



# Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Research Project

PARTNERS REPORT  
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# Contents

<b>Background</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Research Review</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>School Stakeholder Research</b>	<b>11</b>
Quality of Careers Advice	11
Favourability	11
Construction	12
School Liaison Activity	13
Parents	13
Diversity	13
Females and Ethnic Minority Students	13
Improving Diversity	15





# Background

Leeds College of Building is a predominantly white, male institution. The college recognises that this needs to change and that a more diverse student and staffing group would provide benefits to not just the college, but to the construction sector.

As a sector, construction faces a significant skills shortage, exacerbated by its reputation as a career route for predominantly male students. For the sector to meet its own estimates of skills requirements, it is considered that this needs to change.

Leeds College of Building commissioned Chalkstream, a specialist independent research agency, to conduct a research project to help it improve student diversity.

The objectives for the research project included:

- Understanding barriers to diversity within construction and construction education, the strategies being used to lift those barriers and their impact.
- Understand behaviours and rationales among influencers of female and minority ethnic students in relation to the college and construction as a sector.
- Identify what Leeds College of Building can do to address issues that arise from the research.

In order to meet the requirements of the research brief, Chalkstream were commissioned to undertake an integrated research programme that consisted of three main research components:

## 1 Research Review

To identify common trends, challenges and solutions and to ensure that insight is informed by the wide body of relevant evidence available relating to gender, ethnicity and construction, including the barriers students face when they become qualified to work in the sector, and the strategies that employers and educators can adopt to reduce those barriers.

## 2 Focus groups

Examining the challenges and solutions to diversity within the construction industry and construction education, generally and in the context of the college, through focus groups involving employers and Leeds College of Building staff.

## 3 School stakeholder interviews

Mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative) telephone interviews with a mixed group of around 40 Careers Advisors and Head Teachers from feeder institutions, identified through analysis of enrolment and application data.



# Research Review

According to the research review, the construction industry has a significant, pernicious, longstanding and well-documented diversity problem.

It is fuelled by a range of factors including:

- Informal recruitment practices
- Pay and conditions excluding some groups
- Poor careers advice, societal prejudices about technical education
- Industrial fragmentation
- In some cases, direct discrimination

There are major advantages for the industry in addressing the problem. They include improving performance and profitability thanks to a deeper and wider talent pool and lower costs through improved retention. Yet, despite multiple initiatives and technological advances that demand accelerated changes to training and recruitment practices, a significant proportion of the industry resists change, and construction continues to be the least diverse of all UK industrial sectors.

Solutions to the construction industry's diversity problem, according to the research review, include:

- Standardised, joined up and accredited good practice in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).
- Better monitoring and evaluation of diversity status and better diversity campaign impact evaluation, so the sector understands the state of play and what works in addressing the issue.
- Improved communication of the benefits of diversity to individual businesses and their stakeholders, including the client base.
- Leveraging the procurement system more efficiently to tackle diversity issues.
- Improving recruitment practices, adopting blind CV and associated processes, unconscious bias training for recruiters and targeted recruitment campaigns.





- Providing work placements, with mechanisms (such as remuneration, childcare or caring flexibility, mentoring, networks) to support applicants from diverse backgrounds.
- Better support of careers development and careers advice activities in schools, colleges and workplaces.
- Addressing the considerable number of 'hygiene factors' that prove to be barriers to both recruitment and retention of females and ethnic minorities.
- Establishing and maintaining staff diversity support networks.

The diversity problem impacts education institutions – the reputation of the industry negatively affects the diversity of the student body, and industrial practices act as barriers to progression into employment.

Schools, colleges, universities and training providers have a role to play in tackling the construction diversity problems. Recommendations in the literature include:

- Improve careers advice by:
  - Using industry materials more widely.
  - Providing more effective school liaison activity.
  - Ensuring diversity among industry and staff representatives.
- Develop better student and alumni career progression support systems, including an employer vetting service
- Improve student recruitment processes by:
  - Ensuring that marketing and promotional material and language is inclusive.
  - Negative preconceptions of technical sectors are addressed proactively.
  - There is diversity among staff involved in student recruitment interviews.
  - Recruitment staff receive unconscious bias training.
- Identify students' short and long-term career goals and individual barriers to employment, and formulate individual action plans to address these.
- Monitor and evaluate student and staff diversity, setting meaningful targets with rationales and implementing a broader EDI strategy.
- Explore the provision of specialist short course programmes designed specifically to support women and ethnic minorities into construction.
- Track long-term outcomes including job retention and progression and, in some cases, offering incentives for employers who retain employees for a minimum period and/or who offer meaningful opportunities for progression.





