

Choosing Public Relations:

Factors impacting career choice for the next generation of potential PR Practitioners



by
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Abstract

Funded by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), this research investigates Public Relations (PR) and Communications as a career option for students and recent graduates from subject-relevant degree courses (such as Marketing and Advertising). Using Mixed Methods Research (MMR), the study spans 12 UK Higher Education (HE) institutions and over 130 participants to provide a snapshot of awareness, perceptions and barriers to PR and Communications as a career option. With changes to UK HE impacting the way the subject is taught, this study combines a literature review, online questionnaire and detailed focus group to explore the risks and opportunities for the UK PR and Communications sector as it seeks to meet current skill shortages and future recruitment needs.

Providing actionable insights, this report details key findings and recommendations to HE providers and PR recruiters/ employers, including:

- Degree programmes and student cohorts are changing, becoming broader and more diverse, requiring different responses and targeted support for specific groups who are at a disadvantage accessing this career path
- The need to ensure PR and Communications remains taught in-depth as a discipline and presented as a career choice by frontline teaching staff in the rapidly evolving HE environment
- Potential candidates have new ethical priorities and expectations for employers, plus preferences for being communicated with that require adaptation, such as social media
- 79% of respondents reported experiencing barriers to entering the sector, this needs to change if the industry is to continue to attract top talent
- The need for practice and academia to work together to provide access to industry professionals and paid work experience as part of curricula

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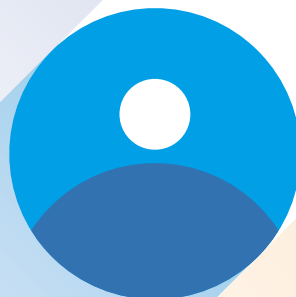
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Finally, many thanks to all the university colleagues and students across the country who distributed the survey, participated in the Focus Group, shared LinkedIn posts and generally enabled this research to go ahead.

Supported and supervised by



Glossary

CIPR Chartered Institute of Public Relations

DMU De Montfort University

EDI Equality (or Equity), Diversity and Inclusion

BEM Black and Ethnically Minoritised

OfS Office for Students

PR Public Relations

PRCA Public Relations Consultants' Association

SEB Socio-Economic Background



Report



1. Introduction to the research

1.1 Why is this research important?

Recruitment is one of the main issues facing the PR/Communications sector according to the CIPR's State of the Profession 2022 report, of which a key takeaway was 'a growing industry stunted by skills shortage'. The industry cites a lack of skilled talent as its primary challenge, with more than half of those in recruiting positions saying they are struggling to recruit, including 78% of recruiters in agencies and consultancies (CIPR, 2022). However, as a relatively contemporary industry, PR and Communications still faces challenges recruiting young people into the profession at entry level, including a lack of a transparent entry route, limited levels of awareness and increased competition from other industries like digital marketing.

1.2 Author Motivation

After a 20-year career in industry, the author of this study now teaches Public Relations, Corporate Communications and Social Media Marketing to undergraduate and postgraduate students. As a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at De Montfort University (DMU), and former practitioner, one of their main aims is to promote PR and Communications as a career choice for students, many of whom come from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds. The author was disappointed to learn from institutional graduate outcomes data that very few of their students were moving into these roles on graduating. In fact, there were some years of the undergraduate programme in Advertising and Marketing Communications run by the author where PR and Communications roles were not mentioned at all (DMU, Graduate Outcomes Data, 2018-19). Why was this? Did students lack education about the profession? Was awareness low? Or were there other, less obvious reasons for this reticence, such as a lack of visible diversity within the workforce?

1.3 Aims & Objectives

Through this research, the author aims to establish factors that influence career choice - both positively and negatively – for students and recent graduates in PR and Communications. From there, the study will then discuss what the industry and HE educators need to do to encourage the next generation of potential PR and Communications practitioners. For example, are we failing at our own PR? Do other industries, such as advertising or social media, have higher levels of awareness for students? Do we need more positive role models from the industry? Can students see a clear route into the profession? Are there perceived skills gaps that are putting students off, such as the high level of written English required?

The aims and objectives of this research are:

- To establish the level of awareness students have around careers in PR/Communications
- To establish how students perceive a career in PR/Communications
- To identify barriers to students selecting PR/Communications as a career

This research fits within two pillars of the CIPR's strategy; firstly, 'Building a resilient community of practice', as it addresses issues relating to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and barriers to entry, and secondly, 'Advocating public relations with employers, clients and the public' as it establishes levels of awareness and perceptions of the sector.



1.4 Significance of this Research

This research is of significance to HE educators like the author, sector bodies like the CIPR and the wider PR/Communications industry. By achieving the research aims, this study will establish the key factors that either encourage or discourage students who already have an interest in the wider Marketing discipline from pursuing a career in PR/Communications. This could help the identified groups in the following ways, including:

- **HE educators**

How can educators help more students into a PR/Communications career? Is more information on PR/Communications as a career required? Do students fully understand what the industry is and how it works? Do learning materials need altering in any way to further meet student needs?

- **CIPR**

Is there awareness of the sector amongst Marketing subject students in comparison to other 'competitor' industries such as advertising or social media? Are there 'gateway' materials or routes that need preparing?

- **Sector**

Are there wider perception issues about the industry that are at play here? Do entry-level recruitment schemes need more promotion through HE channels? Do industry and academia need to work more closely together to help provide access to industry professionals and appropriate work experience opportunities?

It is important to listen to students and have their voices heard in the ways that they want to be communicated with. As industry and educators, we need to understand their views, perceptions and levels of awareness in order to promote PR as a career choice more effectively to them.

