for Returnship schemes, support programmes for returners, and case studies of successful Returnships from a range of large and small companies, future projects would act an accelerator helping to build momentum for Returnships in Scotland.

Looking further ahead, once momentum has been built, there is some reason to believe that it could then be maintained as employers shift from the need to 'push' and into the state where they want to 'pull', e.g. approach organisations such as Equate Scotland for help providing, preparing and supporting suitable candidates to schemes they now see as a normal part of their recruitment cycle.

The Returner Perspective

The fifteen women on the programme were very positive about its impact. This included participants who neither secured a Returnship nor STEM work during the life of the project, but who nonetheless reported that they felt in a stronger position to achieve a future return to a STEM career.

Key themes that the participants picked out were:

- the project provided a significant boost to confidence

- finding new ways to tell the story of their career break, ways that were positive and empowering and that showed how the "gap that isn't a gap" could be an asset to employers as opposed to a liability

- the career clinics, taken up by most participants, received particular praise – while some women were sceptical that these sessions would have much value for them, many reported, with some surprise, how useful they had been both in terms of making very practical plans around getting back into employment but also in terms of helping the women to do some valued 'big picture' thinking about their lives and careers

- the mixed programme of 'at home' (webinar) and 'office-based' activities was appreciated with both approaches being valued

- those that began Returnships / took up employment during the pilot period were energised by the opportunity and well-received by their employers

- there was some consensus around some key areas for improvement in successor projects, particularly around 'frontloading' workshops on CVs and having the chance to discuss and revise CVs before submission to an employer.

Participants were generally very positive about the value of the project with comments such as:

> "I would recommend it to other people. It's an amazing opportunity to get on to it. My children were at school, the times of the meetings fitted around. It was really beneficial."

> "It's been like a bridge really, between me and employers. It's been good to have that bridge."

> "This project has contributed a lot on my return to my career."

Building Confidence

Confidence was repeatedly highlighted as an area where the project had a significant impact:

> "Definitely it's given me confidence."

> "I've got lot of confidence to do with my children's lives and with my volunteer work. But I had less confidence about going back to work. The whole programme has given me that sort of confidence. Not to say I didn't have trepidation when I started my placement…"

> "I went along thinking I'll be the oldest and been out for longest… It was good to find other people in the same age group and that [returning] was a viable thing. I was thinking, am I a bit daft. But seeing other people made a difference. And it was good

> for my confidence. … Part of it is knowing that how you're thinking and feeling isn't just you."

> "I always had confidence in my skills and I worked hard the last year to keep myself updated with the latest technology, however I was not confident about having had a career break and [was concerned as to] what employers would think. The career clinics had a big impact in my preparation for my interview and I think that's the reason I got the job."

Meeting with other women in a similar situation also contributed to boosting confidence by offering a broader perspective on each individual's situation:

> "It was good to meet the other women. Everyone's stories were very different, but there were some things in common. I felt part of a community and we could sympathise with one another, explain our experiences, and think about the future."

> "Hearing other people's experience at the workshops, realising there is common ground, hearing how other people have tackled things, what they have found difficult and what they have found manageable. That's been helpful."

Changing the Story: the Gap that isn't a Gap

Many participants found that the project led to a significant change in how they thought about their career break.

> "The career clinic helped me find ways to talk about the gap that isn't a gap."

> "I moved from a story where I hadn't done any work for nine years, to a story where I've never stopped working, applying my skills, solving problems, achieving 'continuous improvement'."

> "The initial workshop focused on looking at what you've done in the past in a more positive manner. Although people haven't been working in paid employment, they've achieved a lot."

Through discussion and reflection, participants found ways to make the idea of 'transferable skills' genuinely meaningful for their own case.

> "I had thought more about skills that I had learned while I was in my career break. Talking about it, helped me recognise the skill set that I had developed and could transfer over to a new role."

> "With the children's nursery, I helped them improve their communications, worked on documents for them. I didn't stop doing projects. I was just doing projects for a different 'customer'. Now I have capacity to take on different 'customers' as where the children are being educated now, they don't need my help."

> "The biggest thing was being able to identify transferable skills so you can sell yourself."

