

Making a Move: Next Steps for Women. A follow-up study of Women Onto Work students

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Women Onto Work (WOW) courses focus on women who face particular difficulties in moving back into the labour market. They are targeted at unemployed women from the peripheral housing estates in Edinburgh and, city-wide, on unemployed women from black and minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities. This *Briefing* reports on a four year study which followed up former students after their WOW course.

- **The** majority of participants were very positive about the subsequent value of their WOW course to them. The courses had increased their confidence and self-esteem, raised their aspirations and provided them with information about educational and job opportunities and contacts with potential employers.
- **Education** and training after WOW was critical to former participants' long-term employment prospects and WOW was successful in overcoming women's often negative attitude to formal education. Two years after WOW, over two-thirds had been, or were, in education and training. However, some had found the transition to mainstream education difficult in terms of childcare, teaching styles and study skills support.
- **WOW** helped participants to reassess their lives and make choices about their career ideas. Two years post-WOW, 45% were in paid employment, an interim figure since a number were still in education and training.
- **Women's** decisions about employment, courses and whether to study full-time or part-time were all affected by their childcare responsibilities and the lack of suitable childcare provision. A number could not pursue their post-WOW plans or had to revise them because of lack of childcare.
- **Participants'** plans were often incremental in nature, reflecting the need to acquire further qualifications and because of their family responsibilities. Women required easy access to ongoing guidance but this was not generally available.

Background

Women Onto Work (WOW) courses are run in Edinburgh for unemployed women from the peripheral housing estates and for unemployed women with disabilities and women from black and minority ethnic groups from across the city. Participants generally have few formal qualifications and either have had little work experience or have previously worked in low paid, unskilled jobs. WOW aims to raise participants' self-esteem and aspirations and enable them to decide on future education, training or employment options. The 12 week courses include self-assessment, confidence building, examining options in work and education, careers counselling and job seeking skills. A work placement is a major element of the course. Childcare is provided and English language support offered if necessary. The courses are funded through Urban Aid and the European Social Fund under the sponsorship of the City of Edinburgh Council.

The impact of WOW

Looking back on their course, the overwhelming majority of former WOW students were very positive about its value to them:

"I wouldn't have thought about working with computers before I started WOW."

and

"The course gave me a lot of self-worth and helped me realise I can do more than just cook and clean."

For most, the fundamental benefit of WOW was that it helped to increase their confidence and self-esteem. Assertiveness training and other course activities contributed to this but the vital element was WOW's basic approach - it focused on them as individuals, encouraging them to think about themselves, their needs and future plans:

"It made me realise I can do it if I really want to, that I was important enough to do something for myself. You have an idea that you might want to do this or that but you don't feel you're important enough to give yourself that time, or take that time away from your family."

More than half of women interviewed felt that WOW had not just been "useful" but that it had had a major impact on their lives, their attitudes and expectations:

"The WOW course gave me a lot of pride in myself. I realised I can do it if I really

want to. No one is going to do it for you ... and I should do it sooner rather than later."

Participants' outcomes in terms of post-course employment and, especially, participation in education and training are also positive. This is especially so in the light of participants' circumstances. WOW students were disadvantaged in a number of ways: a smaller proportion had formal qualifications compared to the national average; a much larger percentage had dependent children than women of working age nationally; and more of them were lone parents. The WOW courses have achieved a considerable measure of success in the context of this starting-point. Two years after WOW, 67% of participants had been in education or training of whom two-thirds had gained formal qualifications; 45% were in paid employment. Moreover, these figures are only interim since a number were still working towards their career goal, for example, on a full-time course to gain the necessary qualifications to enter a high level job.

Education and training

The high proportion of women who went into education and training after their WOW course illustrates that WOW is successful in motivating participants to overcome their often negative experience of education. This is vital since increasing their qualifications is a first step if most participants are to improve their job prospects, given their existing lack of qualifications. As one woman taking a Business Studies course after WOW commented:

"I always felt I'd been out of work for eight years, I can't really do it, I've no qualifications, there's no way I can go back ... and I'd just assumed that I couldn't learn again."

Most of the women found their post-WOW course stimulating and worthwhile although hard work:

"It's excellent. I'm learning an awful lot, especially about computers ... It's like being re-born, my brain's being re-born."

But issues about childcare, teaching and learning methodologies and study skills also emerged from the research:

"It [college] was more like school, you sat behind a desk and they told you, with Helen [WOW tutor] she asked you and you had your opinions and comments."

Women's problems in these areas illustrate the difficulty of the move from access type courses to other, often less flexible and supportive, courses in further and higher education.

