



UK Research
and Innovation

Equality, diversity and inclusion in UK Foundation Industries

Summary Findings: Gender

Developed by



CONTEXT

Foundation industries are those sectors and sub-sectors of the economy that are principally concerned with the manufacture of core materials that supply other industrial firms. They play a crucial role in the economy, underpinning critical supply chains.

In the UK, there are approximately 7,000 businesses in the six foundation industry sectors included in this study (chemicals, cement, ceramics, glass, metal and paper), accounting for just over five percent of businesses in the manufacturing sector. In total, the foundation industries employ 253,825 people.

Research has shown that the foundation industries have faced a range of challenges since the financial crisis and more recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these challenges relate to difficulties with staff recruitment and retention, as well as changing skills needs.

There is recognition that action needs to be taken to drive greater employee diversity, enabling firms to recruit from a wider and more socially representative labour pool. This will allow them to effectively respond to future demands including the net zero challenge.

THE RESEARCH

This study was undertaken by the Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) on behalf of UKRI to improve understanding of the age and gender diversity of the foundation industry workforce, and to consider potential actions for change and barriers to these.

The project involved three stages:

- A review of the existing literature and available data on diversity and the link with business performance.
- A telephone survey of 249 UK-based foundation industry businesses in Autumn 2020.
- In-depth interviews with senior managers in eight foundation industry businesses to provide a greater depth of understanding of diversity issues.

MAIN FINDINGS – GENDER

The literature review reveals that diversity in the foundation industries is an under-researched topic, with only limited sector data available on the workforce profile and the trends that underpin it.

The telephone survey evidence shows that the foundation industry workforce is dominated by male employees at almost all levels when compared with the wider economy. This is in line with trends in the manufacturing sector more broadly.

Female employees are in the minority in most foundation industry firms, and this varies little with the size of the business. However, there are some differences by sub-sector, with chemicals, ceramics and paper more likely to have female employees accounting for a higher share of the workforce.

There are also some occupational differences, with female employees being largely engaged in non-production roles. Relatively few businesses have female owners and/or partners.

A range of factors have contributed to the gender make-up of the foundation industry workforce over time. These include the need for workforce restructuring, and an historic lack of female applicants for roles.

Foundation industry leaders acknowledge that the gender balance within the workforce is not optimal. Addressing this is regarded as important, but not always at all levels within organisations. Formalised recruitment practices to engage more female candidates are not normalised across the industry, and there are concerns about positive discrimination.

There is an appetite for greater collaboration and sharing of best practice. Many businesses are in the relatively early stages of thinking more strategically about their approach to diversity and inclusion and learning from others in similar industries was of particular interest.

Meeting future skills needs is a shared concern across foundation industries. Looking ahead, the introduction of new processes in the sector could create new opportunities for female employees in more production-related roles.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study points to the need for a different approach to workforce development within the UK's foundation industries. If gender diversity issues are not tackled, there is a danger that the sector will be ill-equipped to deal with upcoming challenges and unable to take advantage of opportunities for growth. But it is also clear that firm-level efforts alone will not be sufficient to tackle these challenges in the timescales required.

Policy options to improve gender diversity include:

- Increasing learning opportunities for managers on developing gender diversity strategies.
- Increasing networking and sharing of best practice between firms on gender diversity issues.
- Developing quality industry-wide collateral on the benefits of increased gender diversity.
- Producing material for education providers tailored to engaging girls in STEM and the foundation industries.
- Developing a coherent industry vision of the future that that embraces new technology makes clear there are opportunities for both women and men.

The next step in improving female representation in the foundation industries is to identify the external inputs required to support firm-level action on diversity. Securing senior leadership support is also important. Making progress will be a long-term undertaking as perceptions and practices take time to shift, but the business benefits of a more gender diverse workforce for the foundation industries are considerable.



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This project was undertaken by Lee Hopley from the Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) on behalf of UKRI between February 2020 and April 2021 as firms were experiencing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project focused primarily on the longer-term position of the foundation industries but took into account pandemic impacts.

This research was undertaken by the Enterprise Research Centre on behalf of UKRI in order to improve understanding of the age and gender diversity of the foundation industry workforce – metals, paper, chemicals, glass, ceramics and cement. The research comprised of a detailed literature review, a survey of 249 businesses in foundation industries undertaken by our research partners OMB Research Ltd, as well as a combined 8 in-depth qualitative interviews with businesses and key industry stakeholders to provide a greater depth of understanding of the issues affecting diversity.

We would like to thank all of the businesses who participated in the qualitative interviews, as well as those who contributed to the development of the wider research.