**A Flexible Start to M140**

**Carol Calvert:**

I'm Carol Calvert, I'm a statistician here at The Open University. I'm also something that's called a Staff

Tutor which means I work a lot with our associate lecturers and directly with students.

I first got involved with the eSTEeM through the recommendation of a colleague. She suggested that eSTEeM have a lot of support, and advice to offer, and I was working on a new project and I thought well why not get a advice and help if you can. And as we move to talk on about the main project, we're going to talk about today, I actually was able to have a lot of help from eSTEeM in terms of funding just so I could get a project running with some of our associate lecturers.

My eSTEeM project grew out of a conversation with some students. These students recommended that if they were thinking about future students, a key thing was to start early, to get ahead if you could. So, I set up a project which basically lets students start early, if they want, on one of these statistics modules. It's a level one module and it runs starting in October.

So, the thinking was maybe students would have a bit of time over the summer to just get a little bit ahead, get a little bit more confident with the materials, load the software, have a few tutorials, meet some of the tutors that are going to be tutoring in October, and just sort of get under their belts; get a bit ahead of the game for October so that when everybody is so busy in October, and all these packs of materials come, and everybody's asked "can you do everything straight away? Can you log on here? Can you answer this question?" There's a there's a bunch of work that they know they've already done. And so really the aim was to give students a bit more confidence.

So, what we did in this project was we set up a dummy website that any students who registered early were invited to log on to. And on this dummy website we put all of the materials for the first five units. So, we put the quizzes, we put the forums, we put the computer animations, we put PDFs of the actual materials, and most critically every student was assigned to a tutor just like they would be in October, so they had somebody to go and talk to if they had any questions, and these tutors ran tutorials in our online system just as would happen in October, and so really we set up a mini world that was as close as we could to what would really happen in October for the students.

And what ended up happening was something that was a bit of a surprise. I didn't know if students would actually want to spend part of the summer studying. I thought maybe we'd get 20 or 30 students saying yes, they'd like to take part. And somewhat to everybody's bemusement, we had 200 students who said they would like to take part. So, 400 word were offered the chance and over half of them said yes, and what that's ended up meaning is there's a group of students who are so enthusiastic about M140, the stats module when it started, they got ahead and instead of perhaps some of them dropping out of the module they've stayed on it.

We've just had all the exam results come out, they came out earlier this week, and we've got over 50 more students have stayed on M140, the stats module, than we would have expected to have. So, students were hugely satisfied, I've got so many lovely comments from students about the difference it made to them to be able to get ahead over the summer, and it's clearly helped at least 50 students manage to keep on track during the year because they've passed M140 and otherwise they we wouldn't have expected they would. So, it's being a bit of a success.

One of the reasons why I wondered if students would be willing to work during the summer was somewhere in my past history, I was a secondary maths teacher. And of course the summer is one of the few times, if you're a secondary school teacher, when you do actually have a little bit of time to get ahead with your own studying. And so I was aware that quite a few of the students were somehow connected to education.

So, there was a chance that for some of them it would be a time of year when they could give it a little bit of time. It was a bit of a gamble but you know, if you don't try and offer the opportunity, you'll never know will it work, and as it happens it seems tor suited quite also students.

In terms of relevance for the Faculty and for The OU, I think it's highlighted that there is the potential for students to work a little bit more slowly, at their own pace without it being particularly hard to organise, and that really comes down to the fact that all of our materials are available electronically, because we are a distance education institution. And so it's meant that the scheme we ran last year is running again this year for the stats module, but we're also running it for an entry level maths module, for the first time this summer, and it's also meant that there's been quite a bit of interest around the University from other areas really thinking the same thing, would it help our students? How could we make it work? What would be the problems? Shall we give it a go?

So, there's a science module I'm aware of who are going to run it this summer as well, and there's a little bit of interest elsewhere, I think everybody's just waiting to see, but the Maths and

Statistics School is absolutely sure for us we can sustain it, and it's worth doing, and the students just love it.

eSTEeM to me is just a wonderful institution that we've set up. The hard work that's gone into developing it, it's just paying massive dividends. For me personally, I wanted to work with associate lecturers. It wasn't going to cost very much to work with associate lecturers but it was going to cost a little bit, and this was an unproven idea. And what eSTEeM was just so brilliant about was considering the case, finding a little bit of money to let me get started, and when we moved from the space of thinking 20 or 30 students to 200, I was able to go back to eSTEeM and say "this is a bit more successful than we thought, can you help by finding a little bit more money, so we can employ more tutors?"

And eSTEeM are just so flexible, they looked at the evidence, saw it was working, and I don't know how they managed to find that little bit more money, but it made the world of difference. So, to me what eSTEeM does is it's almost like funding start-up activities. People have ideas because they're working on the ground, they're working with associate lecturers, they're working with students, and eSTEeM hears that kind of practical emphasis that's coming from people like myself, like staff tutors, and it puts a structure, and a support system, and an advice system, and a little bit of money, in place to let you try out the idea.

I think one of the things about scholarship is that it's very, very directly linked to the experience that the students will have. Scholarship typically is about the learning and the teaching experience that the students see, and so one of the things The Open University is doing is working really hard to try and improve that experience for students, and because we're a distance education institution, we have to do it a slightly cleverer, a slightly smarter way because we can't just go and talk to a student who's on campus.

And I think our emphasis on scholarship is about seeing what works for us in The Open University, but then extending it, and almost offering to the rest of the sector, here you go maybe this will help you. Now that's the spirit of generosity that education should be all about.