



Promoting women in practice: experience report from the building construction sector at a university of applied sciences in Germany

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Abstract

The proportion of women in construction has only increased very gradually in recent years, and in 2021 the proportion of female students in civil engineering, which had been slowly increasing before, even fell again. We are still a long way from gender parity. As an architect and lecturer, the author carries out small measures to promote women. One of them works at the level at the very beginning of a professional career: among female students.

These small steps are described in this article. There are three measures in particular, each of which is associated with a different degree of student activation. The first is well known: more female lecturers are deliberately used. They act as a role model for the young women when they teach technical content as a matter of course. Secondly, at the tutor level, predominantly female students are used. These women from higher semesters also act as role models. In addition, such a task strengthens the self-confidence of the tutors. The author also deliberately chooses women as student employees. This is also intended to increase the self-confidence of the female students working for the author.

The measures described so far are those that normally do not result in additional costs. So it "only" requires an increased awareness in order to bring the empowerment of young women from well-intentioned declarations into practice at a building academy like our university of applied sciences. The third measure is different. It is a special coaching for the author's student employees and tutors. There are already various seminars and coaching sessions that support women in working in a male-dominated professional world. However, the target group is always graduates, doctoral students, professionals or (junior) managers. We deviated from this target group: together with a very experienced coach, the author developed a seminar for these young women who she supports. Some of the elements are standard, but some are tailor-made for the student level and the building sector. In the full text of this publication, all three measures, but especially the third, are specified. The author also describes the feedback from the participants in the coaching and the first small successes of her small steps to support and advance young woman in the construction sector.

Keywords: building sector, empowerment, STEM, tertiary education, woman

1. Introduction

This article first describes the current situation at the author's university and compares it with other universities. Based on literature on the subject and an overview of the statistical situation among students at Jade University of applied sciences, this first chapter explains why measures to promote gender parity are necessary but also entirely feasible. The second chapter describes the measures that the author has taken as small steps towards improving the situation. Finally, chapter three summarises the topic and lists the initial successes of the measures taken by the author.

It has long been criticised that the proportion of women in technical professions is too low. Although women's empowerment programmes have been in place for many years, they have been slow to bear fruit. It is short-sighted to consider only academic professions from this angle. Nevertheless, this is the case in many studies and publications - including this one. For a long time, the low proportion of women in STEM professions was an issue "only" because, according to several studies, mixed-gender teams are economically more successful (McKinsey & Company, 2018). In the meantime, this has become a problem for the economy as a whole since demographic developments are reducing the number of young skilled workers and making women even more necessary (Dernbach, 2023). In Germany, this problem is particularly pronounced because it has a particularly low proportion of first-year female students in STEM courses compared to other European countries. So, how can this problem be resolved?

Such a big issue as gender inequality in many areas cannot, of course, be solved on a small scale. But even the 'big' political solutions – which only a few are able to implement – such as quota regulations, are not necessarily convincing for cis women when you look at some of the results¹. This text therefore addresses the question of small measures that can be implemented with little effort by each respective university. Specifically: what small measures can be taken to increase the proportion of women in STEM degree programmes, particularly in Germany?

A look at the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) shows that change is certainly possible (Diez-Holz, 2020). There, after 20 years, they have now achieved a proportion of female mechanical engineering students of around 50 %. The key to success is women: "many women on campus [promote ...] the positive image of the university among young women. Conversely, if you have hardly any female students and professors on campus, you will have a hard time attracting young female students" (Diez-Holz, 2020). This however requires "sustained effort and deliberate strategies" (Diez-Holz, 2020)

The author of this article lectures as a professor in the Department of Civil Engineering at Jade Hochschule, an university of applied sciences (Jade Hochschule, 2022) and has reached this career stage through her exceptional high competence and determined hard work, but also through measures to promote women (Architekturblatt, 2022). In 2024 she was one of only four women (appointed between 2016 and 2022) out of about 35 professors in her field (Jade Hochschule, 2022). This corresponded to a rate of around 11 % and is below the university average across all departments of 17% (Präsidialbüro der Jade Hochschule, 2024).

