

**cabe** > architecture and race:  
a study of minority ethnic  
students in the profession

executive summary

# Architecture and race: A study of minority ethnic students in the profession

## 01 THE RESEARCH

The lack of black and minority ethnic (BME) representation in architectural education and the profession itself is frequently remarked upon; plenty of anecdotal evidence exists but there is a lack of real evidence. This study is the first of its kind and its key purpose is to lead to action.

The main objective of the research was to review BME application rates to schools of architecture and factors influencing the applications, and to look at BME students' experience of the architectural education process and of obtaining employment in the profession.

The study included quantitative desk research, but the main part consisted of qualitative research, interviewing a sample of students and relevant stakeholders. The study concentrated on domestic students although, where relevant, the experience of overseas students was used as context.

## 02 AIMS

The research set out to examine:

- the proportion of BME students in architecture, current patterns and trends
- how and why BME students applied to architecture schools, and changes in their interests and intentions as they progressed through the system
- how ethnicity, gender, social class and age affected students' experiences of the education system and influenced issues such as drop-out rates
- BME students' experiences as they progressed through the education system and into potential employment
- what happens to those people who drop out of architecture

## 03 WHAT DO THE STATISTICS TELL US?

**'There is a positive picture of BME representation in obtaining entry to architecture schools'**

Our review of available quantitative data showed:

- poor and inconsistent data in some areas
- good evidence to suggest that BME students are now well represented on architecture courses, making up around 18% of all architecture undergraduates (compared to 16% of all undergraduates), and that some communities, for example Chinese, are represented (at first degree level) above their representation in the population as a whole. However, even if all these current students went on to practise as architects, it would be decades before these levels of representation applied to the profession as a whole; currently only 2% of registered architects are non-white
- architecture continues to be predominantly a male profession. Even at entry level the percentage of women is unrepresentative of the population as a whole, and is particularly low in comparison with their position in professions such as law, medicine and dentistry
- there are some differences in student profiles, both between white and BME students, and within BME categories. For example, at first degree level, Black African and Black Caribbean students are older, are more likely to have held non-traditional qualifications at entry, and are more likely to study part-time. The Chinese, followed by those of Indian origin, are by far the best-represented minority ethnic group. They are also the youngest
- white students are four times more likely to obtain first class architecture degrees than BME students. White students in architecture are more likely to come from social class 1 ('professional')
- although there are problems with availability of data, findings show that there are fewer BME students at the advanced levels of Parts II and III of architectural study, compared with Part I. This suggests that BME students are more likely to drop out from Part I than white students

## 04 THE STORY BEHIND THE STATISTICS

The patterns identified above were examined further through a range of interviews. The aim was to build a detailed picture of students' real experience to add substance to the data and statistics.

### Why study architecture, and where?

- Interviews revealed a range of reasons for students to go into architecture, with no great differences between white and BME students. However, most interviewees felt that people are not encouraged to consider architecture as a career option at school
- Many interviewees had received poor careers advice. Some had been actively discouraged from going into architecture, a particular problem for women
- The research identified a perception that students from BME backgrounds were often not encouraged to become architects, because of lack of familiarity with the profession. This was borne out in part in interviews with students who said, for example, that their parents had concerns about the sustainability of a career in the profession
- More broadly, and especially important, concerns were expressed about the length of architectural training, and the related financial burdens
- A range of factors influenced which architecture schools students applied to, including reputation and curriculum issues. There did not appear to be any significant differences between white and BME students in this area. However, some said that decisions involved trade-offs for BME students that did not apply to their white peers. For example, choosing a London university in order to study in a more ethnically diverse environment could create financial pressures, whilst choosing to live elsewhere (in areas with small BME populations) to save money could lead to a degree of cultural and social isolation and lack of peer support
- Some British BME students felt that some courses were overly focused on western traditions of architecture. There was a view that there was often a set of 'taken for granted' cultural assumptions, which were seen to disadvantage those who did not necessarily share them. This included, for example, an assumed familiarity with a range of European building styles

### 'BME students appear to have higher drop-out rates when studying architecture and there are a number of possible reasons for this'

Data strongly suggests a higher dropout rate for BME students than white students. This was examined further

through our interviews, and a number of possible reasons identified:

