



# Gender bias in workplace culture curbs careers

## A year-long gender balanced study involving 5,814 UK employees (53% men and 47% women)

Despite major steps towards equality, women are still neither as well-represented nor as well-rewarded as men in positions of leadership in the UK.<sup>1</sup> At Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge we are researching how workplace culture contributes to this imbalance.

Our research sheds new light on subtle behaviours derived from the ways in which people think of the strengths and attributes of men and women. These include stereotypical thinking about an employee's strengths and potential based on their gender and women and men being held to different standards of behaviour. The study found this unconscious, but nevertheless damaging, bias is perpetuated by both men and women, mainly to the detriment of women's careers.

This is not a simple issue. Few men or women are intentionally sexist. Men and women in organisations we have surveyed have been surprised by the gender gulf that this research reveals in perceptions about the impact of unintentionally gender biased thinking.

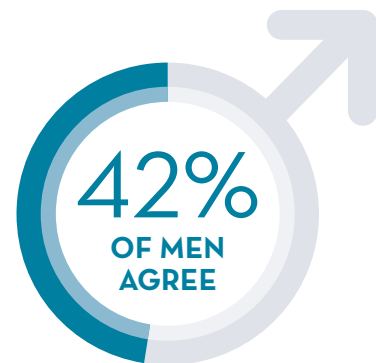
The gulf in perceptions between the genders indicates that awareness and dialogue will be key in making workplaces more inclusive.

Our research programme *Collaborating with Men* seeks to find ways for men to work alongside women to challenge and change attitudes and behaviours and create workplace cultures where talented individuals have equal access to opportunities.

### KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

## Gender bias in workplace culture is understood to affect career opportunities

**74%** of UK female employees say their workplace culture makes it more challenging for women to advance their careers than men.<sup>2</sup>



1. Grant Thornton. (2018) Women in Business: New perspectives on risk and reward; Hampton Alexander Review. (2018) FTSE women leaders. [www.ftsewomenleaders.com](http://www.ftsewomenleaders.com); McKinsey and Company. (2018) [www.mckinsey.com/uk/our-people/uk-gender-pay-gap-report](http://www.mckinsey.com/uk/our-people/uk-gender-pay-gap-report)

2. Respondents agreeing always, often or occasionally.

## The view of senior women is hardened by experience

81% of senior female employees say their workplace culture presents career advancement challenges for women. This compares with 72% of junior female employees reporting these challenges. Indeed, as many as 50% of senior female employees report they face these challenges 'always' or 'often'.



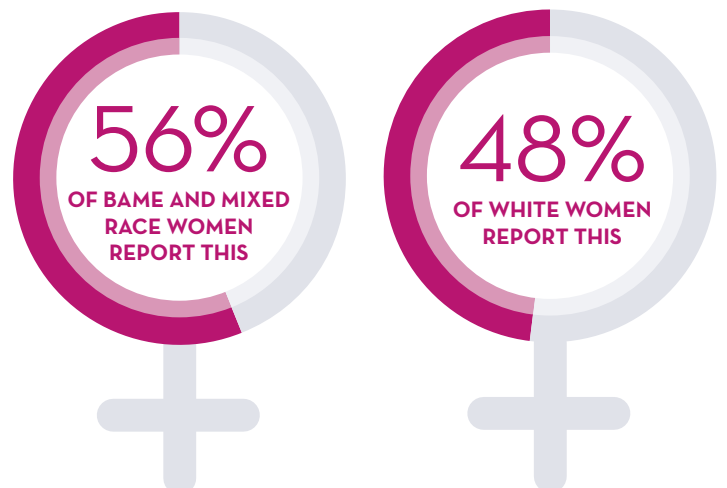
Senior women are leaving this organisation in significant numbers. Yet evidence that there are issues is ignored.

FEMALE ACADEMIC

## Women of colour report greater barriers to career advancement

56% of women from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) or mixed race background say their workplace culture presents career advancement challenges 'always' or 'often'.

This compares to 48% of white females reporting such challenges 'always' or 'often'.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> This data was only collected from some organisations which took part in our study. These figures apply to 698 female employees, 127 of which were from a BAME background.