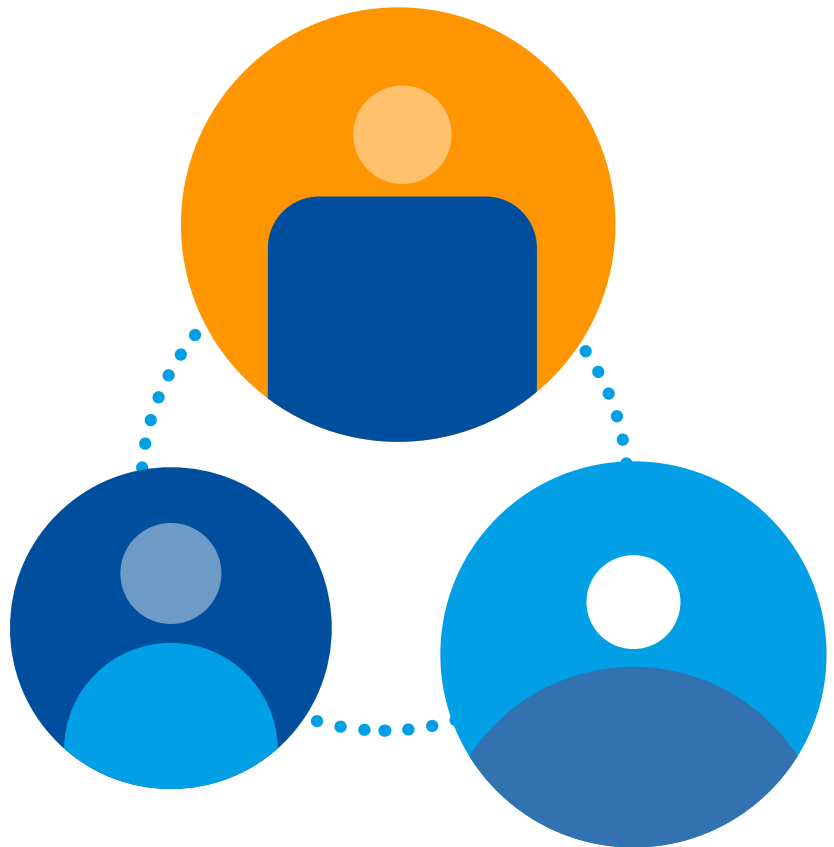
1.5 Target research participants

Previous research on students (such as the 'Levelling Up' CIPR report from 2023) has included PR students who have already decided on this specific career. However, this research will be undertaken using students from relevant Marketing disciplines within UK universities, so they have some awareness of the sector and discipline but may be undecided in their career choices. These are students who have:

- Chosen a relevant degree programme (one that includes Marketing and Communications in some form)
- Knowledge of what PR/Communications is

Our students have chosen their degree because of an interest in one of the Marketing or Business disciplines but normally haven't formed an opinion on a future career path.

The participant group was extended to include recent graduates (last three years or under) from relevant degree programmes who had entered the PR and Communications industry to capture the lived experience of entering the sector.



2. Literature review

This study aims to build on the work of previous researchers. As mentioned above, there has been some previous research into students and their interactions with the sector, however they have been from very targeted participant groups.

Baird & Bridgen's 2023 CIPR Report: 'Levelling Up the Public Relations Profession' features research into students from specific Public Relations degree courses, indicating that a career choice has already been made and there is a higher level of subject knowledge amongst students. In contrast, this study has specifically chosen wider degree topics, such as Marketing, Business and other relevant subjects like Event Management, to ascertain the factors impacting career choice within a group that may not have yet selected a career path, and to reflect recent changes in HE.

In addition, the insights from the Levelling Up report into the impact of geographical location were intriguing: it found 68.8% of surveyed students from the Midlands and North assumed they would be working in London or another large metropolitan area, as there were 'no opportunities' in their current location. As a lecturer working in Leicester, this struck a chord with the author – could location be a factor that influences career choice? As a result, two questions on geographical location were included in this study and the survey was distributed to as many universities across the UK as possible, with a focus on geographical spread.

Focusing on broader degree subjects is also important given the decline in single honours, undergraduate Public Relations degrees. The PR Academy Education Research Report 2024 noted a decline from 22 universities offering single honours in PR twenty years ago to just two today. This decline included universities that positioned themselves as specialists in this area; Leeds Beckett and Bournemouth Universities, who combined PR with other more established subjects to create broader degree programmes. The reasons behind the decline are manifold – from rising tuition fees influencing students to choose more established or broader subject areas in an attempt to offset risk, to university management closing specialist courses with fewer students as a cost cutting exercise, and finally the previous government's positioning of creative degrees as 'low value' or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees (PR Academy, 2024). However, whatever the reasons for the decline the outcome is

clear; the sector must now recruit from these larger, broader degree subject areas, and this research will provide insight into how that can be achieved.

There has also been some work that includes students that have focused on diversity and race, in particular on individuals who have interacted with the Taylor Bennett Foundation; a charity that works to promote ethnic diversity within the sector, providing paid internships, mentoring and other support to students and recent graduates. Bridgen & Zeler's 'Race, Diversity, and Social Mobility in the Public Relations Industry', looks at how these intersecting factors impact upon people entering and working in the sector. At DMU, we work with diverse student cohorts; 52.8% of DMU students are from Black and Ethnically Minoritised (BEM) backgrounds, with 68.5% from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and with many students the first in their families to attend university (DMU, 2020-2025). There are numerous academic studies, coupled with the author's lived experience as a Programme Leader, that show that race and socio-economic background are powerful factors in entering graduate roles, particularly in competitive sectors like PR and Communications. For example, a 2013 study of students found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds 'lacked the social capital' to access competitive careers - inferring that informal networks, family contacts and confidence to access support services, made a significant difference to employment outcomes (Bathmaker et al, 2013). As an example, one of the focus group participants met her future PR employer at a hot yoga class – an expensive, relatively exclusive pastime demonstrating the power of networking. Statistics from the author's undergraduate programme reinforce this; BA Advertising and Marketing Communications is a high performing programme recording Graduate Outcomes at 93% in 2021/22, yet the ethnicity awarding gap (which records the variance between white and BEM students achieving high honours) in the same year was -35% and our disadvantage awarding gap was -13.6%, showing clearly that students from white, middle-class backgrounds achieve better academic results and go on to secure employment at higher rates and in graduate-level roles (De Montfort University AER Data, 2020-2024). To reflect the importance of this, a question on ethnicity was included in the study.

As undergraduate PR programmes that serve a home student population decline, the market has shown a shift towards one-year postgraduate programmes in Communications topics, however these new courses tend to attract international students, and this brings with it its own challenges

(PR Academy, 2024). Studies such as the CIPR's From Diversity to Inclusion Report (2015) highlight the challenges faced by international students and home students from ethnic minority backgrounds, with one roundtable participant commenting:

“Postgraduate students that I’ve been teaching this semester are 90% non-European. I was shocked how many of them weren’t getting interviews when they used their original family names. I said, ‘Why don’t you try, as an experiment, changing your surname to an English name?’ All of them bar one got an interview.”

Issues such as English as a second language and visas are specific to international students but the perceptions of race are common to UK students from BEM backgrounds as well. To capture this, fields were included on barriers to career entry, including racism, standard of written/spoken English and representation within the industry workforce.