¹ In Germany, for example, Markus/Tessa Ganserer, a biological man, obtained a seat in the German Bundestag in 2021 under a quota system for women by identifying as a woman/transgender person, while remaining a married family man with two sons (Geschlecht zählt, 2023). Or cis women attain positions solely based on quotas, which they are unable to fulfil due to a lack of professional competence. In doing so, they fundamentally damage the reputation of women in leadership positions.

Within the university, only a few committees really pay attention to the proportion of women, and in some committees, there are no female professors at all. The university has existed since 1971 as a successor institution to training facilities that have provided training for construction professions since 1877 (Wikipedia, 2025). In the more than 50 years of its existence, only a few women have been appointed in the department of civil engineering; the author is the eighth overall. As an architect (architecture has had a much higher proportion of female students than civil engineering for decades), she is not a civil engineering graduate - only two of the four female professors in her department have been in 2023, they are two of five in 2025. The appointment requirements for female professors at university of applied sciences differ from those at standard universities: in addition to an above-average doctorate and teaching experience, the relevant laws (e. g. NHG) typically stipulate that at least five years of predominantly non-university professional experience is required.

The aforementioned female quota of 11 % is as well below the average for engineering, which the Federal Statistical Office has calculated at 14.8 % in 2023 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023) and 16 % in 2025 (destatis - Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Since engineering accounts for the largest share of appointments at universities of applied sciences (39 %) (In der Smitten, Sembritzki, & Thiele, 2017), the low proportion of women across Germany is even more regrettable in absolute terms. Although a total of 52 % of university degrees and 45 % of doctorates are currently achieved by women, only 22 % of professorships across all subject groups are held by women (Forschung und Lehre, 2022). Reports of discrimination against female applicants for professorships are still by no means outlandish - despite all the official regulations aimed at equality (anonym, 2021). In view of the generally poor applicant situation, which is now not only lamented in isolated cases but also documented (In der Smitten, Sembritzki, & Thiele, 2017), it is now becoming apparent - especially with regard to the low proportion of female applicants (In der Smitten, Sembritzki, & Thiele, 2017) - what was missed 20 years ago. After all, anyone who decided against studying engineering as a young woman 20 years ago² cannot now be available to this field as a professor. Will this change due to the higher quota of current successful female graduates?

With this, the focus is now directed to the current female students. There have been three Bachelor's and two Master's programmes offered in the author's department. As of the 2022/23 winter semester, women were in the minority among enrolled students in each case. Two years later, the proportion of women in the Bachelor's degree programmes has decreased, and only in the Master's degree programmes with significantly lower enrolments has there been an improvement (a new degree programme since 24/25, Environmental Engineering, is not considered here). The figures are shown in Table 1 (Jade Hochschule, 2023), (Jade Hochschule, 2024).

² There are certainly professors for whom the time between enrolment as a first-year student and appointment is far less than 20 years. In the author's opinion, such fast career paths ("instant professor") are rarely sensible at a university of applied sciences, among other things because of the great importance of practical relevance in teaching.

Table 1: Study programmes (B = Bachelor, M = Master) for the Department of Civil Engineering at the Jade University of Applied Sciences in Oldenburg with the number of enrolments as well as the share of female enrolments for the 2022/23 [1] and 2024/25 [2] winter semester.

Course of study	Total enrolments [2022/23]	Proportion of female enrolments [%] [1]	Total enrolments [2024/25]	Proportion of female enrolments [%] [2]
Building Information Technology (B)	3	33.3	7	14.3
Civil Engineering (B)	114	28.0	105	21.9
Industrial Engineering and Construction (B)	71	25.3	66	24.2
Facility Management and Real Estate Management (M)	7	28.6	2	100.0
Management and Engineering in Construction (M)	22	13.6	23	21.7
Total of all courses of study	217	25.7	203	23.1

Sources: (Jade Hochschule, 2023) and (Jade Hochschule, 2024), internal documents.