## Views about career challenges are not explained by the gender of the boss

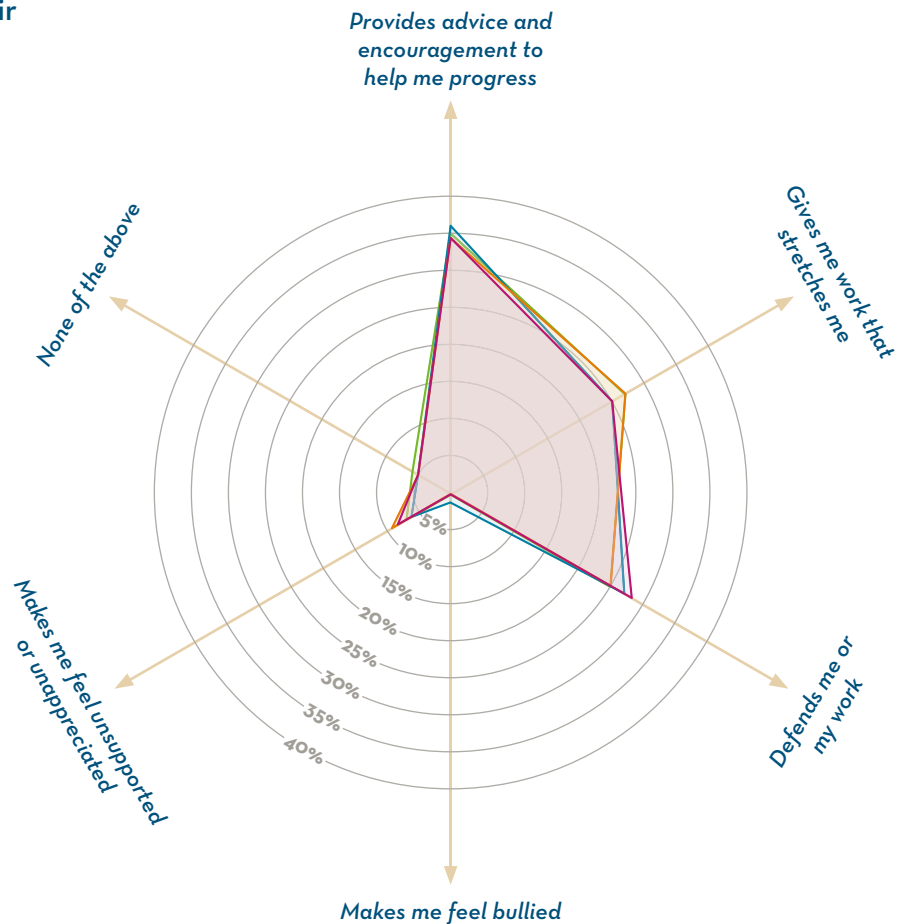
Regardless of whether they have a male or female line manager, employees report an almost identical experience of the support they receive.

It is often assumed I know more than my female colleagues, which isn't the case. I often find myself having to defend the actions of my female colleagues to other males, when no defence is necessary.

MALE IN STEM BUSINESS

### Employees' experience of their manager or senior colleague they work with most often

- WOMEN WHO WORK WITH A FEMALE MANAGER OR MORE SENIOR COLLEAGUE
- WOMEN WHO WORK WITH A MALE MANAGER OR MORE SENIOR COLLEAGUE
- MEN WHO WORK WITH A FEMALE MANAGER OR MORE SENIOR COLLEAGUE
- MEN WHO WORK WITH A MALE MANAGER OR MORE SENIOR COLLEAGUE



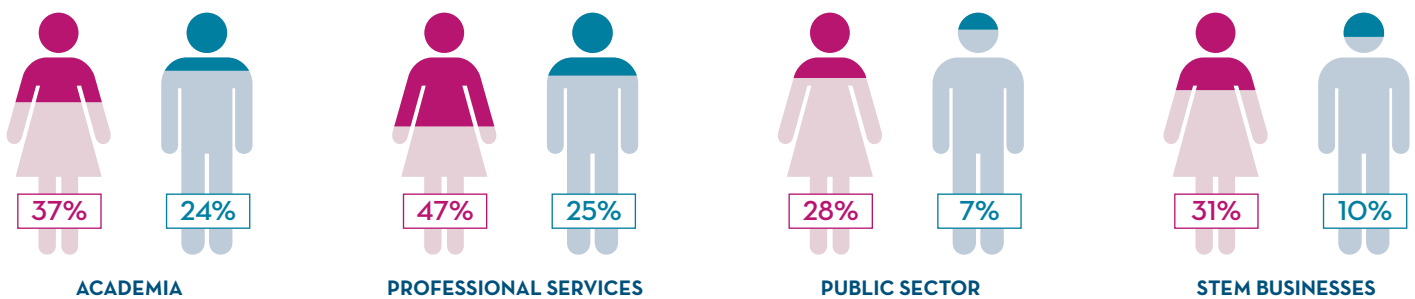
“Our research found it is possible to have a supportive boss and yet still experience sexist behaviour. The results show men and women both practise and experience double standards around gender, so it is a problem for women to address, as well as men. Almost half of men recognise that women face more challenges to career progress. However, men are relatively unaware of the specific ways in which this gender bias plays out for women.”