While finding a better way to represent their career breaks, the women who began Returnships / employment during the pilot were also positive about the new chapter and how it would go on to be part of their story for the next time they needed to pitch for employment:

> "Someone can look at my CV and see I had employment in 2016 and not in 1996! It is relevant and it is up-to-date. I am working in a civil engineering team. And we're going to get site visits and look at design reviews. It's going to give me quite a range of experience."

"I am managing the practical work quite well. It has come back like riding a bike."

Developing Practical Strategies for Returning to STEM Careers

Through workshops, webinars and career clinics, participants learned about practical steps they could take to help them return to professional STEM careers.

"The careers clinic highlighted some steps for me to follow. I was working my way through the actions from that meeting. Then an interview came up and I got that job. So then I switched attention to focus on that. But I still have a list of actions I can go back and pick up where I left off. There are things I can do to get back in, if the first option does not work out, then I have a really good plan. I've not got all my eggs in one basket."

"The career clinics were good at getting me to focus on what I had to do right now and giving me practical suggestions."

"Rather than job hunting being this big nebulous cloud, these are the actual steps, these are the activities, this is the order you have to do them in. So the whole process is a lot less intimidating."

The value of networking was an important theme in the programme. Some of the returners particularly valued the material on LinkedIn. This was a tool that the women were familiar with but the majority had not made much use of. As a result of the programme, women were much more willing to make use of LinkedIn and had clearer ideas about how to go about networking.

"After the LinkedIn course, I see the huge benefit of it, in terms of making contact, especially when it comes to finishing my placement… LinkedIn is going to be a good way of making contacts with people."

"The career clinic made me see I don't need to go to people and say "can you get me a job?". There are other questions I can ask. I can ask what I might do to make me more employable. I don't have to go asking begging for something. And people are quite open to that contact. It's opened my eyes a little bit, to see what I can do to use my contacts, in a good way."

Supporting 'Big Picture' Thinking

The participants found that the project had a big impact on their thinking about their readiness to return that went beyond boosting confidence.

Some participants found themselves genuinely surprised at how the career clinics got them thinking and welcome new perspective on the challenge or returning, including challenges that might be internal:

"The career clinics have been good. They've helped my thinking. They were good at getting me to recognise barriers I was putting up and obstacles I was putting in my own way."

Participants talked about how options that previously they might have ruled out had become available for active consideration.

"So I started from a position where I felt judged, and that I wasn't contributing anything. But after the session I got to thinking that I've done a lot that's of value. I feel a bit more positive. It's changed my mind set from 'I haven't done and I can't do' to 'I have done things and I can do things. I can do anything I put my mind to."

"It's at the point now where if something did arise I'd be keen to look at whether I could make changes so that I could do it. If something were to arise I'd be more keen to push forward with it."

"I was thinking of giving up altogether having had some really bad experiences in the work place in the past. I'm still holding on to the possibility of getting back into work. So that's a real difference Equate Scotland has made to me."

Other Feedback: What Worked Well

The project mixed face-to-face meetings with online webinars. Overall, the women returners were positive about both approaches. Although the webinars did offer more flexibility – for example, for some they could be undertaken without arranging additional childcare – the women also very much valued the face-to-face meetings at office locations.

"It was very helpful to have workshop events in an office environment. It meant having to get professionally dressed up, to get into 'work mode', to turn up and present myself as a professional. If you've been out for a long time, you've got out of the habit of doing that. And it's good to get that experience through the project… It wouldn't be as a good if you were doing everything at home."

With the face-to-face meetings, the project offered various options, including evening sessions. The flexibility was appreciated by the participants, although, unsurprisingly, the final options selected did not suit absolutely everyone.

"It would be good to have more time to plan. That's important with childcare. My children are small. They are not at school yet."

The project aimed to give as much advance notice as possible for events, bearing in mind potential barriers to participation such as caring responsibilities. In some cases, such as the lab visits, early notice was not available as these additional events were set up in response to participant feedback. Based on the feedback from participants, overall the project did well on giving notice and in setting the times for events. And it is clear that paying close attention to this is an important part of the success of this and any future projects of a similar kind.

Attendance at both webinars was 100%. Although positive about the webinars, some women noted that there was room for improvement in the technical arrangements and some things did go wrong. For women with a background in technology, this was seen as surprising and below the standard they expected.