However, these new postgraduate programmes face two issues when it comes to curriculum design and marketing; nomenclature and course content. As the PR Academy states, PR is by nature an ‘impure discipline’ so an ‘interdisciplinary approach makes sense’ (PR Academy, 2024). Students taught in an interdisciplinary environment have more choice in terms of career options, however, they may be confused by the plethora of job titles that PR seems to entail. To record students’ thoughts on this, questions have been included on awareness levels of multiple and related disciplines, such as advertising, social media and digital marketing.

Secondly, in these broader courses, how much content is being dedicated to PR? On taking over a programme in 2021, the author was shocked to discover the lack of content of any kind of earned media – there was one week’s content in one module in a three-year programme. And does that content include guidance on entering the sector? Questions on what learning material students would like to see were included in the study to provide insight for educators.

To summarise, research shows that PR education is facing new challenges. A swing from high-cost, single honours, three-year undergraduate courses for home students towards money-spinning

single-year interdisciplinary postgraduate courses populated in the main by international students. This brings with it increased competition for graduates from other related disciplines, and also for time in the classroom – there's a limit on how much content can be delivered.

However, students themselves face increased personal challenges; the higher cost and increased risk of degrees, plus barriers to entering the sector, including their ethnicity and socio-economic background. These factors combine to present a complex landscape in which to promote careers in the sector.



3. Research design and methodology

In order to capture the multiple factors at play in this new environment, this study needed to provide an overview of how students and recent graduates are learning about and entering the sector, whilst also recording lived experiences, perceptions of careers in PR and Communications and other suggestions gathered from the research participants.

In terms of an overview, the study required Element 1 to provide the following:

- A snapshot of students' views from HE institutions across the UK
- The research participants included recent graduates (up to 3 years) who have lived experience of entering/ attempting to enter the sector
- Undergraduate and postgraduate students
- UK and international students
- Students from a variety of Marketing-related or creative degree courses (students that have some knowledge of what PR is)
- Demographic and geographic data, including ethnicity, area of origin, current/former institution



For the in-depth research element (Element 2), the study required the following:

- A safe space and anonymity to provide lived experiences and discussion of potentially difficult topics, such as discrimination
- Individual views and perceptions of the sector
- Levels of awareness of the sector and careers within it
- Suggestions and feedback on how participants would like to be communicated with

This two-fold approach made Mixed Methods Research (MMR) a clear methodological choice for this study. Element 1 aimed to capture original quantitative data from a substantial number of individuals at different HE institutions, making an online questionnaire the ideal vehicle. This ascertained how many students were or had considered PR as a career and the reasons behind their choices. For Element 2, a focus group would capture qualitative data such as lived experience, perceptions and recommendations. It would also triangulate the quantitative results, with a thorough exploration of the themes raised therein, strengthening and verifying the results.

3.1 The questionnaire (Element 1)

The primary research method was an online questionnaire, using students and recent graduates from UK HE institutions, who are or have studied Single or Dual Honours including PR, Marketing-related, Business-related or other degree courses, as a sample. The questionnaire covered the following:

- Levels of awareness of a career in PR/Communications
- Are students actively considering a career in PR/Communications?
- Positive indicators for a career in PR/Communications
- Barriers to considering a career in PR/Communications
- Perceptions of a career in PR/Communications
- Demographic questions

The questionnaire was designed on Microsoft Forms for ease of distribution, analysis and the security afforded by university systems.

The questionnaire was distributed through the following methods:

- Through the author's substantial LinkedIn network, including many lecturers at UK HE institutions, who then promoted the questionnaire to their student groups

-
- Via email to the author's personal contacts at local and partner institutions
 - Institutions were targeted in order to generate a roughly equal geographic spread but also to identify any possible issues based around location, for example, inequalities in job opportunities
 - In class, to students on relevant programmes at De Montfort University, including BA(Hons) Advertising and Marketing Communications, BA(Hons) Marketing, MSc Marketing Management, MSc Advertising and Public Relations Management
 - Through the DMU Alumni Network to capture recent graduates
 - Via the CIPR's education contacts to reach HE institutions outside of the author's network

The main limitation on the completion of the questionnaire was student engagement; not only did students not engage with the questionnaire when provided by their lecturers but also did not engage fully – there was a 41% drop off rate between the Information Sheet to the questionnaire.



3.2 Focus group (Element 2)

Following up from the questionnaire, the study included a focus group of 16 to further explore the results and themes raised. This gave participants the opportunity to explain their individual perspectives in a more discursive format, providing a platform for in-depth discussion. The following interactive techniques were used within the focus group:

- Using Mentimeter for word association techniques
- Using Q&A as a scaffolding approach to lead to Group discussions
- Student feedback was also gained on the draft format/ questions before delivery

The participants were from De Montfort University in the programmes listed below:

- BA(Hons) Advertising and Marketing Communications
- BA(Hons) Marketing
- BA(Hons) Business and Marketing
- MSc Advertising and Public Relations Management
- MSc Marketing Management
- Recent graduates of these programmes through our Alumni team

The degree courses include both undergraduate and postgraduate students, who mainly come from the UK but do include some international students. The typical breakdown of students from our degree courses include:

- Students who are within a 60 minute drive of Leicester but live on campus (includes cities like Birmingham, Nottingham, Luton, Milton Keynes)
- Students from London (live on campus for cheaper cost of living but an hour on the train)
- Leicester/ Leicestershire residents (commute into university rather than stay in halls, this group tends to include smaller groups such as mature students and disabled students)
- International students

