

Finding the placemakers of tomorrow

The Women in Property student awards celebrated diverse achievement. **Felicity Francis** reports

When *Property Week* launched the Open Plan campaign in June, one of its key remits was to champion initiatives that are already making headway towards boosting diversity in the property sector. Women in Property's (WiP) annual student awards are doing just that, as they now enter their ninth year with the launch of the 2015 selection process (see box).

On 17 September, Jessica Dowdy, a construction project management student from Oxford Brookes University, became the WiP National Student Awards winner for 2014. While the awards highlight outstanding work by female students, their aim and WiP's wider task is to promote the benefits of diversity, of which gender is just one element.

"WiP's remit in the round seeks to correct the gender imbalance which has always been prevalent in this industry, probably more so than any other, albeit that situation is slowly changing," says Elspeth Burrage, WiP president and head of group events at DTZ. "This is one of the initiatives we run that encourages greater gender diversity in property and construction, as it helps to showcase the extraordinary female talent and ambition coming out of our universities.

"However, it is very much part of a wider, growing industry movement to raise awareness to diversity issues that include, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation."

How to enter the awards:

The Women in Property National Student Awards are open to second year (third year in Scotland) female students studying a built environment course at university.

Students submit a CV and are interviewed by regional judges from the property industry and higher education. Regional awards are held in the spring, with each regional winner put forward for the overall award.

In 2014, 47 universities nominated a total of 87 students, who were whittled down to 11 regional champions. Each regional champion received a work placement and the opportunity to be mentored by a Women in Property member to provide support through their early career.

Further information about the awards is available at <http://bit.ly/1rTclFm>



On the night: winner Jessica Dowdy (left) and John Forrester (right) speaking at the event

Reaching a wider spectrum of young people is crucial to safeguarding the industry's future, particularly as competition from other arguably more diverse professions mounts (see feature, p34). One method identified by delegates at an Open Plan meeting on this subject on 25 September is to promote young industry role models with whom school-aged children can identify.

Award winner Dowdy agrees: "As a student in an all-female independent school, I found it astounding to know that I was the only person in my school's history to choose a construction-based degree," she says. "There needs to be wider awareness from a young age that people of any race, religion, gender or social background can have a successful career in the industry."

Dowdy agrees the lack of diversity in property is something that requires urgent action. "While things are changing, women, disabled and ethnic minority groups are still hugely underrepresented in the industry," she says.

"We can no longer afford this lack of diversity. Particularly with the current skills shortage, cutting off a large portion of the population is simply adding to the problem. In my opinion, there needs to be a much greater awareness of the range of property and construction-based careers, starting at secondary school level. Having

greater diversity means a better team, which is vital to ensuring the best value projects are delivered."

Speaking at September's WiP awards dinner, John Forrester, chief executive EMEA of award sponsor DTZ, highlighted his firm's view that tackling diversity now is essential.

"The real estate industry as a whole is only just coming out of recession and this brings a very significant opportunity for talent, something that we are celebrating tonight."

The issue of workplace diversity requires joined-up thinking, he adds. "This is emphasised in the Open Plan project, which challenges businesses and organisations to rethink their policies both overt and unconscious, from graduate recruitment right through to the boardroom and including gender, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation," he says. "Only by combining professionalism with business reality, identifying and developing broad-ranging talent and through creating an inclusive environment will the property sector achieve first class delivery."

As Forrester says, it will be organisations that reach out to young people across the UK that are better able to create talented teams. WiP's award scheme could become one of many to champion the role models of the future. ■

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Jessica Dowdy