Participants were positive about the way the project was run and the professionalism of those they came into contact with:

"The project was responsive. They did listen to the feedback and respond accordingly."

"The support from Equate Scotland has been really good. I haven't had to go back to them and say "what's going on here?" and they've chased me up when I didn't do something. That was appreciated."

Other Feedback: What Could Have Worked Better

There was a common theme about the timing of CV submission and the lack of opportunity to revise and improve CVs based on what the programme had to offer:

"We didn't all meet together until February and our CVs had to be in by December. And we didn't know who the companies were. So you didn't know how to gear them

> to the companies because we didn't know at that stage. And you're always told to gear your CV to the job."

> "It would be good to have CV training early on in the programme. And to have a career clinic earlier in the programme."

> "There wasn't an opportunity to get feedback and revise CVs before I was asked if it was OK to send them on to potential employers."

> "Change the order of the events. CV stuff first. LinkedIn early. Interviewing skills. Have these three up at the front."

The project had to operate under tight time constraints, so while some of these issues might have been addressed, a later submission of CVs to employers might have adversely affected the potential for Returnships to be created. Nonetheless, this was a very clear theme in the feedback and any future project would need to work out ways of addressing it that balanced any downsides to delaying the submission of CVs to employers.

Other comments around potential areas for improvement included:

> "A bigger sweep of employers. It wouldn't have been much of a stretch to get a broader base of employers."

> "Maybe make clearer what the expectations are. We haven't known what they are until things have unfolded. So having something that sets out the order in which things happen. To have more visibility of this. We've not known when things are coming and or what exactly it is. What's come up has been great. But having a roadmap would be helpful."

> "STEM is too broad. I wanted there to be women in the programme who had a technology background and also to have speakers / trainers with up to date knowledge of technology."

> "I'm not sector specific. I was fine with being with people with different specialisms. We all had to get back into work. It doesn't matter what they did, the circumstances were more relevant."

There was also some feedback around managing expectations and the details of the contract actually offered for a Returnship. It was suggested that, in the future, there might be scope to work on some of these details at an earlier stage, so that expectations could be more effectively managed.

Employers and Returners: Flexibility

Flexibility was an area of moderate tension for both the women returners and employers. There were at least two issues around flexibility, one around a genuine, if often modest, conflict of interest and the other around communication and the potential for both parties to be sending each other mixed signals.

For example, employers showed some unease as to how the women's availability for Returnships was expressed.

> "They needed to make a pitch where they're giving something and showing flexibility. So [with the submitted availability statements there was] some impression of a lack of flexibility, a bit of disconnect. To be faced with a set of absolute constraints was a bit off putting. It sent a mixed message to the organisation. A better message might be: can we meet up to discuss what would be possible… Managers see that and can say "ah…" So they have choice… It has to be a win, win."

So, from the employer perspective there was, on occasion, a sense of 'disconnect'. Hearing too much about what the women returner 'could not do' was off-putting and sent the wrong kind of signal, with the potential for the employer to conclude there was less willingness to be flexible and negotiate, and possibly even to conclude that there was less flexibility across the board, not just around hours and holidays.

However, for the returners there was also a sense of 'disconnect'. For example, in one discussion with an employer, much emphasis was given to their strong record of granting flexible working requests once employees were already on the books. While this is positive in itself, women returners experienced some 'disconnect' here as, from their point of view, they needed to be able to raise the issue and make agreements about flexibility *before* committing rather than after.

In addition, returners pointed to some of the signalling of employers. When they saw, for example, job adverts that described posts as full-time, it could lead to the conclusion that inquiries about part-time working would not be entertained. From the employer point of view, such wording was sometimes, if not always, just the 'default' wording and, as they saw it, was signalling only a preference rather than an absolute constraint.

The extent to which returners saw the external signals from employers as rigid and inflexible was significant. One way in which this showed was by the level of surprise one returner expressed that there would be 'employers willing to place fifteen women for various positions'. Just knowing that this was the case had an impact for her and gave her encouragement that returning was possible.

Other participants pointed out how the list of essential and desirable criteria included in job ads, when read strictly, had left them, as potential returners, feeling excluded:

> "The jobs you look for online have essential and desirable and I was just not fitting. So you hit the first wall. You can't demonstrate you have all the essential criteria. So you just don't get an interview. But getting a placement based on CV rather than a job description has been incredibly helpful."