4. Research findings

4.1 Population sample

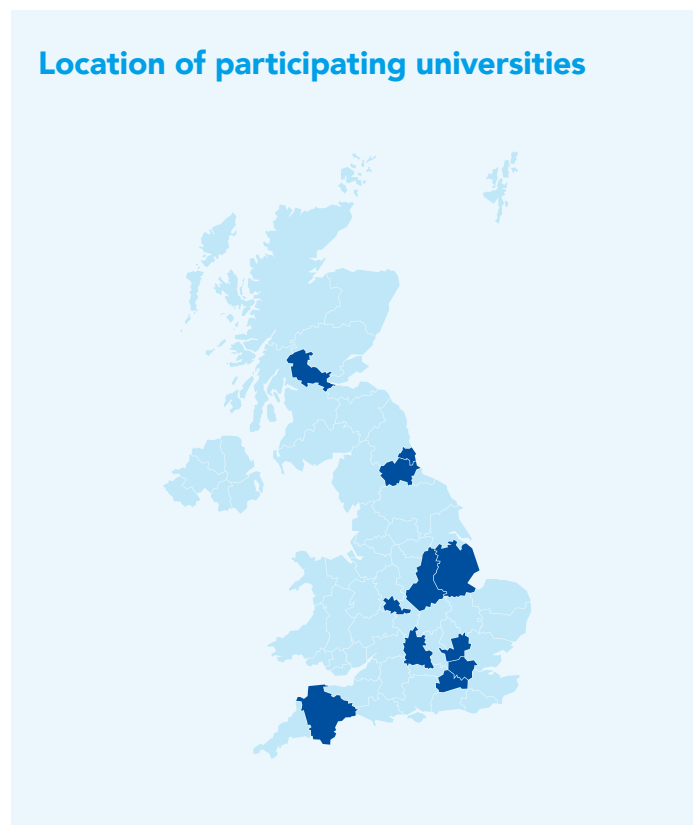
The questionnaire was completed by 118 participants from 12 UK universities, achieving a rough geographic spread across the country.

A note here on the difficulty in achieving this. The author contacted a total of 31 UK HE institutions, of which 24 communicated the survey to their students through a variety of methods (in class, Virtual Learning Environments such as Moodle, BrightSpace etc, student intranet and email). That students from only half of those institutions completed the questionnaire speaks to a wider issue in student engagement (which could be an entire study on its own) and the over-communication that students receive from institutions in terms of emails, notifications and feedback surveys. The author had allotted six weeks to complete the fieldwork for the questionnaire – it actually took six months.

To the right is a map of the institutions that had participants successfully complete the questionnaire.

The spread demonstrates that PR and Communications is being taught across a wide area of the country, which is positive. However, participants flagged location as a barrier to entering the industry, with respondents noting a lack of relevant jobs in their location as a reason not to consider PR as a career choice (9%) and as a barrier to entry (14%). Notably, all of these responses came from respondents from Scotland, the NE of England and the West Midlands, demonstrating that in terms of gaining entry-level employment in the sector, the playing field is not even, with additional barriers to entry presenting in those locations. Location was also a theme brought up in the focus group with participants perceiving a more 'competitive' and 'saturated' jobs market outside of major metropolitan centres, such as London, Birmingham and Manchester.