Across the whole university, around 41 % of first-year students in the 2022/23 winter semester were female, which can also be explained by study programmes such as speech therapy, midwifery or nursing science, each of which has a 100 % share of women (Jade Hochschule, 2023). Due to the new social work degree programme, the proportion increased slightly to 43 % in 2024/25 (Jade Hochschule, 2024). With a rate of 14 – 33 % among female first-year students in the three bachelor's degree programmes (with fewer than 10 students in total, a percentage figure is not very meaningful anyway), the Department of Civil Engineering at the Jade Hochschule in Oldenburg is roughly in line with the national average, which a study published at the beginning of 2023 puts at 30 % for civil engineering, with a slight downward trend (Bundesingenieurkammer, 2023). Although at a lower level, this decline is also evident in Oldenburg, see Table 1. In absolute figures for all degree programmes, there was a decrease of 56 to 47 female first-year students from autumn 22 to autumn 24. Now, of course, the current Oldenburg female students are not to be regarded as future Oldenburg professors³ - on the contrary. With regard to the promotion of young academics does John 4, 37 – 38 apply: "One soweth, and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours." In very concrete terms, the Jade University of Applied Sciences in Oldenburg benefits, for example, from the promotion of women by other institutions, which benefited the author, for example (Architekturblatt, 2022). Conversely, it is hoped that graduates of the author's current affiliation will work at other universities someday.

So what is this university doing to recruit and promote young women in STEM subjects? For example, there is a project called "Niedersachsen-Technikum" (Jade Hochschule, 2023). This is aimed at school leavers who are interested in studying but is currently struggling to attract young women. With information events such as "Career Prospects for Female

³ The author does not consider so-called internal appointments to be prohibited for no reason: "academic incest" rarely leads to fruitful results. Nevertheless, this does unfortunately sometimes happen at Jade University of applied sciences.

Professors", the Equal Opportunities Office primarily addresses women who already hold a doctorate (Jade Hochschule, 2023). To recruit young professors, there is a project funded with 4.7 million euros called "JadeProf" (Jade Hochschule, 2021) (Jade Hochschule, 2023). Positions and scholarships are awarded for the period of doctoral studies at the Jade Hochschule. Around 60 people are currently benefiting from this doctoral funding, although - to the author's great irritation - there is no quota for women. As part of a second line of funding, research professorships are to be advertised - even internally and also without a women's quota. There is also no provision for special support for teaching positions awarded to women (as is the case in Bavaria, for example (Landeskonferenz der Frauen- und Gleichstellungsbeauftragten an bayerischen Hochschulen, 2023)).

Thus, the author is currently faced with the following situation: society has a high need for and is aware of successful measures to increase the proportion of women in STEM subjects in the long term (Diez-Holz, 2020). In Oldenburg, the Department of Civil Engineering has a roughly average proportion of female first-year students and a below-average proportion of female professors. Both shares are far from parity. The measures to change this in the longer term are currently either less successful or - like JadeProf - are not exclusively aimed at young women. The university's laudable offers, which are specially tailored to women, relate primarily to the phase before taking up a degree and to that after the doctorate.

2 Report

The university's Equal Opportunities Office, under the leadership of the Vice President for Equal Opportunities, are very committed to the task incumbent upon them. It is not the author's job as a professor of building construction to devote herself to the advancement of women. Nevertheless, she is committed to women in her small sphere of influence, especially those between enrolment and vocation. She is convinced that the positive experiences at MIT can also be replicated at German universities. The sentence from the MIT report that "without the support of others [...] the number of female students in mechanical engineering [would] not be anywhere near the [high] level it is today" (Diez-Holz, 2020) certainly applies to civil engineering as well. It takes not only an Equal Opportunities Office but also the support of many, the participation of each and every individual. The following describes the author's small steps in pursuit of this goal.