In practice, where returners and employers did have negotiations about flexibility, they appear to have worked well.

> "My placement is running over the school summer holidays - ideally the scheme would be run it so that it avoids the long summer holidays (as that's extra costs) – the childcare

> provider I am using doesn't accept childcare vouchers. The company have given me a couple of weeks off [unpaid] where I've not had childcare…I get the impression that the company really want it to work."

Future projects could usefully address the concerns of both returners and employers around the issue of flexibility. Given that the scope to achieve 'win, win' agreements between returner and employer seems to be high, it would be a shame for some 'win, win' opportunities to be missed because of poor signalling about flexibility from employers or over-cautious reading of signals by returners.

Opportunities and Learning Points

A: CV Preparation and Submission – Introduce a Two-stage Process

In the pilot, women joining the programme were requested to submit CVs which were then passed on to employers at the earliest possible stage. While this generated more 'lead time' for the employers to consider Returnships, both employers and the women returners believed that a future programme would do better to introduce an intermediate stage, allowing for the women to gain feedback and refine their CVs before they were passed on to employers.

For the women returners, an intermediate stage would provide:

- reassurance that the 'first go' at the CV was not final
- the opportunity to benefit from a CV writing support session before finalising a CV
- the opportunity to benefit from expert and peer feedback before finalising a CV
- the opportunity to tailor CVs to particular employers
- reassurance that submitted CVs were of a good standard.

B: Availability / flexibility Statement – Introduce a Two-stage Process

Alongside the CV submission, an availability statement – i.e. working pattern information, travel limitations, and details of known holiday commitments falling within the likely placement period – was provided by the returners and passed directly on to employers. In discussion with women returners and employers, it became clear that there could be benefits to introducing a two-stage process.

Perhaps because of the way the question was framed, one employer commented that some of the availability statements ran the risk of being poorly perceived as a set of categorical and immovable constraints. Even if the employer were able to accommodate the constraints - and the general impression employers gave is that they would if they thought the candidate were a good fit – detailed constraints could send an unintentional signal that the candidate might not be accommodating to some of the constraints of the employer.

In discussion with returners, it became apparent that for some of them their sense of what constraints were absolute and what were flexible would depend on the nature of the opportunity on offer. Indeed, as work opportunities began to look more like a very definite possibility, more than one woman noted, with some sense of surprise, that they began to think differently about options.

In light of this, it would make sense to have an intermediate stage where women are first asked about flexibility and constraints in a very open way, by the organisation providing the support service, and also have the opportunity to discuss how these are presented to employers. As with CVs, an additional step where the returner can consider how best to present themselves, would be of benefit to all parties.

There might also be merit in holding back flexibility information at least until an employer has reached the point where they are interested in interviewing a candidate based on their CV. Holding back some detail on constraints might have the effect of highlighting what is more important, that is whether the woman has the skills and experience to make a contribution. If the employer believes she has and is invested enough to seriously consider offering a Returnship, that, then, might be the time to share more explicit details of the constraints, on both sides, that would need to be accommodated.

C. Promote the 'Happy to Talk Flexible Working' Logo and Strapline in Recruitment Marketing

The 'happy to talk flexible working' logo and strapline can be used in recruitment marketing to send a signal to prospective applicants that an employer is open to discussions around flexible working.

The logo and strapline are provided by Working Families, a UK work-life balance organisation which aims to help working parents and carers and their employers find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work.

It was apparent from the women in the pilot that they are not clear or confident that prospective employers are happy to talk flexible working. The project aimed to support women to be confident in asking about flexible working in a pro-active way and also aimed to educate women about how employers are increasingly likely to be open to this in way that, for some of the women in the pilot, may not have been true when they were last in STEM employment.

Any future projects will want to raise confidence on the part of applicants, but encouraging employers to be pro-active in the messages they send, as opposed to relying on women to be pro-active about asking, is an important complementary action. Given what employers both say and do when it comes to dealing with flexible working requests, it would appear there is little or no downside to using the 'happy to talk flexible working' logo and strapline.

As well as having the potential to pull in a wider and more diverse pool of candidates, adopting the logo and strapline has the potential to generate useful reflection for the employer about when they are prepared to have this conversation with potential or actual employees and the impact of the timing on potential applicants.