- BME students were often unclear about what was expected of them during their training; the tutorial system was seen to offer varying levels of feedback which could exclude those less familiar with the system
- the seven-year minimum period required to qualify as an architect was seen to raise restrictive cost implications; financial pressures could increase as the course progressed. As the proportion of BME groups in lower income households tends to be higher, such factors were likely to affect these students disproportionately. The fragmented design of architectural training also provides multiple opportunities to drop out
- some interviewees argued that there was a lack of cohesive infrastructure to support students who encountered financial problems
- some students pointed to the isolating effect of being the sole or one of only a few students from a BME background in their year, and commented on the implications for their support networks
- the *crit* system was often seen to be challenging, culturally specific and, at times, contributed to decisions to drop out of architectural training
- a number of students found the process of finding and working in architectural practice difficult, and identified it as one during which graduates could potentially drop out of their architectural training. Many students said they received minimal support from their institutions in finding positions
- it was also argued that BME students are often outside professional, social and family-related social networks that could help them to find jobs, and that cultural differences could continue to set them apart from their colleagues once in placements
- the low pay students received during their practice experience, in contrast to what they had anticipated, and the long hours they were expected to put in could exacerbate any difficulties interviewees were already experiencing
- entry into the workplace was for many students a key point at which they reconsidered their engagement with the profession. For those who experienced sex or race discrimination at this point, this often resulted in leaving architecture, or downscaling of professional ambitions

## 05 MAKING A DIFFERENCE: POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The research project considered a number of ways of addressing some of the issues raised by the data review and by students. These are primarily targeted at the architecture schools themselves, but also include such agencies as the RIBA, CABE and partner organisations.

### Raising the profile of architecture: 'Making the profession more attractive and diverse'

Findings showed that not enough people were exposed to architecture as a career option at school. This might be addressed by:

- further support for outreach and media work currently being undertaken by such organisations as Women in Architecture and the RIBA through its equality forum Architects for Change
- providing material on buildings and the built environment for schools and further education colleges that can be delivered within the standard curriculum
- encouraging architecture schools and practices to become more involved in pre-16 careers programmes; for example, to provide open days to give a positive image of opportunities available in architecture
- supporting schemes through which architects from a diverse range of backgrounds can become involved in schools' career programmes

(These proposals would augment work already being done by CABE Education)

### Access to better data: 'Architecture schools may have a legal duty to keep more accurate data'

- Analysis highlighted large gaps in the data provided in the area of diversity; considerable improvement is required in order to carry out reliable monitoring. The lack of data currently being collected consistently or effectively could potentially leave schools vulnerable to challenge by the CRE, under the Race Relations Amendment Act
- Given the complexity of this data collection and the problems experienced by schools and related agencies, development of guidance is recommended
- There is also need for further research on experiences of professional practice, for example, establishing a cohort study to follow a group of architects from the beginning of their training through to employment

### Supporting students: 'importance of role models and mentoring'

- The research highlighted the importance that BME and female students attached to having role models, and the cultural, social and academic isolation that can arise in their absence. One immediate way of addressing this is to ensure that staff teams include women and members of BME groups
- Many students identified mentoring as a positive recommendation of particular value to students in building their social networks in architecture schools with less diverse student profiles. Schools and practices should be encouraged to develop mentoring schemes. Agencies such as the Society of Black Architects potentially have an important role in developing contacts, good practice models and advice and students would benefit from these initiatives being more widely publicised

### Supporting students: 'improving communications between institutions and students'

- Architecture schools should consider reforms to the *crit* system to help improve perceptions of fairness, as well as helping to provide an atmosphere in which more women and BME students could flourish
- Steps should be taken to provide greater and clearer feedback on students' work. Overseas students in particular had found it difficult to ascertain what was expected of them and establish how their performance could be improved
- Staff need to give students more advice and practical help in obtaining practice experience. Women and BME students appeared to have greater problems in finding positive placements. BME students and, in particular, overseas students repeatedly explained that they felt they didn't understand the best way to find placements or what they might be doing that would explain their lack of success
- Funding was a consistent problem for those in lower income groups, especially for those with BME backgrounds, and financial worry was a key factor underlying dropout rates. The type of bursaries developed by the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust offer a valuable model and the extension of such bursary schemes should be considered
- Overseas students face particular issues that need to be addressed. For example, an increased level of guidance about the modular structure of UK degree courses, and how to construct a balanced programme of studies would be valuable

## 06 BUILDING ON THIS RESEARCH

This research makes a start in clarifying some of the issues relating to BME concerns about architectural training. Further work is now being carried out by CABE on BME experiences within the profession once they have qualified. Other initiatives to consider include:

- working with institutions to maintain consistent and accurate statistics in order to assess BME student representation more fully
- the development of longitudinal studies following students as they work through colleges and into the profession
- the examination of design issues as they reflect diversity internationally, and also a diverse UK today
- the development of models of good practice in architecture schools in supporting BME students through their architectural education
- the study of models of good practice where employers have been successful in achieving a diverse workforce

Copies of the full report and further information are available from: [www.cabe.org.uk](http://www.cabe.org.uk)

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The full report was researched and written for CABE by Helen Barnes, Jane Parry, Melahat Sahin-Dikmen and Dorothe Bonjour of the Policy Studies Institute



Policy Studies Institute

This document summarises a CABE-commissioned piece of research carried out by the Policy Studies Institute. Although every care has been taken in preparing this publication, no responsibility or liability will be accepted by CABE or its employees, agents and advisers for its accuracy or completeness.

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