2.1 First measure: kill two birds with one stone

The author's first measure pursues two goals at the same time. As mentioned, more female lecturers are a promising measure to attract more female students to a technical faculty. As far as possible, teaching assignments were therefore deliberately given to women with professional experience. Even if this sometimes involved more effort or travel costs, the author believes that each additional role model is a small step in the right direction. When experienced female engineers teach future female engineers as a matter of course⁴: they signal to the young ladies that "women can do it just as well as men" without the need to say anything.

⁴ Furthermore, the author hopes that this self-evidence will also reach the male audience in the lecture hall, especially those with a migration background and a background not characterised by gender equality. There are a disproportionately large number of these in the construction sector because engineers and doctors are regarded as high respected professions in the relevant cultural sphere (Aktoprak, 2020).

Figure 1: Impression of the women's promotion fair ScienceFem in Würzburg in June 2024.



The above-mentioned teaching assignments promote a second goal: Women acquire the teaching experience required for appointment to a professorship. What LaKoF Bayern supports with extensive funding (Landeskonferenz der Frauen- und Gleichstellungsbeauftragten an bayerischen Hochschulen, 2023), the author can of course only do to a very limited extent. However, at least eight different women have been given this opportunity in the six semesters that Iris M. Reuther has taught as a professor at the Jade University of Applied Sciences so far (Jade Hochschule, 2025). Some of these women had teaching experience in secondary or quaternary education or had higher education teaching experience many years prior due to family time. Since many teaching positions are awarded within existing (usually male-dominated) networks and consequently men are more likely to be eligible for appointment as a full professor, the targeted awarding of teaching positions to women is evaluated as a doubly effective measure for the advancement of women.

At the same time, the author of this text is also a role model. She not only performed this role in Oldenburg but also took part in a women's promotion fair in 2024 as an alumna at her former university, the University of applied sciences Würzburg. The poster for this fair "ScienceFem" shows Figure 1.

2.2 Second measure: Tutors

If the supervision in structural engineering was already less personal than at other universities for years due to a lack of capacity, the teaching carried out online due to coronavirus measures led to even fewer individual opportunities for the supervision of first and second semester students in the Department of Structural Engineering, as is also the case elsewhere (Kochskämper, Lips, & Besa, 2022). As a measure to improve teaching after the end of most restrictions, the author introduced a tutorial for the modules she teaches for the first time in the 2022/23 winter semester. Four to five student employees were sought for the six semester groups. Among the best examinees of the previous year, predominantly female assistants were specifically recruited.

In this way, too, the author pursues several goals at the same time. Even as tutors, the young ladies are already signalling that women are quite capable not only of understanding technical issues, but also of explaining them to others. They are thus role models in their own way. Secondly, it enhances the self-confidence of the tutors. Even more than through the exam evaluations they receive, they are given feedback that they are technically adept and that they are trusted with this task. The author was also once a tutor (Architekturblatt, 2022) and realised as a student that she was capable of teaching others. Therefore, it is not impossible that through this first teaching experience, one or the other current student will discover a corresponding talent in herself and perhaps one day pursue the path to a lectureship or even professorship.

2.3 Third measure: support and benefit

The two measures mentioned above were ones that required commitment but hardly any additional costs for the university: Tutors and teaching assistants are paid equally regardless of gender. The action described below, on the other hand, was only possible thanks to funding from the Equal Opportunities Office of the Jade University of Applied Sciences, which we would like to thank explicitly at this point.

It is common practice in the private sector to increase the motivation of employees through benefits (hrmony, 2023), whereby companies typically ask what kind of incentive achieves the desired goals. The taxation of benefits also plays a role. This is irrelevant for student employees. The measure initiated by the author was based more on what is helpful for the female employees in the long term.