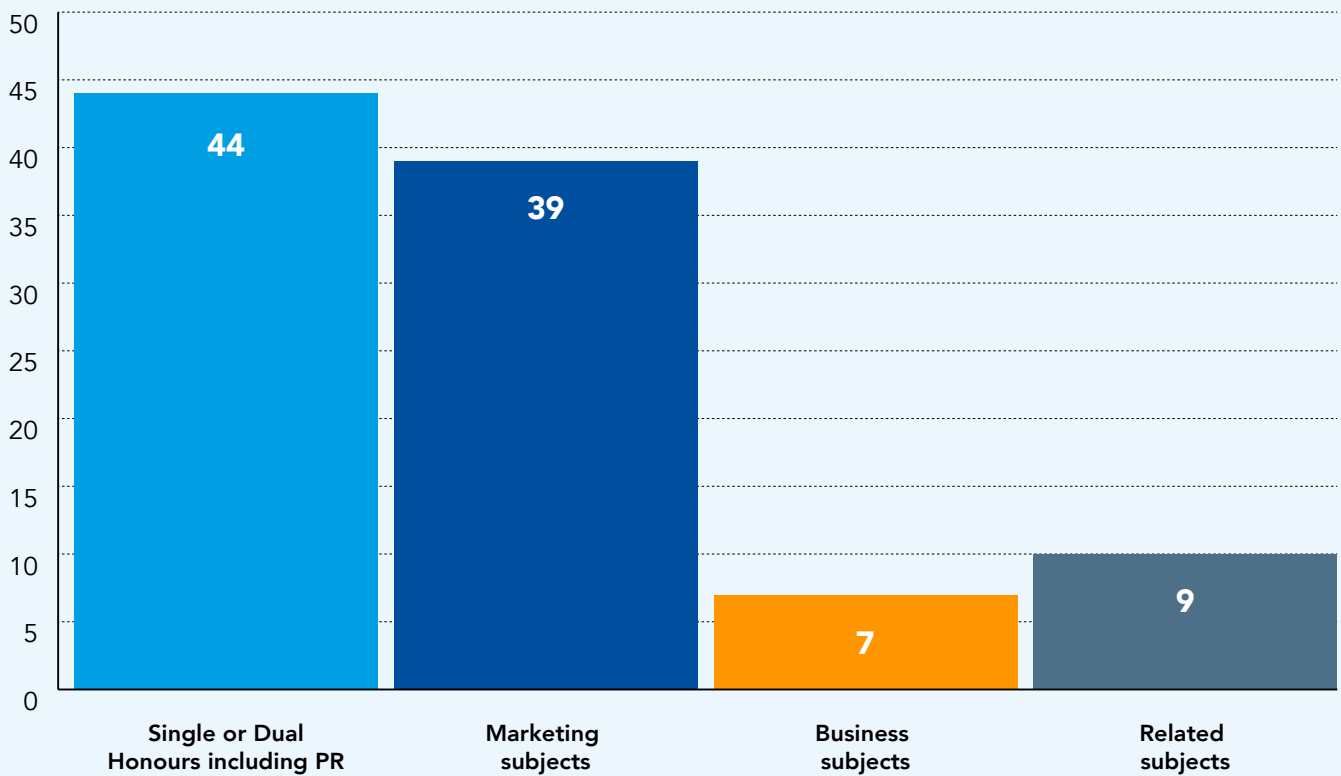
Location of participating universities



4.2 Academic study

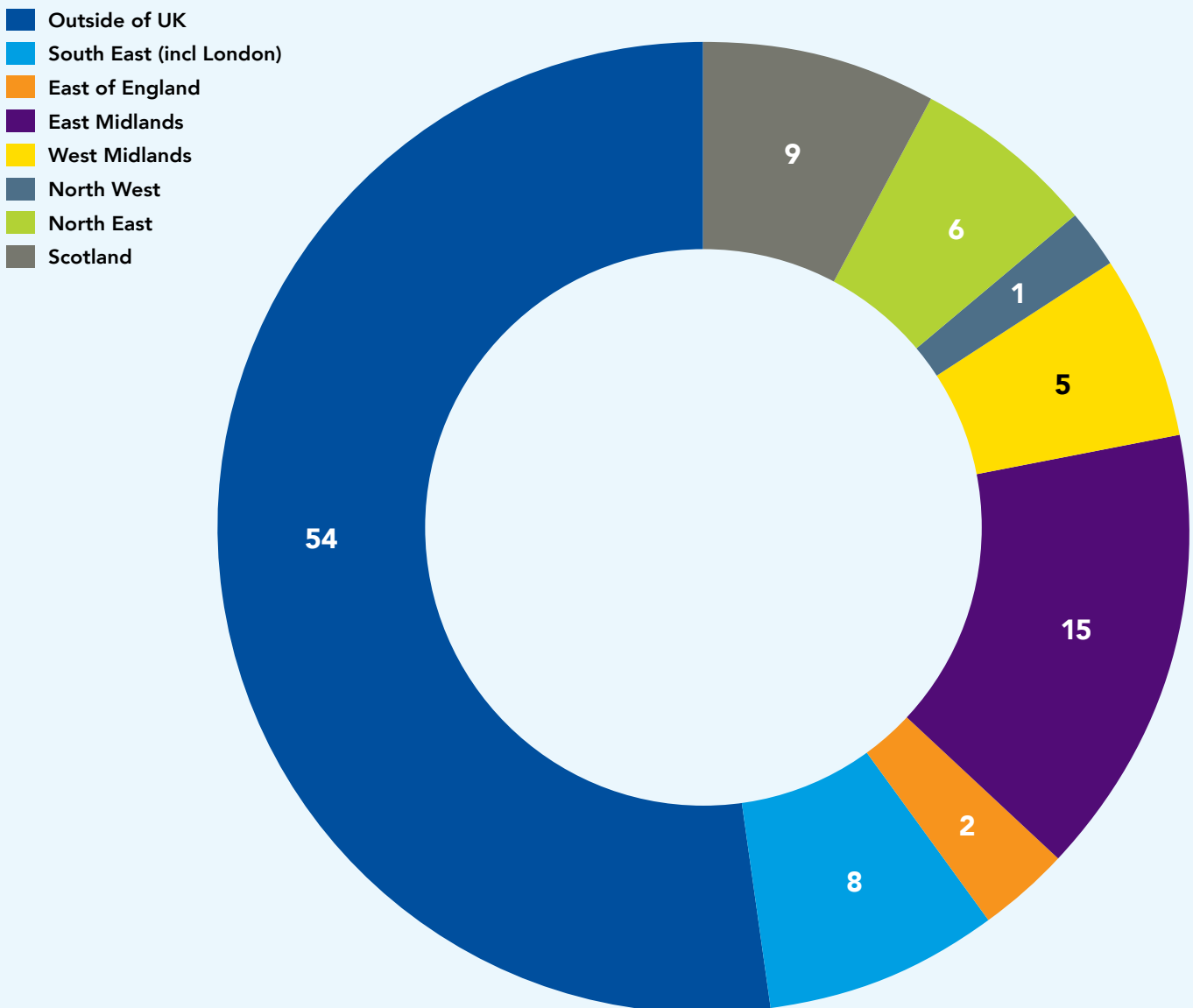
Students were found to be studying or have graduated from a range of degree courses. The academic subjects being studied supports the findings of the Literature Review, in terms of the vast majority of students now studying PR in a multidisciplinary context, with 44% studying a degree with PR in the title but most often as dual honours, for example, Media and Public Relations, while the remaining 56% studied the topic as part of wider marketing, business and creative subjects. These include degree courses as varied as Advertising and Marketing Communications, Business and Marketing, and Event Management.

Degree Course by %



The shift from dedicated three-year undergraduate study to single-year postgraduate study is also reflected with nearly half of respondents (47%) studying at masters level. This shift is also recognised in the section on location and ethnic origin, with 54% of respondents originating from outside of the UK, demonstrating the shift from UK to international students. However, of the UK respondents, the results showed a healthy spread of potential recruits, with Scotland (9%), the East Midlands (15%), the East Midlands (15%) and London and the South East (8%) showing strong interest.

