

Frances Cunningham



SWAP Programme and pre-SWAP: Introduction to experimental science, then SWAP Access to STEM (both 1 year) at New college Lanarkshire, Coatbridge Campus

Engineering Academy: University of Strathclyde Engineering Academy, City of Glasgow College, Riverside Campus (one year)

Current Studies: University of Strathclyde, Civil and Environmental Engineering (2nd year entry).

Hopes for the future: To find work as an engineer in the area of flood risk and coastal defence

My name is Frances, I'm a married mother of four kids. I am currently in my second year at the University of Strathclyde studying Civil and Environmental Engineering. I was always very bright at school and thought I had a promising future ahead of me until I reached the age of 15. Then I became more interested in staying out with friends than studying, as youths often do at that age. Soon my results started to reflect this and I left school with poor grades and went straight to work, always saying to myself that I would go back to further education, but I never did.

After leaving school, I worked in sales, fast food restaurants and factories until I became a mother at 21. I still worked and had another three kids, still all the while feeling that I had put my intellect to waste. I never regretted having my kids but always wondered what could have been and worried that I was setting a bad example for them by not continuing my studies.

I realised that in the not too distant future my kids would all be in high school needing me less and less and that I wasn't qualified for anything. I finally made the leap and applied to Coatbridge College. I was terrified starting college and will never forget at my interview I arrived in a smart coat, boots and handbag and the other applicants looked so young with just jeans and t-shirts and I felt so old.

It can be very daunting being a mature student but I realised every year that my fears are unfounded, women my age studying engineering might not be the norm, but I don't feel out of place, the students are lovely and I now have a bunch of friends whom I never would have met otherwise.

My SWAP programme was great, it was very full on with lots of coursework and deadlines but, that's what learning is like anyway. The teachers at Coatbridge couldn't have helped us any more, especially Charlie & Sinead, the physics and maths teachers. They made sure we learned what we needed and also helped us enjoy our time there too.

The Engineering Academy is very similar to SWAP, it's the same routine, constant exams and reports to do. SWAP and the academy prepare you for studying at university, you need to know that it's going to be really full on. Both help you learn how to utilise your time studying, which can be pretty tricky when you've got a family and home to look after also.

After SWAP and the Engineering Academy, I felt prepared for university, probably more so than the school leavers as I had had two years of rigorous study by this time. The work can be overwhelming at times, I love it and enjoy it but it is really hard work. If you don't love engineering, it might not be a good idea to take a degree in it, it is too difficult to do if you don't have a genuine interest.

Hopefully at the end of my studies I find work in flood risk and coastal defence. This is the area of study and would like to specialise in this in the future.

Despite the demands of my studies, I still find time to get involved in the wider university community. I am a STEM Ambassador and, for example, I have participated in events at Strathclyde and Coatbridge to speak to SWAP students to answer their questions and hopefully alleviate their fears. I also represented the university at the Global Leadership Programme in Madrid this year, which was an all expended paid trip. I also attend CE4R events at Strathclyde, which are workshops run by Dr Mike Murray where staff from engineering firms attend and present actual problems to us and we students have to come up with solutions.

SWAP has changed everything for me. Being out of education for so long it would've been really difficult for me to gain a place at university. Instead by undertaking SWAP, I gained the knowledge, confidence and qualification I needed for progression and was offered a place in every university I applied to. I haven't looked back since!

I also enjoy site visits and this is me at the St James site in Edinburgh city centre. During these visits, we are shown around and have an opportunity to ask the engineers what their jobs are like and get some info from the project managers

