

# SUPPORTING DIVERSE WOMEN IN STEM: LESSONS FROM A PHD INTERNSHIP INITIATIVE

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## BACKGROUND

Ongoing calls for improved 'workplace readiness' among higher education graduates coincide with persistent underrepresentation of women in STEM careers, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (Meoli et al., 2024). These intersecting equity challenges highlight the need for targeted initiatives that support women in STEM pathways beyond traditional academic settings.

## AIMS

This study explores the design, implementation, and impact of a novel internship program aimed at supporting female PhD students in STEM who also identify with an additional equity group, such as Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD). The aim was to understand both the institutional and workplace challenges involved, and the lived experiences and outcomes for participants.

## DESIGN AND METHODS

Funded by a Women in STEM and Entrepreneurship (WISE) grant, the University of Wollongong developed an industry-based internship program tailored to the needs of the target group. Supported placements were arranged with industry partners, accompanied by institutional oversight. Data were collected through formal interviews with six PhD student participants and two workplace supervisors. In addition, reflective accounts from a lead investigator and the project coordinator were used to capture implementation insights and structural barriers.

## RESULTS

Participants reported considerable personal and professional benefits from the internship experience, including improved confidence, enhanced understanding of industry contexts, and expanded career networks. However, several challenges were identified, including misalignments between university processes and workplace expectations, and difficulties in securing placements that aligned with both academic timelines and industry needs. These reflections provide a foundation for understanding practical considerations for implementing such programs at scale.

## CONCLUSIONS

The internship program offered a valuable opportunity for women from underrepresented groups in STEM to engage with industry and develop career-relevant skills. While participants expressed strong appreciation for the experience, the findings also highlight the importance of institutional flexibility and proactive partnership development in supporting such initiatives. The study offers actionable insights for universities and policymakers aiming to improve equity and employability outcomes in STEM education.

## REFERENCES

Meoli, A., Piva, E., & Righi, H. (2024). Missing women in STEM occupations: The impact of university education on the gender gap in graduates' transition to work. *Research Policy*, 53(8), 105072.

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