Area grew up in by %

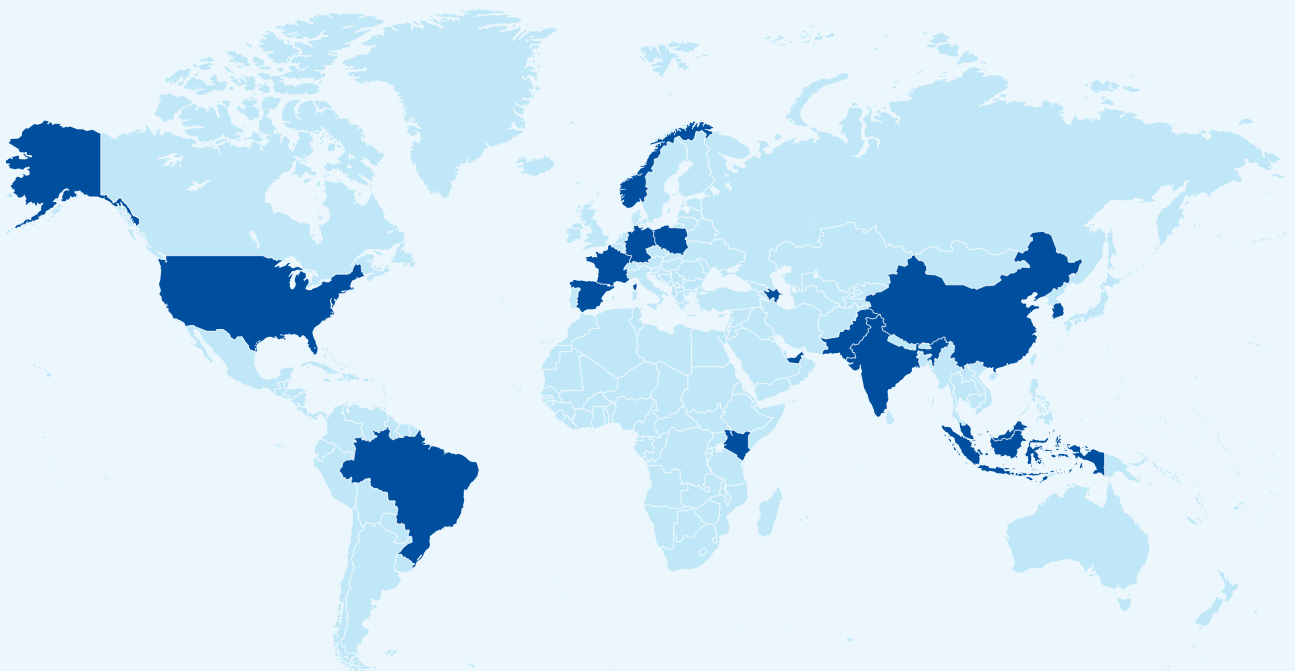


4.3 Location, ethnic origin and diversity

This shift to increased numbers of international students is broadly good news for the sector. Numerous CIPR reports have flagged a lack of ethnic diversity to be an ongoing issue in PR, with the latest CIPR report recording 80% of the industry as white (CIPR, 2024). By recruiting from these new courses, largely populated by international students, it presents the sector with an opportunity to shift the dynamics of the workforce, therefore providing an environment where practitioners of all backgrounds can feel more comfortable.

Respondents from an international background came from identifiable clusters: Europe (Norway, Spain, Poland, Germany), Asia (China, India, Pakistan, Malaysia), the Americas (USA, Brazil, Bermuda), Middle East (UAE, Azerbaijan) and Africa (Kenya).

Country of Origin (international)



However, this more diverse talent pool faces specific challenges that need to be recognised. The industry should provide more support to increase not only recruitment but retention, helping both candidates struggling to enter the profession and those 'bouncing' off the sector within a short time. For example, the standard of written English was cited by 10% of respondents as an issue, and visa requirements can also be challenging for candidates and employers – something specific to international students. However, some of these challenges apply both to international students and to people of minority ethnic background from the UK (although this is said with caution, as the two groups are different and face specific issues). Although encouragingly, discrimination was only identified by 1% as a barrier to employment, however 9% reported that not being able to see anyone like themselves in the sector was a factor in not selecting PR as a career, suggesting that representation within the workforce is important to potential recruits.

"I wasn't really looked at as someone who could bring a lot to the table as my disability was seen first....I still worry now that I don't see myself in industry. And I worry I'm not going to be seen again, and it has made me feel like I must get the best marks...and do as much as I can to be on a level playing field with other students."

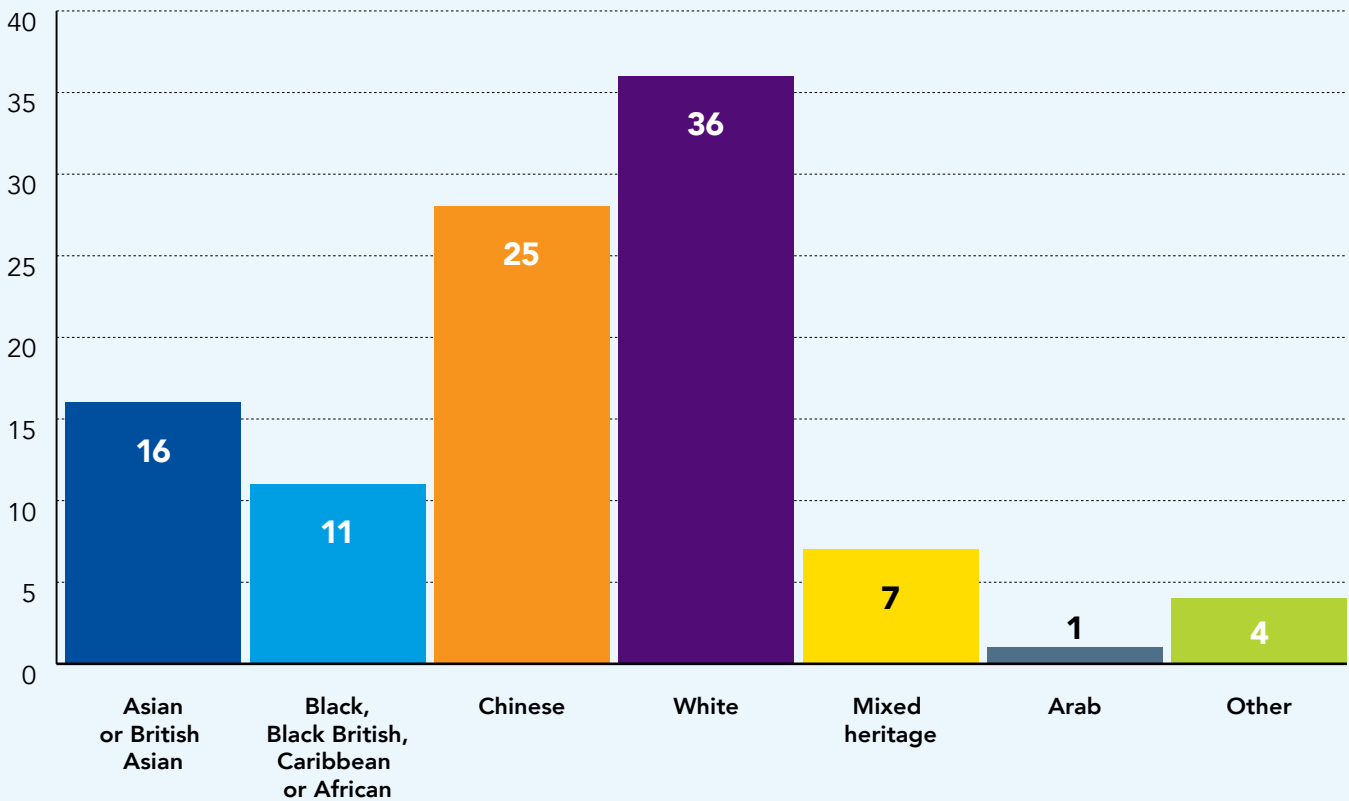
The focus group also raised other factors outside of ethnicity that required additional support. One respondent recorded that their neurodiversity had put them at a disadvantage in presentations and interview processes as they became excessively nervous, however after gaining confidence they were now excelling in the role. Job roles were perceived as 'ableist and neuro-typical' with a lack of consultation on how roles were presented. One participant wondered 'have agencies ever have had recommendations from a disabled person?' and went on to give the example of a disabled colleague decorating a mobility aid with glitter and taking it with them everywhere to normalise doing things differently.

