

cabe > minority ethnic
representation in
the built environment
professions

summary

01 INTRODUCTION

'I can only describe it as not feeling entirely welcome'

Interview candidate

The places we inhabit shape our health, happiness and prosperity. Creating truly great places involves built environment professionals and communities working together, often in new and innovative ways. CABE is committed to getting more people from across the community into the built environment professions, and making sure they have the skills they need to create great buildings and public spaces.

Previous studies have examined the issue of black and minority ethnic (BME) representation in the construction industry. But actual data describing levels of representation in the built environment professions remains fragmented, and evidence of the existence and nature of barriers faced by BME professionals largely anecdotal. Like the construction industry as a whole, the built environment professions are still seen as predominantly white and male and not particularly representative of an increasingly diverse society. Within the built environment sector many acknowledge that BME professionals face barriers in pursuing a career in the sector that are not experienced by their white colleagues. What can the sector do to address this situation?

This research set out both to join up existing research and address some of the gaps in knowledge, so as to contribute to a more informed discussion across the built environment professions about how best to achieve greater diversity in professional employment in the sector.

02 THE RESEARCH

CABE commissioned the Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies, Royal Holloway, to undertake a research project into the representation of BME students and professionals in the built environment industry, and in particular to explore evidence and experiences of barriers to entry and progression. The study builds upon previous research commissioned by CABE into BME students' representation in, and experiences of, architectural education and entry to employment.

This summary provides a brief outline of the research project's aims and approach, key findings and recommended areas for action. More detail is contained in the full report, available from www.cabe.org.uk.

03 AIMS AND APPROACHES

Specific aims of the research were:

- to identify and map existing information about the representation of BME people in the built environment professions, and explore any gaps or patterns
- to identify evidence to support or challenge the existence of barriers to entry and progression of BME people within the built environment professions, as well as of examples of good practice
- to make practical recommendations for action by employers, educators, professional bodies and policymakers.

The research involved three related strands of activity:

- a literature review
- identification, mapping and analysis of published monitoring data
- in depth interviews with a sample of 37 BME students and 50 BME professionals as well as representatives of a number of large employers and the key professional bodies.

04 MAIN FINDINGS

What the statistics say

'BME people will account for half the growth in the working-age population between 1999 and 2009'

Ethnic minorities and the labour market, Cabinet Office, 2003

Aside from important arguments about greater social equity and better quality design resulting from an industry that reflects the communities it serves, the stark fact is that the built environment professions need to attract and retain all the talent they can:

- construction employs over two million people, and construction related employment is due to grow at between 1 per cent and 2 per cent annually
- between 2003 and 2007 the industry has a cumulative requirement for 76,800 trained professionals and technicians (significantly more than the projected input)
- BME people will account for half the growth in the working age population between 1999 and 2009, due to the younger age structure of BME groups.

Yet even though more BME students are choosing to study built environment subjects, the industry is still not attracting them into employment at the same rates as their white counterparts. Despite having sufficient initial interest to study a built environment subject, at the end of their studies more BME students take up employment in other sectors.

The facts are that:

- BME students are relatively well represented in most of the built environment disciplines at all stages of higher education (with the main exception being landscape design), although within the overall figures there are variations between different BME groups, with some groups concentrated in certain subject areas more than others
- upon graduation, the picture begins to change. BME students qualifying in built environment subjects are less likely than their white counterparts to go into the construction industry. Around 35.5 per cent of BME students studying architecture, building and planning subjects went into construction and property related activities (standard industry classifications f and k), compared to 51.5 per cent of white students. The gap narrows if the proportion of students with 'Unknown' destinations is removed, which is higher for BME than white students
- data regarding the ethnic composition of built environment professionals in employment is patchy and inconsistent. Only a minority of built environment professional bodies collect or collate ethnicity data and, where it is collated, it is not always comprehensive; few built environment employers collect and analyse ethnicity data comprehensively.

Looking behind the figures: experiences of BME students and professionals

Published statistics can only ever tell part of the story. What is it like to be a BME professional in the built environment sector? What were the key influences on career choice? How easy was it to get a job? What needs to change to make the industry a more attractive career for others? Findings from in depth interviews with BME students and professionals provide some indications, summarised below.