# Focus Groups

According to focus group participants, the most common causes of diversity challenges facing the construction industry are:

- Stereotypes among a general and specific publics (including certain ethnic minorities) about the nature of the construction industry.
- Poor advice and guidance in influential organisations such as schools and job centres.
- A default position rejecting construction among young people, in particularly females and ethnic minorities.
- Informal recruitment culture and reputation/s for nepotism.
- Lack of co-ordination in the industry to combat challenges.

West Yorkshire, according to some participants, suffers from particular challenges due to:

- The scarcity of iconic buildings in Leeds to showcase to young people.
- Awareness of construction careers being particularly poor in disadvantaged areas of Leeds.
- Poor quality provision in some areas, limiting the opportunities for young people.

Solutions to those challenges include:

- Improved careers advice in schools, delivered at an earlier age and tailored to age groups.
- Pooled careers guidance/event resources by West Yorkshire colleges.
- Promotion in entertainment media, particularly those focused at children.
- Increased flexibility in working conditions.
- Forthright communication about salaries and earning potential.





Construction education, according to focus group participants, suffers from specific challenges related to diversity beyond those prevalent in the industry. They are:

- Variable or poor college liaison with schools.
- The relative recency of the equality, diversity and inclusivity agenda in the further education sector.
- Low demands made, and under-utilisation, of employer relationships.

Focus group participants spoke at length about what the college could do to improve the diversity of its student body. The three most common recommendations were:

- The college should target careers information at school pupils at a much earlier age and should engage employers more consistently and strategically in that activity. To improve its work in school liaison, the college needs to introduce a number of changes in order to support teaching staff to engage in that activity.
- The college should do more to provide 'wrap-around' support for female and ethnic minority students entering the industry including alumni-careers service, networking and mentoring programmes.
- The college should actively promote role models and demonstrate female and ethnic minority participation in construction and construction education wherever possible.

Other suggestions included:

- Focusing on construction's contribution to the sustainability agenda within student recruitment messaging in order to appeal to young people's values.
- Maintaining flexible college provision in terms of blended learning, thus 'enlarging the pool of people interested in construction' and thereby supporting diversity.
- Best practice sharing with other colleges to improve quality elsewhere and therefore support opportunity more generally.



- Developing curriculum to include factory production techniques, so as to (again) deepen the recruitment pool and therefore support diversity.
- Ensuring that facilities and equipment are attractive to and appropriate for female potential applicants – both in college and on employer sites.
- An increase in the volume of outreach to communities where there may be higher volumes of potential students from non-white backgrounds.
- Developing a cadre of construction champions among local business partners and alumni.
- Participants questioned how small to medium enterprises might be incentivised to do this.
- Introducing construction as a career to parents across Leeds via a targeted mail drop.
- Demonstrating modern, clean construction sites with contemporary facilities and being forthright in communicating the wide range of opportunities available in the industry.
- Female only sessions/workshops – with female tutors if appropriate.
- A funded position to support outreach/diversity specifically related to female/ethnic minority students.
- Using GCSE English and Maths courses to attract more female and ethnic minority applicants and then introducing them to construction as a progression pathway.
- Ensuring the marketing and recruitment materials – including the college's digital presence – feature a diverse set of students.
- Engaging in an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion programme in order to foster a culture that supports student diversity.

In general, suggested staff, efforts need to be strategic and sustained and expectations should be managed because progress is likely to be slow.

# School Stakeholder Research

Chalkstream spent a total of 12 hours interviewing careers advisors and head teachers for this stage of the research programme. Some of the insight generated was particular and specific to the college, but more general findings of interest to third parties included:

## Quality of careers advice

Careers advice among the schools involved in the study is commonly reactive rather than proactive. It is apparent that Careers Advisors do try and provide independent advice and guidance to their students on post-16 provision. However, it was evident that many Careers Advisors were largely reactive in relation to the provision of information and advice on building and construction careers, usually in response to a student expressing an interest of some kind in a building-related subject.

For those students that do express an interest in building and construction, it then appears that Careers Advisors put forward/signpost the college as an option and then provide any support required in terms of exploring course choices, helping with applications, etc. It was also evident that there was quite a range of different interactions that were undertaken by the college and Careers Advisors (e.g., taster days, events, etc).

Careers Advisors were generally very keen to interact and establish relationships with Leeds College of Building.

Careers Advisors did mention quite a number of initiatives they were taking around building and construction that had resulted in increased enrolments to Leeds College of Building, especially in relation to females. Moreover, there appeared to be a direct relationship between those schools running construction-related courses and increases in enrolments to the college. There was also evidence of good practice in careers guidance within schools.