Gender was also raised as an issue; job roles were perceived as stereotypically feminine. One respondent reported working with all 'white, middle-aged men' in a market agency, claiming that in 34 years, only their PR/social media role had been occupied by women. One

recent graduate worked in the public sector and noted the vast majority of the communications team was made up of white women, and where teams focused on topics such as children or family, they were entirely female, excluding male team members.

Numerous reports show that young people are increasingly aware of EDI issues and unlike previous generations, insist that organisations, and by default industries, follow through with diversity initiatives, rather than just talking about it (Mintel, 2023). The industry's perceived lack of progress in this area could become a deterrent to future candidates.

Self-described ethnic origin by %



*NB. The data in these two areas was somewhat skewed by a large group of international postgraduate students from China, studying at one particular university, so the author has chosen to record this group separately in order to not to miss any trends relating to students from other Asian or British Asian backgrounds.

4.4 Awareness of PR as a discipline and career option

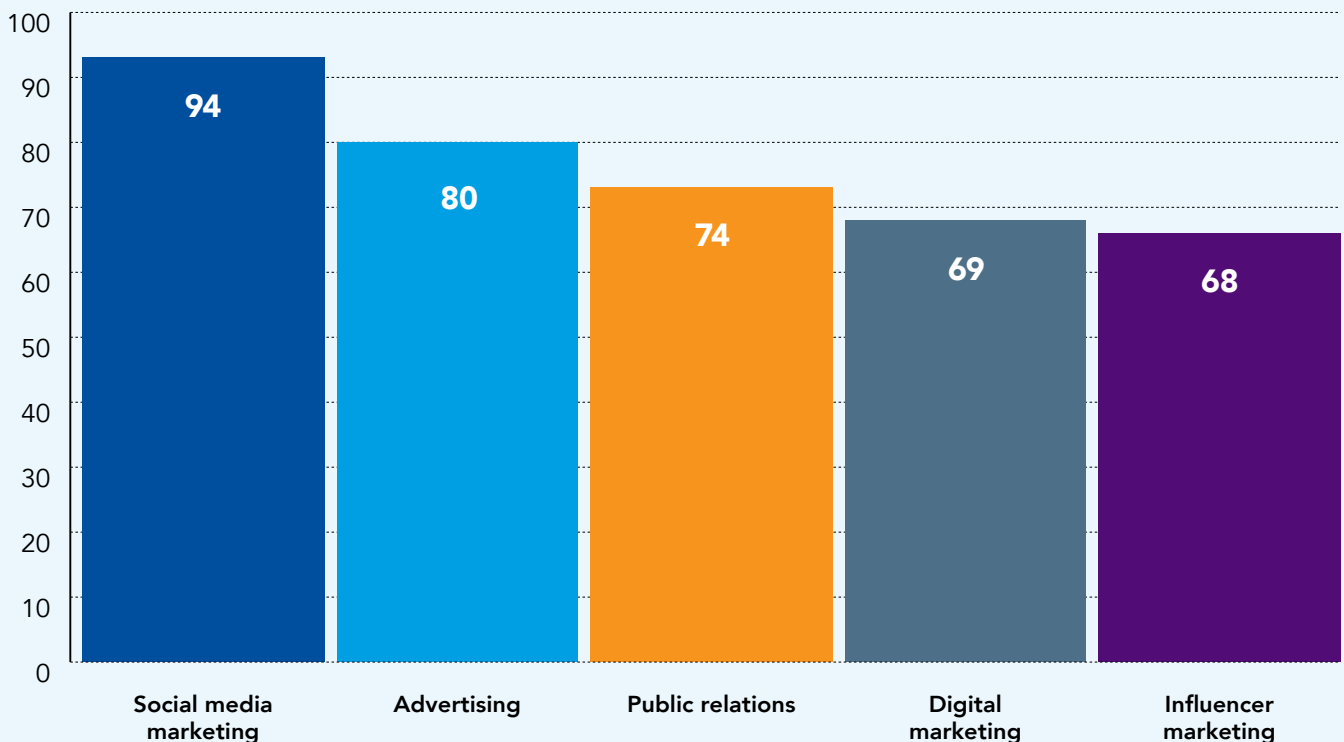
These questions were designed to find out levels of awareness around PR, how much the participants understood about PR as a discipline and a career option and how that influenced their career decisions.

In general, awareness of PR as a discipline was strong:

- 78% of respondents said they were confident in their knowledge of PR
- 22% said they had heard of it but were not sure what it meant

PR ranked in the middle in terms of related careers, coming third (74%) in terms of awareness behind social media management (94%) and advertising (80%), but marginally ahead of digital marketing (69%) and influencer marketing (68%).