D. Explore Potential Benefits of an Employers' 'Score Card' that Assesses their Commitment to Returnships

'Score cards' or similar can be a useful tool for both describing where an employer stands in relation to an issue as well as highlighting concrete steps to further pursue an agenda. There may be an existing 'score card' or similar scheme that could be adapted or supplemented to track an employer's commitment to returners. Or there may be value in a 'score card' focused only on returners. In either case, collecting and sharing information around this could play a number of roles in a successor project:

- signal clearly to candidates that an employer has reflected on the value of Returnships and has made, or is on the way to making, the necessary adaptations in its HR processes to maximise the opportunities that they offer

- signal to the wider community that the company is progressive, both in terms of a social agenda and in terms of maximising a business opportunity

- provide a framework for concrete actions on the part of the employer and a means by which they can communicate the completion of those actions

- provide some extra and informative "substance" to a listing of employers who are providing (and / or open to providing) Returnships, such as might appear in a Scottish Returnship Online Hub (see F. below)

A possible template for a 'score card' could take a cue from the Joel Test that is sometimes used in recruiting computer programmers. The Joel Test is 12-question self-assessment score card that employers can use to let prospective employees know more about working practices and organisational attitude. The style of the Joel Test is pragmatic and the culture

around it is accepting of a score below the maximum 12. By participating in the test at all, however, an employer is sending a strong signal to potential employees about their attitudes and approach.

A mock entry, using a six-question score card might appear as below, although clearly there is scope for a future project to work closely with employers and prospective candidates to better refine the test questions.

Scottish STEM Employer   [Employer Careers Page](#)

- Returnship intake: April and September
- Desirable expertise: Renewable Energy, Technical Project Management, Construction
- Applications: Equate Scotland scheme only please
- Informal enquiries: returnships@stememployer.scot

Joan Test Score: 3 out of 6

The Joan Test is a six-question measure of an employer's commitment to Women Returners.

✔ Do you provide flexible working and are you open to discussion about this *before* getting to the point of making a job offer?

Do you use the 'happy to talk flexible working' logo and strapline on all your recruitment marketing?

Do you ensure that CVs with 'gaps' in employment in the specified role are not screened out as a matter of course and allow for returner candidates to be given due consideration by relevant managers?

✔ Do managers believe 'it's not about presenteeism, it's about getting the job done'?

✔ Have you got a track record of offering Returnships?

Do you feature Returnships alongside other entry routes on the 'Work for us' or equivalent page of your website?

E. Demonstrate Connectedness with Other Initiatives

Some employers and some women were unclear how connected the Equate Scotland project was to other Returnship initiatives. The reality was that Equate Scotland was aware of a number of other schemes running in the UK and had good contact with the Women Returners UK. Indeed, Women Returners UK contributed to the final networking event of the project. There was an opportunity, however, for the project to signal more clearly to participants that it was drawing upon and building on learning already established, as well as adapting practice to account for the distinctive demands of the STEM-focus and the Scottish business environment.

F. Creation of Scottish Returners Online Hub

The goal of promoting Returnships as a mainstream addition to existing recruitment methods would be well-served by a Scottish Returners Online Hub. Such a hub could be used to:

- provide information, background and links about Returnships in general and the development of Returnships in Scotland in particular

- provide employer and returner focused 'all you need to know in three minutes' guides (as text and, if budget were to allow, with video and or animation)

- provide a listing of Scottish Employers who are open to Returnship applications and / or have formal schemes (and, if budget allowed, a mechanism for displaying / updating the employer's Returnship "score card" – see D. above)

- provide case studies of Scottish Returnships with both returner and employer perspective

- provide a mechanism for returners and employers to register for updates and alerts

- provide links and information about other support that returners can receive, such as the various courses and workshops offered by Equate Scotland on an ongoing basis.

Equate Scotland has a 'Getting Back' section on its website which describes ongoing services to women returners. Some of the women interviewed had found out about the Women Returners project through internet searches that took them to this page, so there is an indication that potential returners are already coming here for information. This section of the Equate Scotland site could, if resources were available, be developed into a more extensive Scottish Returners online hub.

Conclusions

Women Returners Scotland was a successful project, achieving high levels of engagement with its fifteen women participants and good engagement with its employer partners.