## Favourability

Survey respondents were highly likely to recommend Leeds College of Building as a place to study, compared to the results of similar surveys undertaken by Chalkstream with FE Colleges over the past few years.

It was evident that there was quite a sharp distinction between those who would recommend Leeds College of Building to who they considered to be appropriate students, and those who recommended the college for everybody at their school. All respondent explanations were generally positive in nature with many referring to the good reputation of the college and the positive feedback they had received from students at the college. Respondents commonly referenced student progression and outcomes as a driver for the college's strong reputation.

## Construction

Survey respondents think that construction is an attractive career – they gave a high rating of 4.6 out of 5 on the attractiveness of a career in construction. All Head Teachers scored either a 4 or 5.

These schools are markedly positive about construction as a career. In the latest (2017) national study involving careers guidance professionals, 57% of Careers Advisors scored the attractiveness of a career in construction at between 8 and 10. In this study, 90% of Advisors give it that score.

Overall, only 45% of Advisors declared themselves confident in providing careers advice on construction - an improvement on 2016, when only 26% said they were confident.

Many of the additional comments made by both Careers Advisors and Head Teachers emphasised the attractiveness of different aspects of the industry in terms of the variety of opportunities that it offers, being a growth sector, the security of employment and career progression.

Career Advisor and Head Teacher ratings on their knowledge of the construction industry and their confidence in offering advice about careers in the construction industry was lower than their rating of construction as a career; the overall respondent average was 3.3 out of 5 on both factors.

However, Careers Advisors in Leeds schools appear to be more knowledgeable and confident than most. In the national study, 32% of Advisors believed they had a 'good' knowledge of the industry, In this study, 45% rated their knowledge as good or better. In the national study, 24% of careers advisers said they do not feel confident offering advice on the construction industry. In this study, just one person out of 22 Careers Advisors rated their confidence at 1 or 2.

In relation to their knowledge of the construction industry it was clear from a number of comments made by both sets of respondents that they generally considered that there were gaps in their knowledge, especially in relation to the higher more technical areas of study.

However, Careers Advisors did feel that they knew where to look or who to speak to in order to find information. Go Construct, CITB, Morrisby were specifically mentioned in this context alongside general use of the internet.



## School liaison activity

Schools want Leeds College of Building to be proactive in getting in contact and providing relevant information to schools to enable them to properly inform their students about the opportunities available at the college. Many of the comments made by survey respondents point to a largely open door in securing effective school liaison with most, if not all, feeder schools.

## Parents

It was evident that a number of respondents generally thought that parents would not consider a construction college's offer – despite the inclusion of architecture, engineering, surveying and the like in the curriculum – as 'academic'. Underpinning many of the careers advisor comments, but certainly not all, was the view that lower ability, less ambitious students that would consider construction as an education pathway alongside those genuinely interested in vocational study.

## Diversity

### Females and ethnic minority students

Careers Advisors and Head Teachers were very clear and consistent as to why they thought that low proportions of females and ethnic minority students applied and enrolled at the college. In relation to females, the low proportion of applications and enrolments to Leeds College of Building was overwhelmingly considered to be because of stereotyping in the construction industry. The view was predominantly that construction has, historically, always been a male dominated industry; that any females going into the industry would be in a conspicuous minority and would feel uncomfortable in a construction/building environment. Because of this, females do not consider construction/building as a career option.

The other aspect of gender stereotyping mentioned by survey respondents was that they believed that it starts at a very early age and that by Year 11 it is far too late to be doing anything about it.

For the majority of respondents, the main reason put forward as to why relatively low proportions of minority ethnic students were applying and enrolling at the college was parental expectations and linked to this, parental pressure.

It was evident from survey responses that schools were already doing quite a lot of work with students to try and address the gender and ethnic minority stereotyping in relation to careers in the building and construction industry.





## Improving diversity

Role models and events, sessions or workshops were the most frequently mentioned improvements, alongside promotion and marketing, educating parents, careers advice in earlier years and taster days.

Overall, a very large proportion of the comments made by survey respondents related to different aspects of marketing and promotion, either through different types of events that focused on diversity or promotional material that was inclusive of women and ethnic minorities.

At the heart of responses given to this question was the desire to get females and ethnic minorities into schools as ambassadors to inform and inspire students about the construction/building industry and the wide range of opportunities available within it. Respondents generally stressed the importance of students seeing someone like themselves being successful within the construction industry.





# Leeds College of Building\_

A graphic element consisting of several horizontal white lines of varying lengths, stacked to create a 3D architectural effect, resembling a stylized building or a set of steps.