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Education providers secure cash boost to tackle construction skills shortages

A partnership between Northumbria University, Gateshead College and Derby College has been awarded £400,000 to address skills gaps in the construction industry.

The funding will be used to launch the BRIDGE Project, a research programme that will investigate why there are low numbers of women, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, mature and part-time students enrolling on construction-related degree courses.

The partners behind the project, which attracted the six-figure cash sum from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Catalyst Fund, will then publish guidelines and solutions that could help tackle these pressing issues.

The news follows the publication of the most recent Construction Skills Network report, which highlighted a growing skills shortage in the industry. The study concluded that 179,000 UK construction jobs will need to be filled from 2017-2021 to meet rapid growth in demand for infrastructure and housebuilding across the country.

Professor Becky Strachan, Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor for Strategic Planning and Engagement within the Faculty of Engineering and Environment at Northumbria University, said: “This funding from HEFCE will allow us to investigate the barriers and develop solutions to attract a more diverse set of people to study construction and built environment programmes at higher and further education level.

“Our aim is to widen access and open up opportunities for students, enabling a future workforce with a wide range of rich talent, regardless of age, background or gender. The outcomes from this project should also be applicable to other sectors with similar workforce diversity issues.

“We already work closely with a range of employers to design industry relevant programmes – for example we will soon to launch a new Chartered Surveyor degree apprenticeship created in partnership with industry representatives. We also have experience of widening access through our NUSTEM initiative, which we will draw on during this project.

“We believe the BRIDGE Project will stretch the boundaries of traditional approaches in response to demand and have real impact on future workforce development.”

Steve Logan, project consultant at the Gateshead College Skills Academy for Construction, said: “We are delighted to be awarded the funding from HEFCE and to be able to launch the BRIDGE project alongside Northumbria University and Derby College.

“This project is set to benefit those seeking professional, technical and

management jobs by providing ways to encourage people from all backgrounds, sexes and ethnicities into higher education and a career in the construction industry.

“We want to address why construction degree courses aren’t attracting students from a range of backgrounds. This will, in turn, also benefit employers by providing more fresh talent to meet the upcoming demand for skilled and professionally qualified graduates.

“It’s a great example of how Gateshead College is taking its strong links with employers, listening to their concerns and then working in close partnership to find innovative solutions for complex skills issues.”

The project will collate evidence and input from key stakeholders including current and prospective construction and built environment students, apprentices and trainees, industry professionals and those who chose not to continue a career in the industry.

HEFCE Chief Executive Madeleine Atkins said: “The significant response from higher education providers to this funding call demonstrates their commitment to ensuring all students benefit from a vibrant, inclusive, world-class higher education experience.

“Funding this programme will support real progress towards closing the unacceptable differences in outcomes between groups of students. We look forward to working with providers to make sure this targeted, evidence-led investment maximises outcomes for students – contributing to improved productivity and social mobility and, of course, individual opportunities.”

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