Choosing a career and qualifying for the built environment professions:

- family influence plays an important role in the initial choice of a career in the built environment industry. Those interviewed suggested that the industry's identification with stereotyped male values and building site mythology overshadowed the professional opportunities it might offer
- BME students often do not have existing contacts within the industry, which their white counterparts are able to call upon in gathering information and finding work experience. This is a particular issue because of the crucial role that work experience can play in helping BME students establish the professional connections to assist them in securing employment after graduation

'When I was doing my degree... I was the only black guy, and I was the last one to get a training placement. After the first six months, I was the first one they asked to come back for a year. So, I wouldn't say it is equal opportunity; it is all perception – you go with what you know'

Civil engineer

- few of those interviewed identified the careers advice and support they received in higher education as helping them with their choice of profession and work. Most described the careers advice as too general and focused on set piece events involving visiting employers. More flexible advice was felt to be needed, that drew on the experience of ex-students and offered access to a wider range of employers
- despite the increasingly diverse nature of the student body, BME students generally expect a predominantly Euro-centric curriculum. This was identified as a particular issue in architecture, with some BME architecture students referring to their studies as being 'unstimulating' and 'unengaging', due to the lack of a wider global, culturally diverse perspective. (This reinforced the findings of earlier research)
- although offering distinct advantages, attending an institution with a diverse student body does not guarantee that lecturers will be aware of, or sensitive to, the differing needs of their students.

Getting into the industry

It is generally acknowledged, by both professionals and employers, that barriers continue to exist throughout the recruitment process:

- the importance of contacts and informal networks in recruitment within the industry disadvantage those who do not fit the existing mould
- assumptions and stereotypes about the competencies of BME people are deeply ingrained, and another barrier to objectivity
- there is a strong suspicion that discrimination continues to happen: having to send more applications than white colleagues to get an interview; feeling a need to delay revealing ethnicity; having to target applications to known receptive firms
- for BME women, there is the potential for dual disadvantage
- once in front of an interview panel, however, participants in the research generally felt that they were treated fairly. Nevertheless, many described the discomfort of being faced by a completely white, male interview panel, of 'not feeling entirely welcome'
- BME-led firms described similar challenges in getting contracts.

'When we looked back at our stats we found that it was very clear: graduates got into the organisation because they knew someone'

Large employer in the sector

Developing and progressing within the industry

'The reality is that if those at the top continually resist change in the upper levels of an organisation, then the glass ceiling can never be broken'

Housing professional

- BME professionals continue to describe experiences of a 'glass ceiling' on career development through which it is hard to break. However, it is worth noting that there is more optimism among those just entering the industry than those who have worked in it for a time
- progression and promotion can be dependent upon having a 'face that fits' socially and there is a perception amongst BME professionals that, in a predominantly white industry, their white colleagues get more opportunities to progress

'Familiarity is very, very important in construction. You want someone who speaks your language and whenever you get someone who is a little bit different they struggle to fit in and don't last very long. It's illogical really'

Civil engineer

- BME professionals interviewed also generally felt that they had to work harder than their white counterparts to get recognised, to shake off doubts about their competency and progress within an organisation
- establishing oneself and one's abilities was not helped by managers who lacked the skills and understanding to manage in an increasingly diverse workforce
- lack of opportunities and support can combine to create a vicious circle: BME people not putting themselves forward, therefore unfairly being seen sometimes as lacking ambition
- conversely, many of those interviewed described the feeling of being a 'pioneer', 'trailblazer' or 'pathfinder' for their ethnic group and, more broadly, for all BME people in the industry. The visibility was definitely seen as a double-edged sword: some sought to minimise their visibility by trying to fit in, whilst others welcomed the visibility and sought to capitalise on their increased profile

'They don't think we're capable, so I'm proving to them that we are capable so that the next job they go to they think: "well, we had that black man and he knew", and they don't have those stereotypes after that'

Trainee site manager

- For those interviewed, support and guidance were key to progression, with the role of champion or mentor mentioned in particular. Nevertheless, despite a perception amongst the BME professionals interviewed that things had improved over the last decade, they still did not feel their managers supported them to develop and progress to the same degree as their white colleagues.