They are at the end of their second or fourth Bachelor's semester, are still relatively new to the male domain of construction and should be given a few basic tools to manage their start in this professional environment as successfully as possible. Here, unsurprisingly, the professor's experience played a role, as she had only learned some of the "rules of the game" in male domains over time and "the hard way". Only years after she started her career did guidebooks and articles on the subject (e.g. (Knaths, 2007) or (Kals, 2022)) gradually appear, and not every young woman looks for such literature. This is understandable because they usually do not (yet) experience much rejection or exclusion at school and university.

In order to facilitate the career start in construction in this respect, the author sent her student employees to an event with two coaching sessions tailored to their needs. It was deliberately held in Hamburg (about 2.5 hours away by train), not at the university. It was combined with a guided tour of HafenCity, an urban development area with many ongoing construction projects (see Figure 2). There was a Portuguese dinner together to which, not coincidentally, another woman with a lot of experience in a male domain was invited. She was an interlocutor with whom the students were not in a dependent relationship. With the exception of this dinner, the 1.5-day event including hotel accommodation was free of charge for the participants. The process is shown in Figure 2.

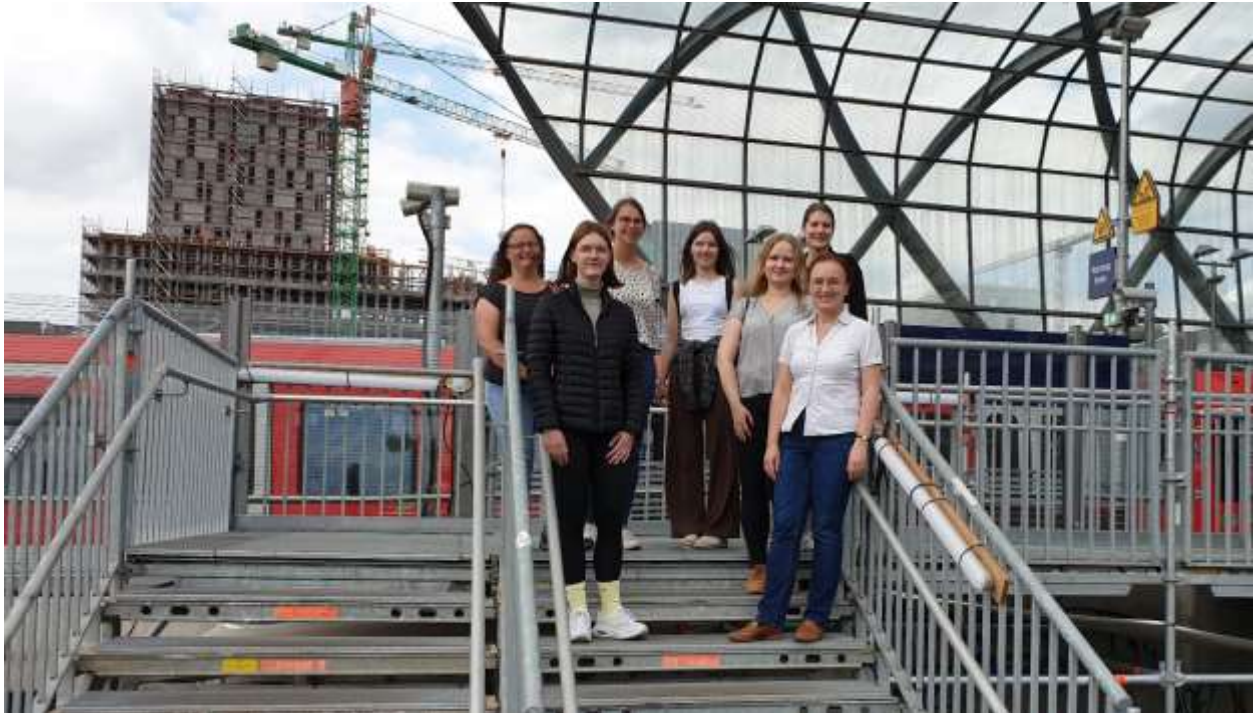
Figure 2: Timing of the event "support and benefit for female students" (own illustration).

