Examining the impact of socio-economic background on choice of built environment degree and graduate destinations

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Introduction

- Socio-economic background affects student access to all university degrees (Bolton and Lewis., 2025), but the lack of knowledge and awareness of built environment careers exacerbates these effects for surveying degrees.
- In 2026, of the current RICS global members, only 20% identified as a woman; gender parity in the surveying profession remains a significant challenge (RICS.n.d).
- Despite growing interest in educational inequalities, there has been limited research examining their impact across suites of degree programmes, particularly built environment degrees.

Existing studies

- An individual's higher education trajectory is heavily influenced by their socio-economic background and plays a significant role in shaping outcomes at various points in their educational journey (Tomaszewski et al, 2022; Guo et al, 2025; Quast et al, 2025).
- Lower entry conditions offered to students from disadvantaged backgrounds have had a positive impact on widening access for disadvantaged students (Sutton Trust, 2025).
- Socio-economic inequalities are often reproduced across generations, as parents with higher socio-economic backgrounds can provide opportunities that improve their children's access to higher education (Tomaszewski et al, 2022; Bolton and Lewis, 2023; Kao et al, 2024; Bolton and Lewis, 2025; Guo et al, 2025).

Existing Studies

- Traditional gendered associations with particular fields of study continue influence educational decision-making, (Mullen, 2014).
- A student's family background has been widely identified as an important influence on degree choice. Kao et al, (2024) suggested that advice from significant others, such as relatives and peers affected students' initial degree choice decisions.
- An 'expectation framework' generated by family and social class exerts a dominant influence on student choice, yet rarely is it addressed in studies of degree subject choices (Trend, 2009).
- Jackson and Collings, (2018) suggested that Australian graduate students who did undertake a placement year may have entered higher quality relevant employment.

Methodology

Objectives:

1. examine how socio-economic background influences student decisions when choosing built environment degrees,
2. investigate the motivations and barriers for undertaking a placement as part of a built environment degree,
3. analyse if built environment graduates with work experience have a higher likelihood of employment either for a placement or their graduate role
4. explore whether built environment graduate destinations are influenced by socio-economic background.

Methods:

- Questionnaires administered online and subsequently face to face
- Sample number: 47 out of 389 students across UG QS, BS and RE courses at Northumbria University

Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Degree programme	Real Estate	27	57.45
	Quantity Surveying	7	14.89
	Building Surveying	13	27.66
Year of study	First year (L4)	22	46.81
	Second year (L5)	11	23.40
	Placement year	8	17.02
	Final year (L6)	6	12.77

- Composition of respondents: male (51.06%) and female (31.91%)
- Students from a white background (57.15%) and ethnic minorities background (42.86%)

Limitations

- Single institution
- Low response rate
- Results therefore restricted in scope

Findings

- Quantity Surveying respondents had the highest proportion of first-generation students with 85.71% compared to Building Surveying with 23.08% and Real Estate with 14.81%.
- Building Surveying students only reported that either one (7.69%) or none (53.85%) of their parent(s) or guardian(s) or carer(s) worked within their degree field.
- Similarly, Quantity Surveying students also only reported that one (14.29%) or none (85.71%) of their parent(s) or guardian(s) or carer(s) worked within their degree field.
- Whereas for Real Estate students respondents, they reported both (7.41%), one (2.22%) and none (59.26%) of their parent(s) or guardian(s) or carer(s) worked within their degree field.
- The most common route for an undergraduate Built Environment degree programme discovery at Northumbria University reported was by a family member with 29.79% of respondents identifying this was how they discovered their degree programme. Followed by a degree listing website (23.40%), by other and university open day were both reported by (19.15%) of students.

