Abstract
A key player in the UK economy, the construction sector has a skills shortage particularly at graduate level. Young people are not entering the sector and it is one of the least diverse sectors in the UK. The BRIDGE Project aims to address this situation by identifying the factors that underpin this lack of diversity and use these to design, develop and evaluate a set of interventions to bring about positive change. Based on a theory of change, these have focused on admissions and recruitment, challenging the negative image of the sector, improving career information for young people and providing equality and diversity training for staff/employers. Our results show improvements in the gender balance of first year students and a more positive image of the sector by young people.

Main Proposal

The UK construction industry is a major contributor to the UK economy adding £138 billion in value and accounting for 9% of the total (ONS, 2017). However, there are growing concerns of a skills shortage particularly around graduate level roles (CITB, 2018). This situation is further exacerbated by the construction sector being one of the least diverse sectors in the UK, a situation that is mirrored by the student population on construction programmes across further and higher education.

This session presents the main findings from the Office for Students funded BRIDGE (Building Routes Into Degrees with Greater Equality) project. The project is designed to address these challenges by aiming to gain a deep understanding of the factors affecting the lack of diversity among students on professional built environment programmes; and develop and evaluate a range of interventions designed to address barriers to participation and improve career uptake in this sector by women, people with disabilities, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and people from minority ethnic groups.

A partnership between Gateshead College, Derby College and Northumbria University, the project has drawn on the team's experience of employer-focused programmes such as degree apprenticeships and PlanBEE (http://www.joinplanbee.com/) and widening participation programmes such as NUSTEM (www.nustem.uk).

The team has conducted an in-depth assessment of the current situation through employer, staff and student interviews, enrolment data and a comprehensive literature review. The results show that (1) there is a long-standing under-representation of females, BAME, disabled and lower socio-economic groups on construction programmes and across the sector; (2) the majority of undergraduates are white, male and middle-class; (3) significant differences exist in the diversity of the student population between certain subjects; (4) young people who choose graduate study and careers in the built environment are usually influenced by parents, family or friends working in the industry; (5) there is lack of career knowledge among young people; (6) the sector has a negative image among the public as 'dirty', 'dangerous' and 'difficult' and (7) a culture of bias and discrimination is present across the sector.

Using these results, a theory of change has been developed and used to inform a series of activities and interventions based around seven themes with an accompanying evaluation strategy to measure their impact. Examples include changes to admissions and recruitment practice, workshops for young people to challenge the negative and stereotypical image of

the sector, improved career information, and training and awareness raising of staff and employers around stereotypes and equality, diversity and inclusion.
The results indicate that although some of the beliefs and stereotypes are deeply embedded within wider society and there is a strongly engrained culture among employers, these can be challenged successfully through well designed interventions and activities. For example, changes made to the advertising, recruitment and interview process for planBEE resulted in an increase in first year female students from 8% in 2016 to 27% in 2017.

References

CITB (2018) Industry Insights, Construction Industry Training Board.
ONS (2017) Annual Business Survey by the Office for National Statistics.