## Only minor differences across UK sectors

Women reporting more challenges to career advancement was common to the four key sections of the UK workplace landscape studied. The results mostly differed by gender, not sector. However, we found a slightly higher

proportion of women in professional services and academia think that women face more challenges. Our researchers think this may be because these sectors have traditional, hierarchical organisational structures.

Employees who think the culture of their workplace lead to women 'always' and 'often' encountering more challenges than men in advancing their careers

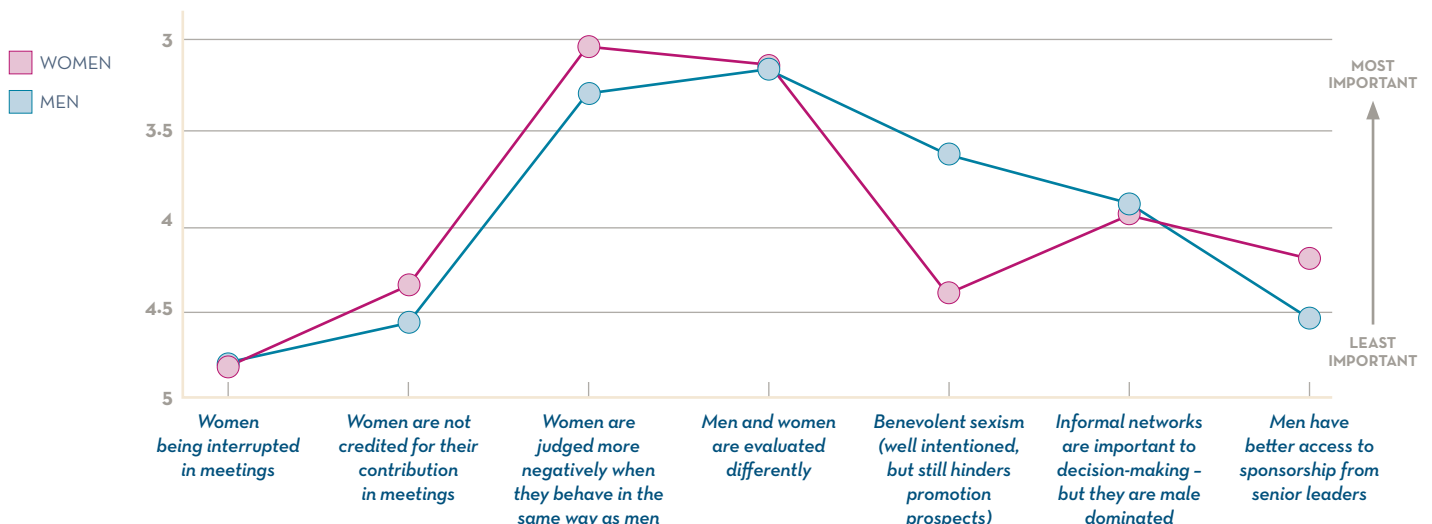


## Top seven manifestations of career challenges arising from gender bias

Guided by a literature review of previous academic research<sup>4</sup>, the study asked participants to rank seven specific examples of gender bias in order of priority for immediate action. Both male and female UK employees prioritised women being

judged more negatively when they behave in the same way as men and stereotypical views about women's traits inhibiting women's potential promotion into leadership positions as the most important issues for their organisation to address.