Friday, 14/07/23					Saturday, 15/07/23	
8 a.m.	11:30 a.m.	2:30 p.m.	3:30 p.m.	6:30 p.m.	9:00 a.m.	from 1 p.m.
trip to HH	guided tour	check-in	coaching I	dinner	coaching II	free disposal, way back

In the following, the main contents of the coaching session, which was held under the motto "I know what I can do", are presented. It was developed by the author together with a female coach. The subtitle chosen by the very experienced coach Iris Seidenstricker (Seidenstricker Coaching, 2025) was "Communicating confidently and convincingly in the construction industry as a woman and young professional". Part I of the coaching consisted of

a general introduction, motivation for the special situation of starting a career and the topic "Among Men". This unit on Friday dealt with expectations, manners, hierarchies, teamwork aspects and included a short report by the professor about challenging situations as a female construction and project manager. Apart from this part, she was not present in this setting according to the professional coaching rules. An impression of the coaching units is to find in Figure 3 and (Jade Hochschule, Präsidium, 2023).

Figure 3. Group photo at the end of the guided tour through the HafenCity.



Part II of the coaching on the morning of the following day began with self-reflection: the search for inner drivers. These were then countered with counter-messages, and it was also shown that there are different perspectives on every situation and task. Acknowledging one's own and others' perspectives and valuing both seemed like particularly helpful inspiration from this coaching. This was followed by six concrete strategies for successfully asserting oneself as a woman among men. These were then explained in more detail during the course of the Saturday but were also discussed within the group. All in all, the two-part coaching session was varied, but still very compact. It contained some essential "tools" as a starter package for the future female engineers.

Seminars and coaching sessions with similar content are no longer a rarity for female doctoral students, post-docs or even managers. For female students however, this kind of thing is unheard of and, even more so, it does not yet exist for such small groups and tailored to a specific discipline. This is due to the high costs of such units with, in this case, only six participants who have no professional successes to show. Whether and for how many of the participants this "investment" pays off will only become clear in a few years.

However, the feedback from the student employees, which was collected online and anonymously, is already available. They all rated the whole event as very good or good. There was criticism - and rightly so - of the schedule on the first day, which was somewhat pressed for time due to a major event with restricted public transport in Hamburg. The date, duration, location and coach were unanimously rated as positive. Almost all of them found the content helpful and feel encouraged to follow up on the topics covered and apply them in their everyday lives. The networking with the other participants (who previously only knew

each other in part) and the material provided were also rated positively. Two participants expressed their gratitude. The cost of the dinner on Friday was mentioned as (too) high by two of the students. Nevertheless, all of them would definitely recommend such an event to their fellow students.

Through this feedback, the author (but also the coach) feels encouraged in what she is doing. The fact that half of the participants only filled out the online feedback form when asked a second time, that the only part that had to be paid for by the participants themselves was mentioned twice as being too expensive, and that the thanks mentioned were the exception, could be a sign of the high level of expectation what is attributed to the so called "Generation Z" (personio, without date), (Wittmann, 2024). Perhaps this also reflects the fact that, due to their age (mostly 20 - 25 years), their horizons are still not very broad. The feedback also reveals a sometimes quite pronounced self-confidence. However, in view of the hurdles mentioned in the introduction that women still have to face in male domains, the latter could well be an advantage for starting a career in the building sector.

Figure 4. Impression of the coaching units (picture: author).



The author's strong commitment to getting more women into construction, as described here, isn't the only special effort she's making for the next generation in her field of work. She also attaches great importance to practical training (Reuther, 2016) (Reuther, Analogue Learning, 2024) and is also super committed to helping her students go international, giving them the chance to study abroad in Europe (Reuther, ECEM, 2024). Such experiences, combined with sound training, broaden young people's horizons. It is not only teams with a diverse gender mix that are particularly successful, but also those with a diverse range of experience, including stays abroad.