Findings

- Choosing a degree - Interested in the topic was the most common reason (76.60%). Career prospects (68.09%) and financial prospects (55.32%) both were popular amongst students.
- Just under two-thirds of students (61.70%) reported they knew about the RICS before starting their course.
- In terms of placement - first years (64%) identified they were and 46.00% identified that they were not. For second year more intended to take a placement (81.82%) rather than not (18.18%), . With the final year students there was an even split (50:50) between those who did a placement and those who did not do a placement.
- Some first-year students considered the length of study when taking on a placement year such as one student reported *'too long as I already did foundation year'* and another said '*I want to get my three years done at uni*'.
- Similarly, other students discussed the potential costs of taking on a placement year and for one student they were '*concerned about fees and loans accumulating*' and one student said '*I can do that on my own, at my home country without spending more money*'.

Second year work experience and placement success

	Are you intending to take a placement year?			
Have you had work experience?	Yes – I have a confirmed placement	Yes- I am still looking for a placement	No	Total
Frequency				
Yes	0	4	1	5
No	3	2	1	6
Total	3	6	2	11
Percentage (%)				
Yes	0.00	80.00	20.00	100.00
No	50.00	33.33	16.67	100.00
Total of respondents (%)	27.27	54.55	18.18	100.00

Final-year students work experience, placements, graduate jobs and graduate destinations.

Degree	Prior work experience	Placement year	Graduate job	Family occupation in degree field
Real Estate	No	No	No	No
Real Estate	No	No	No	No
Real Estate	No	No	No	No
Building Surveying	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Quantity Surveying	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Real Estate	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Examine how socio-economic background influences student decision when choosing built environment degrees

- Findings suggest first-generation status may influence the built environment degree programme chosen by students.
- The data gathered from the questionnaire suggests that there could be a very weak influence of family occupation on degree choice
- There are suggestions that there is improved inclusion on built environment degrees although this is something that needs further investigation
- Different types of schools provided different levels of support – unsurprisingly private school students were well supported with applications

Investigate the motivations and barriers for undertaking a placement as part of a built environment degree.

- Students were primarily motivated to undertake a placement to gain experience to put on their CV and improve their employment prospects.
- Some students reported they were simply not interested in undertaking a placement.
- Other students considered the length of study when taking on a placement year would be ‘too long’ and they wanted their ‘*three years done*’.
- Concerns about finances were also discussed with students wanting to receive an income in the shortest amount of time.
- A clear barrier identified from this study was the financial impact of undertaking a placement.

Analyse if built environment graduates with work experience have a higher likelihood of employment either for a placement or their graduate role.

- The students who had a confirmed placement did not have prior work experience necessarily
- 50% of final year students had secured a graduate job with these students having undertaken a placement (though n=3)
- Although unclear from the small data set, these findings suggest the potential improved likelihood of securing a graduate role if a student has undertaken and placement year and prior work experience.

Explore whether built environment graduate destinations are influenced by socio-economic background.

- Due to the limited data collected on final-year students it would be inappropriate to my any conclusion on whether built environment graduate destinations were influenced by socio-economic background.

Conclusions

- Initial findings from the study suggest that socio-economic background could play a role in influencing student decision when choosing built environment degree. Question around improving outreach
- Some of the factors that could influence student degree choice suspected in this study included first-generation status, pre-university education institution, family education and family occupation.
- Most of the students on a built environment degree expressed their desire to undertake a placement year - motivated by ‘gain experience’, ‘future employment’, ‘career development’, ‘improve knowledge or understanding’, ‘educational gains’, ‘monetary gains’, ‘networking’, ‘cv’, ‘focusing interests’ and ‘personal reflection’.
- Financial concerns were identified as a barrier to undertaking a placement with students thinking about the cost and fees of an additional year of study.

Next steps

- Widen out survey to other institutions offering built environment degree programmes
- With a larger dataset it would be possible to test the findings in this study and draw more concrete conclusions on the objectives
- Consider ways of increasing response rate – this seems to be a challenge for different types of student questionnaires
- Would anyone who has BE UG programmes be interested in putting the questionnaire to their students and seeing if we can get a bigger dataset?

Any questions?