'Trust, and giving you responsibility in your role, is key to helping you progress personally as well as professionally. The first design team meeting I went to with the project team, the senior partner came along with me. I chaired the meeting...I got positive feedback and since then have been able to handle this type of meeting on my own. That is all he needed to see'

Architect

Challenging racism:

- those interviewed were realistic about the difficulty and potential risk to their career of challenging the system. Most described a pragmatic approach to racism and discrimination, one which placed individual instances of racism in the context of something bigger

'You get contractors who come and they call you "nigger" and all that kind of stuff to your face, but then two minutes later it's like "alright mate?". But I have got it in my mind that basically what you've said to me is what you say down the pub to your mates'

Trainee site manager

- positively, there was some evidence that white colleagues were more likely to challenge racial discrimination than may have been the case in the past.

Industry views: talking to employers

Researchers also talked to a sample of 12 employers to explore their perceptions of the barriers facing BME professionals and strategies for encouraging greater diversity within their companies. Those chosen were all from large rather than small businesses, so not necessarily representative of the sector as a whole, and known to be demonstrating good practice. They were implementing a range of strategies that could signpost ways for the industry to address some of the issues identified through this research.

Strategies described included:

- getting the policies right
- widening the recruitment pool
- presenting an inclusive image in recruitment literature
- using new technology to improve the collection, maintenance and use of monitoring data
- using best practice standards to review and develop processes
- ensuring a visible ongoing commitment
- providing diversity training for senior managers and key partners
- development programmes and positive action schemes for under-represented groups.

Nevertheless, most admitted that they struggled to achieve increased representation of BME staff beyond graduate level.

05 SUMMARY

From this research a picture emerges of an industry that needs to change, for social equity, business and economic reasons. Possibly the biggest immediate driver of change is the projected growing skills shortages in the industry. What is clear is that standing still is not an option.

Whilst the industry may not be seen as such a hostile environment by new and existing BME professionals as has been the case in the past, there remains a strong perception that more could be done to attract and support the careers of professionals from different sections of the community. As with other sectors of the economy, in planning action there is a need to balance initiatives to address barriers to entry to the industry with those aimed at supporting career development and progression.

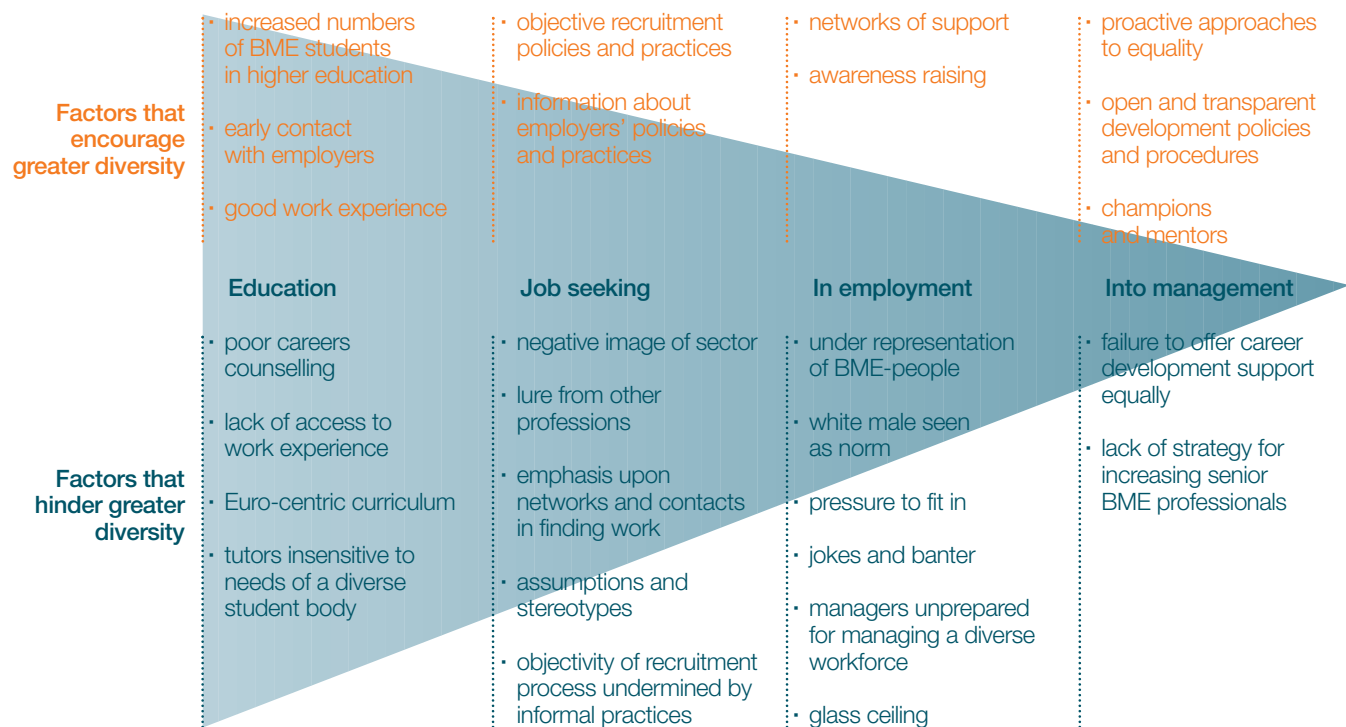
In practice change is already taking place, in part as a reflection of changes in society as a whole; however, it is happening only in discrete pockets. More could be achieved, more quickly, with committed leadership.