3. Conclusion

There is currently an increasing need to increase the proportion of women in the engineering professions. The example of MIT shows that with targeted and concerted measures, even parity in STEM subjects can be achieved. At the author's university, there are a few services for the advancement of women, which the author supplements and expands in a very targeted manner in her field of appointment. Many are possible at no extra cost. This text also describes a financially supported, special coaching event that provided special

support for selected female student employees. Although the fruits of such action will only become apparent after years, a positive interim assessment of the measures described can already be made today.

The measures described in Chapter 2 are small steps that are presented here with two objectives: firstly, to show that even with very little additional budget, every university lecturer in the STEM field can do something to promote gender parity. Secondly, this text aims to find imitators for these 'low-threshold aids', so to speak.

The number of women involved is far too small to present meaningful, statistically measurable results. This applies to all three topics mentioned. There are therefore no strict analytical framework conditions or evaluation criteria. Although the successes mentioned below are very encouraging and indicate the effectiveness of the measures mentioned, they cannot be considered empirically proven for the reasons mentioned before. Not yet, at least.

Some of the female role models mentioned in Chapter 2.1 were already highly experienced professionals who were no longer seeking career changes. However, one of them has since been appointed professor at the Technical University of Augsburg, partly as a result of her teaching activities at Jade University: Sabine Kraus (Technische Hochschule Augsburg, 2025). In this position, she can now serve as a permanent role model for aspiring female civil engineers at another University of applied sciences.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which the female tutors mentioned in section 2.2 had a positive influence on other female students. Even if the author of this article (please keep in mind: she is a professor of building construction, not a women's studies researcher) wanted to, it would be almost impossible for her to measure this influence.

It is easier with the women who benefited from the coaching described in Chapter 2.3. The author is still in loose contact with the majority of the six female students who participated in 2023. Almost all of them have completed their bachelor's degrees or will do so in the course of 2026. That alone is a success. Why? In Chapter 1, the proportion of female first-year students in construction at Jade University was stated as approximately 41% for the years 2022/23 and 2024/25. The proportion of women among graduates in the building department was approximately 31.2% in 2022 (Jade Hochschule, 2023) and around 31.2% in 2023 (Jade Hochschule, 2024). This means that, proportionally speaking, significantly more women do not complete their studies than the corresponding number of men in the same age groups. However, if all or almost all of the women who benefited from the mentioned coaching went or go on to obtain their bachelor's degree, this is still above average.

Of course, obtaining a degree does not guarantee a career. Nevertheless, the author considers this success of these female students to be, at least in a really tiny proportion, a result of her support and encouragement. However, promoting women is a marathon, not a sprint. That is why the results of these small steps towards promoting women in STEM fields will probably only be visible in many years' time. Just as the author herself only became a professor more than 20 years after being encouraged to do so by her own former professors.

Overall, however, this work still requires the support, appreciation and recognition of the university's management and for this the political will of the state government. Then there is a realistic chance that others will also devote time, money and energy to the advancement of women in professional fields in which they are underrepresented. After all, it is actions, not words, that show what someone's priorities really are.

Acknowledgment and remark

Most of the measures for the advancement of women described in this practical report were only possible thanks to the financial support of the Jade University of applied sciences' Equal Opportunities Office. This publication is made possible thanks to the Jade University of applied sciences' research funding. The author would like to thank her former professors and colleagues who encouraged her as a woman in this male-dominated field, the construction sector. However, the greatest thanks are due to all the women who the author was able to win over as role models: hopefully, through their example, they can make the presence of women in the construction sector much more common in the next generation than is currently the case in Germany. Most of the sources in this work are written in German. The author will be happy to help in this regard if you are interested in the subject.

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