Average ranking of gender bias issues in order of priority for action



4. Summarised here: Armstrong, J. (2016) Collaborating with Men. [www.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk/news/collaborating-with-men-report-talks-about-changing-workplace-culture](http://www.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk/news/collaborating-with-men-report-talks-about-changing-workplace-culture). p7.

## Double standards – being judged differently for the same behaviour

43% of female employees say they have directly experienced being judged more negatively than men for exhibiting the same behaviour in the last 12 months.<sup>5</sup>

Examples given in other research include being seen as competent but not likeable, branded as aggressive or bossy for behaviour that would be described as assertive in men.<sup>6</sup>

## Men rarely see the double standards in how women’s behaviour is judged

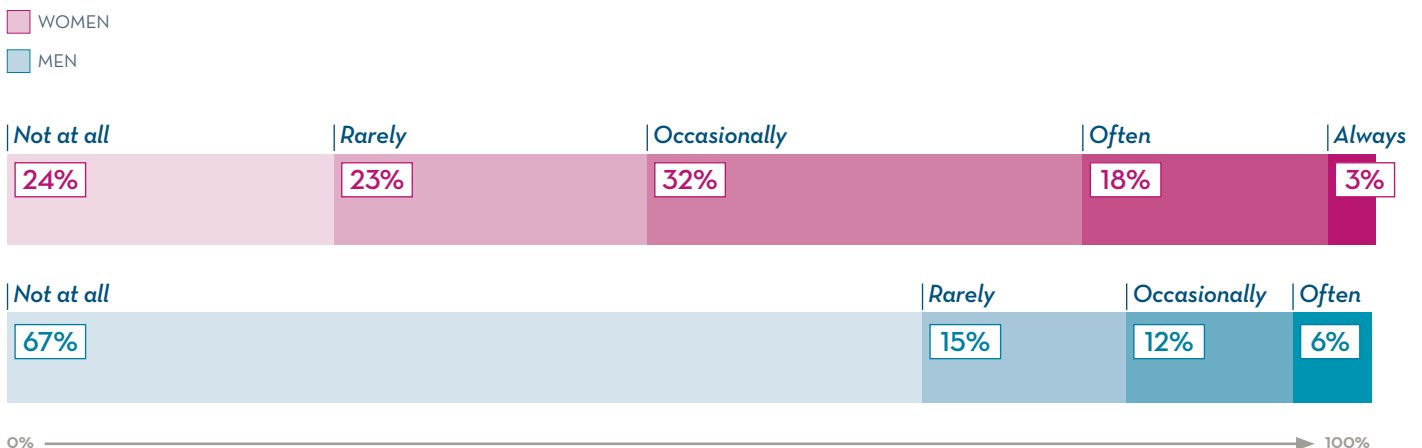
53% of women report seeing female colleagues being judged more negatively when they behave in the same way as men in the last 12 months. Only 18% of men have noticed this happening to female colleagues over the same year.<sup>7</sup>



This is an aggressive working environment and the workplace is predominantly male. It feels that the louder and more aggressive you are the more likely you are to progress. Whilst this appears to be acceptable for a man if a woman behaves in the same manner you are considered a bully or hormonal depending on your seniority in the workplace.

FEMALE IN STEM BUSINESS

How often employees noticed women being judged more negatively for displaying the same behaviour as men in their workplace in the last 12 months