For the women returners, the project worked to build their confidence and develop practical strategies for returning to professional STEM work after a career break. For the STEM employers, the project focused on demonstrating the business benefits of Returnship schemes and supporting them to explore the benefits of what is a relatively unfamiliar recruitment route. More broadly, the project showed that initiatives of this kind can make a contribution to the health of the Scottish economy by being part of a range of measures that address the skills shortage in STEM that, without such intervention, has the potential to grow into a crisis.

Both participants and employers valued the work done by the project, with the women participants emphasising the practical difference it had made to them, whether or not they secured a Returnship or permanent employment during the pilot.

The pilot was able to provide informative answers to three key questions:

Can modest and low cost interventions make a significant difference for women who are contemplating returning to STEM careers?

The pilot shows that relatively modest interventions can have a very significant impact. All the women in the programme reported that:

- their confidence had improved

- they had gained clear ideas about manageable practical steps to take in order to get back into work

- they found ways to think about and describe their career break in a positive way, as opposed to thinking about it as a liability and being unsure how to describe it to potential employers

- they gained concrete new skills which they believed would help them back into professional STEM work, such as use of LinkedIn, CV writing, and 'pitching' to an employer

Are Scottish STEM employers open to the idea of Returnships and willing to commit time and money to running them on a recurrent basis?

The pilot shows that there is an appetite for developing Returnships amongst larger Scottish STEM employers. At this point in time, there remains a need for the idea to be 'pushed' by an external agency who can provide expertise, structure, and resources to help companies internally market the idea of Returnships. STEM employers were clear that providing paid Returnships – at a decent if not full professional salary rate – was a viable and attractive proposition. They also showed a willingness to commit time. The proposition that they would also be willing to commit additional money to contribute to preparatory and ongoing support work for returners was not tested.

Are there opportunities for a successor project / extended pilot, building on and refining the approach established in the Equate Scotland pilot, to make a significant contribution to the adoption of Returnships in Scotland in STEM industries and, by doing so, contribute to the wider goal of addressing the looming skills shortage in STEM*?*

The answer here is a clear yes. The pilot has shown:

- Employers exposed to the pilot saw Returnships as an attractive supplement to existing recruitment routes.

- A Returnship support project, such as the Equate Scotland pilot, can act as a powerful **accelerator** for promoting the adoption or the Returnship recruitment route as a mainstream option for Scottish employers.

Of course, there are issues that this brief pilot was not able to address such as what do SMEs, as opposed to larger corporates, need by way of support to make Returnships an attractive recruitment route. Given the prevalence of SMEs in the Scottish business landscape, any successor project would need to give consideration to questions such as this, for which as yet only provisional or speculative answers can be provided. Nonetheless, the responses from employers and women to this small-scale project suggest there is a rich opportunity for future work that, for a modest investment, can yield a large return for women returners, Scottish STEM employers and the wider Scottish economy.

Acknowledgements

Organisations and Useful Resources

Equate Scotland – An organisation seeking to make a positive difference for women in science, engineering, technology and the built environment. They work alongside industry, academia, the Scottish Government and public bodies, creating positive changes in employment practices and workplace cultures which benefit everyone.
www.equatescotland.org.uk

Goldman Sachs Returnship Program Details of the Goldman Sachs scheme that originated in 2008. The term "returnship" is trademarked by Goldman Sachs.
www.goldmansachs.com/careers/experienced-professionals/returnship/

HitReturn: Returners Programme – An example of a SE England returner programme with a well-developed web presence. This programme is mentioned here as the website / FAQs / etc. provide a concrete illustration of some of what both women returners and employers in the pilot suggested would be helpful for future Scottish projects, e.g. setting out clear expectations for all parties, setting out clear timetables etc.
www.hitreturn.co.uk

Opportunity Now / Project 28-40: The Report – Report based on a major survey by Business in the Community on "28-40 is a critical age for career development – the danger zone where women are not promoted at the same rate as men – a problem not just for women but for companies too. This survey, the largest ever undertaken, has given us invaluable insights into how to tackle this."
www.bitc.org.uk/our-resources/report/project-28-40-report

