
The nature of the issue:
In the fast moving world of STEM research, highly qualified and skilled individuals who temporarily step back from their research area quickly find themselves lagging behind their peers and, when seeking to return to work, often struggle to find research-based employment which fully utilises their knowledge and experience. This issue impacts significantly (though not exclusively) on women, who often find themselves taking a career break to bring up young children or to act as carers to elderly relatives. The deleterious effect of a career break can also be compounded by issues such as relocation, as a partner’s career continues to develop, with a planned maternity break extending into a longer career break. In many cases, such a career break comes at a time when the researcher, their sponsors and hosts have invested a significant amount of time and money developing the skills and knowledge necessary to ensure that the individual is a valuable expert in their chosen STEM discipline. In order to re-enter the workplace at a level commensurate with their abilities, such individuals require more than a brief and intensive skills update, needing instead a longer and in-depth immersion in the area of knowledge in which they previously operated.

Why it needs to be addressed:
Highly trained STEM female researchers who do not return to STEM careers are a substantial loss to UK PLC. Once on a career break, there are few opportunities for women to return to research at the level commensurate with their skills and experience without help from a returners programme such as the Fellowships scheme offered by the Daphne Jackson Trust. According to the 2016 PwC Women Returners Report, 76% of professional women want to return to work after a career break, although 65% of those that do return in roles below their potential. The economic benefit of UK PLC of addressing the professional women career break penalty is calculated as providing an additional £1.7bn to the country’s economic output. Given the convergence of overarching issues such as BREXIT and the challenges it represents for UK research (ref: the BEIS-commissioned Changes & Choices report), the goals of the Industrial Society (particularly the People [Skills & Education] section), the transformational impact of swiftly evolving technology on the employment market and the existential threat of COVID-19 and the demand for scientific innovation which it demands, it is essential that Government urgently identify mechanisms to leverage and scale up returners to STEM research.

How government policy could be improved to address the issue:
Despite the benefits of bringing new perspectives to bear on entrenched problems, it can be a source of frustration that in seeking answers, Government can show a tendency to favour the new over existing exemplars, with demonstrable and auditable success rates. The Daphne Jackson Trust thus hopes that Committee will call upon organisations with prior knowledge and expertise. The Trust has previous experience of working with select committees (2014:- Science & Technology Committee enquiry into Women in Scientific Careers; 2014:- BIS feasibility study on transitioning engineers back into engineering careers; 2013:- Sir John Perkins’ Review of Engineering Skills) and would be pleased to reengage with the BEIS Committee at this critical juncture.

Specific consideration should be given to the following:
• increased Government funding and support for returners schemes, with the appropriate Minister and Department(s) championing the cause of women returners, codifying best practice, promoting initiatives that encourage sustained change, awarding success and identifying high profile champions;
• kite marks for commitment to gender equality to be established within all employment sectors along the lines of Advance HE’s Athena SWAN charter;
• a voucher scheme to enable women returners to access sectoral-specific retraining, via appropriate professional bodies, trade associations and charities.