5. Respondents noticing this behaviour always, often and occasionally.

6. Heilman, M.E. (2012) "Gender Stereotypes and Workplace Bias," Research in Organizational Behavior 32 pp.113-15.

7. Refer to footnote 5.

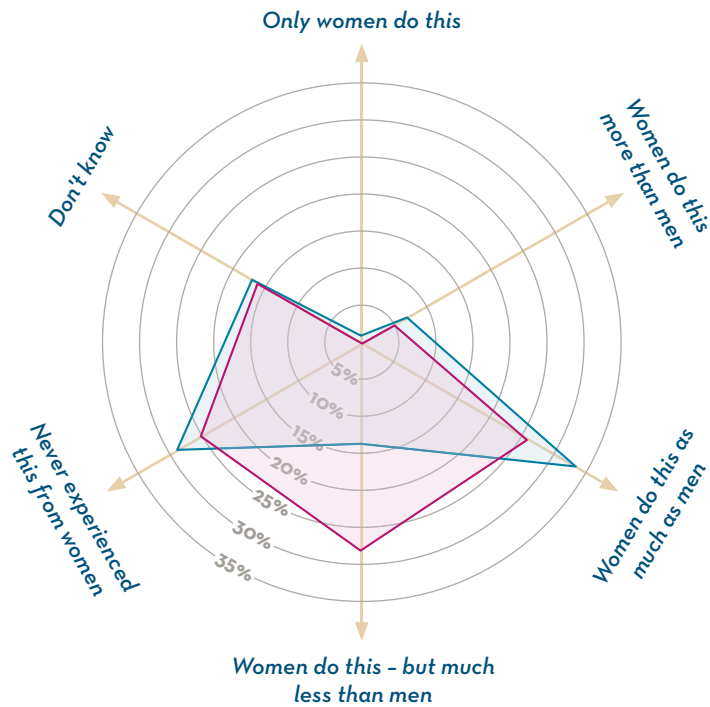
## Women practise double standards too

Only 25% of women say they've never experienced female bosses treating the same behaviour differently due to gender. Our research found the majority of women think female managers judge

the same behaviour differently according to gender too. Men agree even more strongly. Meanwhile male employees are more likely to think that men and women are equally guilty of this behaviour.

Employees' personal experience of female managers or senior leaders treating the same behaviours differently according to gender over the last 12 months

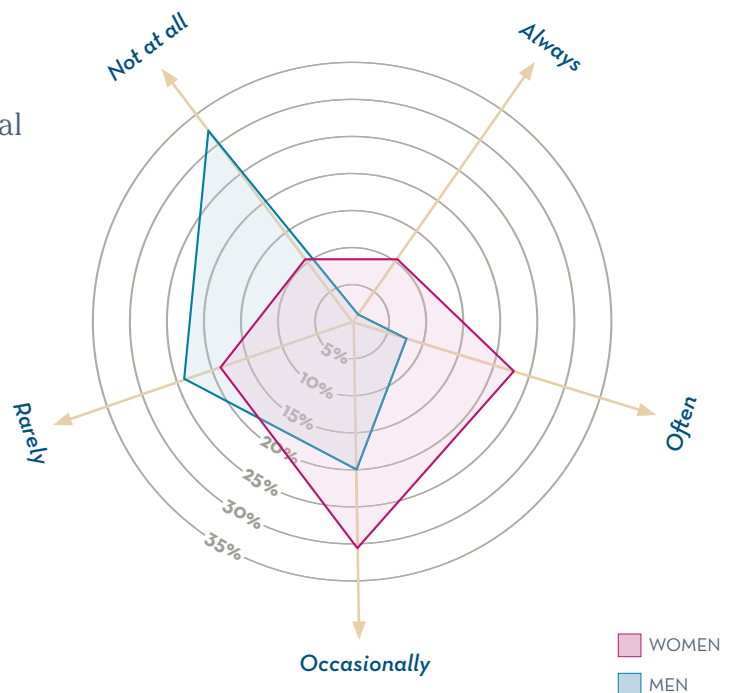
WOMEN  
MEN



## Women's careers suffer from stereotypical views about female traits

Most (64%) women surveyed believe that stereotypical views about female traits, such as building good relationships, attention to detail and strong administration skills leads to them being perceived in their workplaces as good managers rather than good potential leaders. Only 29% of men agree.<sup>8</sup>

Employees' views on whether the traits women are thought more likely to possess leads to women being given less prestigious work and being thought of as good managers rather than good potential leaders in their workplace



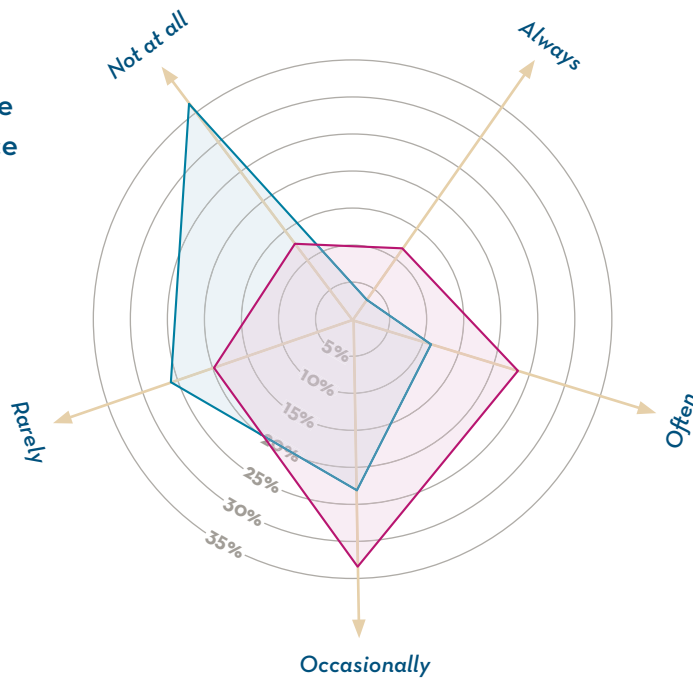
8. Respondents reporting this happens in their workplace always, often or occasionally.