Impact of childcare needs

The effect of childcare responsibilities on women's plans was perhaps the most predictable aspect of the research. The plans of all of the WOW participants with children were closely linked to their childcare responsibilities. Their decisions about employment, hours of work, choice of course and whether to study full-time or part-time were all affected:

"Childcare is holding me back from doing what I really want. I would like to go on to college and get qualifications to get me the job I want."

The provision of childcare on one course and not on another could be the deciding factor in a woman's decision but this might not be the best choice in other respects:

"An Access course might have been better to build up my study skills but this is a better option because of childcare."

After-school and school holiday childcare were identified as just as much of a problem as pre-school provision:

"... my three are at school but in saying that after-school care is just as big a problem as nursery care. And school holidays, that's the killer, that's really bad - trying to find the funding for childcare."

Whether or not women were able to overcome their childcare problems depended on a variety of factors, individual to each of them. In some cases, they simply went ahead with their plans and trusted that somehow they would manage to sort out childcare:

"Sometimes I think you've just got to close your eyes to childcare."

This, however, is a risky strategy and one that is not open to every woman. Others felt that some employers are not willing to give women with children an opportunity. As one woman who had made childcare arrangements remarked:

"But most of the interviews I went for, when I say three kids, it's 'what would you do with them in the summer holidays?' It didn't matter if you stood on a stack of Bibles and says your childcare's taken care of, there was no way you were going to get employed."

Attitude of partners and families

WOW participants encountered various reactions to their involvement in WOW, and to their subsequent plans, from their partners and families. Mothers and sisters could be critical but were more usually a source of support, helping especially with childcare. Partners were less likely to provide support and encouragement, the more common response was one of acquiescence and some women encountered outright opposition:

"When I went on the WOW course he wasn't chuffed at all ... now I don't upset him, I just get on with it and tell him what he needs to know."

It is likely that as women on WOW courses re-assess themselves, their partners and families will be affected and this is an issue that needs to be discussed within the courses.

The need for post-course guidance

Women's post-WOW plans were often incremental in nature taking into account family responsibilities and the need to acquire further qualifications or training. Some had to revise the plans made at the end of their WOW course or defer them to a later period. The research shows that a substantial proportion of women did not enter a long-term or permanent position in the first two years after WOW. As one student on a community education course commented:

"Since doing WOW, the decisions I made about what I was going to do in order to work towards a career have slowly begun to take place. My son is 3½ and hopefully if things go well [on course] I'll be ready to get into work by the time he's at school."

In the context of the long-term and sometimes changing nature of their plans, and the need to be well-informed about the financial implications of their choices, former students require ready access to ongoing, impartial guidance.

The next steps

WOW has had a large measure of success in motivating participants and helping many "get started". But women's experiences after their course demonstrate that this is only one part of the solution. A range of other developments need to happen alongside courses such as WOW to enable participants to achieve their potential.

Implications for policy and practice

- There is a need for courses such as WOW to help raise the self-esteem and motivation of women in disadvantaged situations and help them get started on the road to education, training and worthwhile employment.
- Increasing their formal qualifications through subsequent education and training is vital for WOW participants but the transition to mainstream education was difficult for some. In mainstream education and training better childcare, flexible timetabling and more appropriate teaching and learning approaches for non-traditional students are required. Closer links need to be developed between mainstream education providers and organisations such as WOW to make the necessary changes so women can realise the ambitions raised by access provision such as WOW. WOW could do even more to prepare women for college through, for example, offering educational as well as work placements.
- For most WOW participants with children, lack of suitable childcare was a major obstacle to achieving their goals. Without comprehensive, flexible, and affordable childcare, women from courses such as WOW will continue to be hampered in achieving their potential. As well as more extensive and affordable childcare, employers and education and training providers need to change their attitude to women with children and be more open-minded and flexible.
- Participants need ongoing impartial guidance after their WOW course to help them with their long-term and sometimes changing plans. There is a limit to the post-course support and guidance that WOW can and should provide. A comprehensive adult guidance system is necessary.

Publications

Howieson, C (1966) *Making a Move: Next Steps for Women. A follow-up study of Women Onto Work students.* WOW Ltd. Available free from WOW Ltd.

Further information

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About this study

The Centre for Educational Sociology was commissioned to carry out a longitudinal study between 1992-96 to assess the longer term impact of WOW on participants. The research deals with four cohorts of students, of whom two were contacted once, a year after their WOW course, and the other two contacted twice, one year and two years afterwards. All participants were surveyed by postal questionnaire and a one-in-five sample interviewed. A total of 114 women were involved.

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