This research provides the professions and industry with some important insights and pointers for action. Taken together, the findings suggest a need for action under six broad headings:

- collecting and using data
- image of the industry
- professional education and support
- recruitment practices and entry to the industry
- progression and development
- sector leadership.

Summary of key issues

The graphic summarises the key positive and negative factors which have emerged from this study and the impact on access to and progression within the built environment and construction industry professions.



06 RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR ACTION

Collecting and using data

- Professional bodies and employers across the sector to be able to analyse the ethnic composition of their members and workforces to better target action to address under representation.
- Educational institutions to be able to access monitoring data for qualifiers and relate it to enrolments, and so use it to analyse retention and success rates by ethnicity.

Image of the industry

- Sector organisations, professional bodies and employers to undertake a more coordinated and structured programme of marketing of the built environment professions to schools, colleges and universities.

Professional education and support

- Universities and colleges (through tutors and careers advisers) to review the effectiveness of learning and teaching strategies used in built environment departments in meeting the needs of a diverse student body, including curriculum, access to work experience and advice, to guide future development.

Recruitment practices and entry to the industry

- Employers to review their recruitment policies and procedures, building on existing best practice, with the aim of making the sector's recruitment processes more objective:
 - raising awareness
 - eliminating scope for discrimination
 - promoting diversity.

Progression and development

- Employers to review mechanisms used to identify and support the development of the professionals they employ, particularly the effectiveness of those mechanisms in supporting career development of those from non-traditional backgrounds.
- Sector organisations and professional bodies to evaluate the approaches and success of other sectors in championing the development needs of BME professionals (including support groups, networks, mentoring programmes), and assess the need for similar approaches in the built environment sector.

Sector leadership

- Professional bodies and large employers to lead by example. Developing (where they don't already exist) clear policies on equality and diversity, with an action plan for implementation and arrangements for monitoring, and communicate them widely within the sector.
- Professional bodies, large employers and sector organisations to take a lead in promoting discussion of the findings in this research and the development of a framework of action which addresses the barriers and areas of under-representation identified (within the context of the sector's particular structure and characteristics).

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This document summarises the research described in the full report. Although every care has been taken in preparing this publication, no responsibility or liability will be accepted by CAFE or its employees, agents or advisers for its accuracy or completeness.

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Further copies of this summary, as well as the full report, can be downloaded from the CAFE website: www.cabe.org.uk

The text of this summary, as well as the full report, is also available in large print. For a copy, email: skills@cabe.org.uk

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