Prospect – Prospect is the largest union in the UK representing professional engineers. Its members are engineers, scientists, managers and specialists in areas as diverse as agriculture, defence, education and children's services, energy, environment, heritage, shipbuilding, telecoms and transport.
www.prospect.org.uk

Skills Development Scotland – The national skills body supporting the people and businesses of Scotland to develop and apply their skills.
www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk

Tapping all our Talents: Women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics: a strategy for Scotland – Report from The Royal Society of Edinburgh, April 2012
www.royalsoced.org.uk/1027_Report.html

The Skills Crunch – Report from 2014: **"**The Prince's Trust and HSBC Skills Crunch report reveals that business leaders are facing skills gaps, threatening to hamper economic growth. UK employers say they're struggling to recruit, yet hundreds of thousands of unemployed young people are desperate for work. How can we work together to up-skill the workforce of the future?"
www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/research

Women in STEM: Are you in or out? – Report based on a survey completed by over 5,000 respondents with a STEM related qualification. The survey ran between May and September 2014 as a collaboration between Prospect, Women in Manufacturing, TRS and the Woman's Engineering Society.
library.prospect.org.uk/id/2015/00134

Women Returners – A UK organisation leading the way in promoting development of 'returnships' as a primary vehicle for assisting professional women returning to the paid workforce after an extended (2-15+ year) hiatus. Geographical focus is centred on London and there is some emphasis on financial and legal areas of expertise. **Women Returners** provide a regularly updated log of known UK returnship programmes. They provide support for employers setting up schemes as well as support for women who are seeking to return to work.
wrpn.womenreturners.com

- Business case for Returnships
  corp.womenreturners.com/business-rationale/

- List of recent Returnships in UK (mostly London and SE England)
  corp.womenreturners.com/uk-returnships/

Working Families is a UK work-life balance organisation. They help working parents and carers and their employers find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work. They promote the 'happy to talk flexible working' logo and strapline for use in recruitment marketing.
www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Appendix: Skills Shortage and the Economy

Extracted from the original project proposal for Women Returners Scotland:

There is a growing consensus that employers of scientific, technical and engineering (STEM) staff face a skills crisis and that this is holding back economic recovery. According to the Royal Society, one million more new STEM professionals are required by 2020. A 2014 report on 'The Skills Crunch' found that eight in ten business leaders in these sectors believe a significant skills crisis will hit their organisations within the next three years, while half predict this will happen within the next 12 months. Leaders from Scotland's energy industry continue to warn of a looming skills shortage, with half the sector's workforce expected to retire by 2023 and an estimated need for 208,000 people to be recruited to plug this gap. Scotland's IS conference in 2014 heard about an acute shortage of skilled professionals in technology and software engineering. The Recruitment and Employment Confederation argues that every type of engineering is in short supply as are IT coders, programmers and developers.

This huge challenge needs to be viewed against the background of the Scottish Government's economic strategy, set out in March 2015, which sees action to deliver a fairer society as integral to achieving a more productive and prosperous economy. Support for a more diverse workforce is a key strand of the Scottish Government's inclusive growth strategy. This is also recognised through the establishment of Energy Skills Scotland and its remit to promote opportunities in the sector for women. Building on the recommendations of the Women's Employment Summit and the Royal Society of Edinburgh's 'Tapping all our talents' report, the Scottish Government has also made a strong commitment to tackling occupational segregation.

There is no doubt that the looming skills crisis is intensified as a result of gender segregation in the STEM workforce. Just 13% of the STEM workforce overall is female, but only 6% of

professional engineers and less than 4% of engineering apprentices are female. Clearly there is a major challenge to recruit more young people into STEM, but it is short-sighted to ignore the talent pool of women qualified in STEM but not currently working in a STEM occupation. This 'leakage' of qualified and experienced women represents a huge loss of talent.

In 2014 Prospect worked with the Women's Engineering Society, Women in Manufacturing and TRS to find out the views of women who have left STEM. 5,000 women responded to our survey – a report of which is attached. The survey sought to enhance understanding of barriers that may exist for women when entering and/or returning to a STEM career and steps that can be taken to combat these. Moreover it was designed to find what would make the biggest impact in attracting women back to STEM in order to focus collective efforts into a meaningful campaign, increasing the visibility of the issue and reach the untapped potential. Some respondents did not want to return, but many did and simply did not know how to start.