Conversely, previous academic research<sup>9</sup> has found that traits highly valued in those seen as potential leaders such as ambition, a single-minded commitment to work and being seen as risk-takers are stereotypically associated with men.

Only 12% of men say that such ‘highly valued traits’, stereotypically associated with men, have implications for promotion in their workplace ‘always’ or ‘often’. This compares to 32% of women who believe these stereotypical views about male strengths influence promotion decisions ‘always’ or ‘often’.

**Employees’ views on whether the traits men are thought more likely to possess are more highly valued in their workplace**

WOMEN  
MEN



There is a natural tendency for people (both male and female) to allocate more administrative and less prestigious work to women. Women are more likely to be expected to circulate details for conference calls, take notes, organise...

FEMALE IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



Male Partners evaluate based on what they recognise as strengths... characteristics they value in the men around them. For example, women are said not to be ‘hungry’ enough to succeed.

MALE IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



My experience of this is not a difference between men and women, rather that anyone showing the male characteristics are favoured and progress faster and further. Quiet excellence is less likely to be rewarded.

FEMALE IN PUBLIC SECTOR

9. Eagly, A.H. & Karau, S.J. (2002) Role congruity theory of prejudice towards female leaders. Psychological Review, (109) pp. 573-598.; Turban, S., Waber, B., and Freeman, L. October 26th Harvard Business Review (2017) www.hbr.org/2017/10/a-study-used-sensors-to-show-that-men-and-women-are-treated-differently-at-work

## What next?

Change requires greater awareness of everyday sexism in the workplace. We can all take responsibility for starting conversations and finding answers. Good communication is key.

While unconscious bias exists everywhere each workplace has its own individual culture, so tailored solutions are needed to make real changes.

In addition to this short summary we are planning to release three research reports in spring 2019. These reports will provide practical support, focusing on a critical review of strategies and actions that work or seem promising in building gender inclusive cultures.

Five themes the day-to-day practice reports will cover are:

1

Facilitating open conversations among women and between men and women to bring gender double standards into the open, through initiatives such as reverse mentoring and gender ally networks

2

Identifying psychologically safe ways to call out gender bias when it is seen

3

Implementing transparent, formal, monitored sponsorship initiatives for which managers are held accountable

4

Questioning what 'promotion by merit' means in your organisation and how this helps deliver your inclusion objectives

5

Coaching people on how to give and receive feedback

Keep up to date with our work here:

[www.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk/about/Collaborating-with-Men](http://www.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk/about/Collaborating-with-Men)

## Research methodology

An online survey collected the data anonymously from 5,814 employees. The gender binary is used because we are examining the implications of gender stereotypical thinking. Some questions differed in the male and female questionnaires to reflect existing academic research showing that men and women experience gender bias differently.

The seven main issues researched usually result from unconscious bias – so are hard to recognise. This survey therefore prompted consciousness of the above issues by giving research-based examples – and then asking if participants have personally experienced these issues or noticed others experiencing them. We recognise that workplace culture problems can be fostered by as well as experienced by men and women – and the survey allowed that to be recorded.

### THANKS TO PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS:

25 employers, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics businesses; public sector organisations; professional service firms and the academic sector. This included organisations such as Arup (Whitehaven), BAM Nuttall Ltd, Clifford Chance, Dentons UK & Middle East LLP, faculties from the University of Cambridge and research institutes including Genome Research Limited.

Researchers: Dr Jill Armstrong, Lead Researcher and Jason Ghaboos, Researcher