Career awareness by sector %



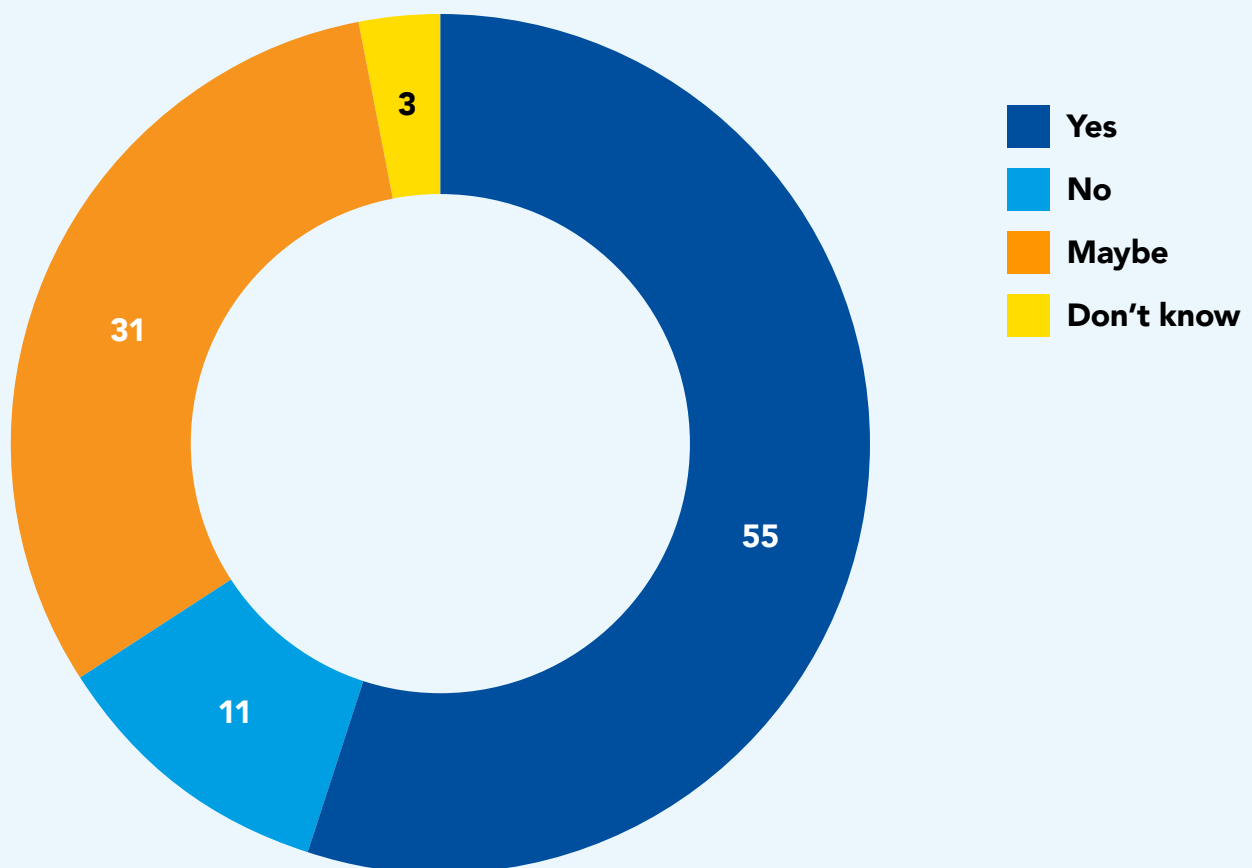
In the focus group, respondents raised issues around sector terminology; multiple job titles such as Corporate Communications or External Communications were perceived as confusing and made searching for roles more difficult. There was also confusion as to where roles such as Event Management, Social Media Management and Influencer Marketing stood vis-à-vis PR, as the multidisciplinary nature of the roles mean that all these elements could be included in a single role. There was also a concern that some of these titles were specialist and they were afraid of specialising too early in their careers. One participant flagged that their role had previously been called PR Executive for years but had recently been changed to Social Media Manager, although the role remained the same. The participants wondered if the term PR had become dated, with recruiters using the more specialist terms for job advertisements.

“It’s like you don’t learn to drive until after you’ve passed your test. You don’t know how what you have learned will be applied into a role.”



When asked if they would consider PR as a career option, the respondents produced a high number of positive responses (see pie chart). Given the topic of the survey and the degree subjects involved, it is perhaps to be expected that a high percentage of respondents answered 'yes' (55%). However, more can be learned about the attractive elements of a career in PR and Communications from the factors selected by participants about what made them consider PR as a career option. The top reasons were 'What I have learned in my course' with nearly a quarter of all respondents (22%) choosing it as a factor, followed by 'It matches with my personal skills and strengths' with one fifth selecting that option (20%) equal to 'It looks like a varied, interesting career' also 20%. This emphasises the importance of course content on PR and Communications within these new broader, multidisciplinary degree courses, something that is not necessarily a given.

Consider PR as a Career by %



By default, many lecturers write their content based on their own areas of expertise, and this may not be PR and Communications. For example, when the author took over their programme, there was very little content on PR (one week of one module in a three-year course), and an entire module on PR was added when the opportunity came to rewrite the programme. This was also a theme raised in the focus group – participants felt that PR and Communications content wasn't prioritised in courses, only appearing towards the end of a course or typically featuring in 'chapter 16 or 17' in textbooks. The topic also wasn't included in some of the new technologies in the classroom like simulations. For example, the marketing scenarios in simulations such as Edmodo didn't feature much PR. The second two elements highlight that young people are prioritising enjoyment at work, that they will be working at something they are good at and that their career will provide variety and interest in their working life. The focus group participants reinforced this perception that PR was 'fun and glamorous' with opportunities to 'meet celebrities' and to travel. However, they felt relying on this perception sold the industry short, and they felt the work that practitioners do for the public good needed more emphasis.

The 'pull' factors towards a career in PR that scored lower also provided interesting feedback. One in six respondents (15%) had seen content on PR that had got them interested in the career, demonstrating the importance of social media and content formats such as video to this generation. Finally, although scoring lower for reasons to consider the career, having had direct work experience (13%) or industry professionals as guest lecturers (11%) correlated strongly with the following question on what deciding factor/moment made them choose PR as a career, with over one third of those who had work experience choosing it as a career, and just under a third of those who had access to industry professionals citing that as the deciding factor. Interestingly, although the original question had given guest lecturers as an example, access to industry professionals manifested in multiple formats in the free text box, from having family and friends in the industry, professional networking opportunities and official routes of access such as the Taylor Bennett Foundation. These results demonstrate that although course content attracts the largest volume of interest, the biggest conversion factors are direct access to work experience and industry professionals.

However, these opportunities may not be available or realistic for all students. De Montfort University statistics demonstrate that students that come from ethnic minority or disadvantaged backgrounds lead complex lives, often with caring or other responsibilities, that prevent them from seeking or participating in work experience outside of the classroom

location and ethnic origin remain a deterrent for those considering a career in PR. The free text section also provided useful feedback, with low salary expectations compared to other sectors noted. Participants also expressed concern about negative social and environmental impacts and negative perceptions around lobbying. The issue of 'lying' and protecting reputation at the expense of ethics was a recurrent theme in the focus group, with words like 'deceiving', 'hiding' and 'lying' appearing in the WordCloud. Interestingly, the focus group participants also raised the perception of PR as 'tactical rather than strategic' and offering lower financial rewards and more limited career progression as a result – both factors influencing their choice of alternative career paths.

4.5 Barriers to entry

Disappointingly, 79% of eligible respondents – those who had experience seeking a job in the sector – reported facing barriers to entering PR as a career.

The top barrier was a lack of connections in the industry, with 21% of respondents citing this as an issue, closely followed by a lack of work experience at 18%. The focus group reinforced this finding, noting that placements and internships were difficult to access both individually and through university careers services. This supports the wider findings from this study and previous research, indicating that this new, more diverse cohort of students studying the discipline lack both the social capital and financial resources that enable entry into competitive industries such as PR and Communications. This becomes more evident when examining this multiple choice question, as we see a distinct overlap in respondents reporting that they lacked industry connections, struggled to gain work experience and access paid work (16%) and couldn't afford to complete unpaid internships (8%) or wait for the job they really wanted (7%).

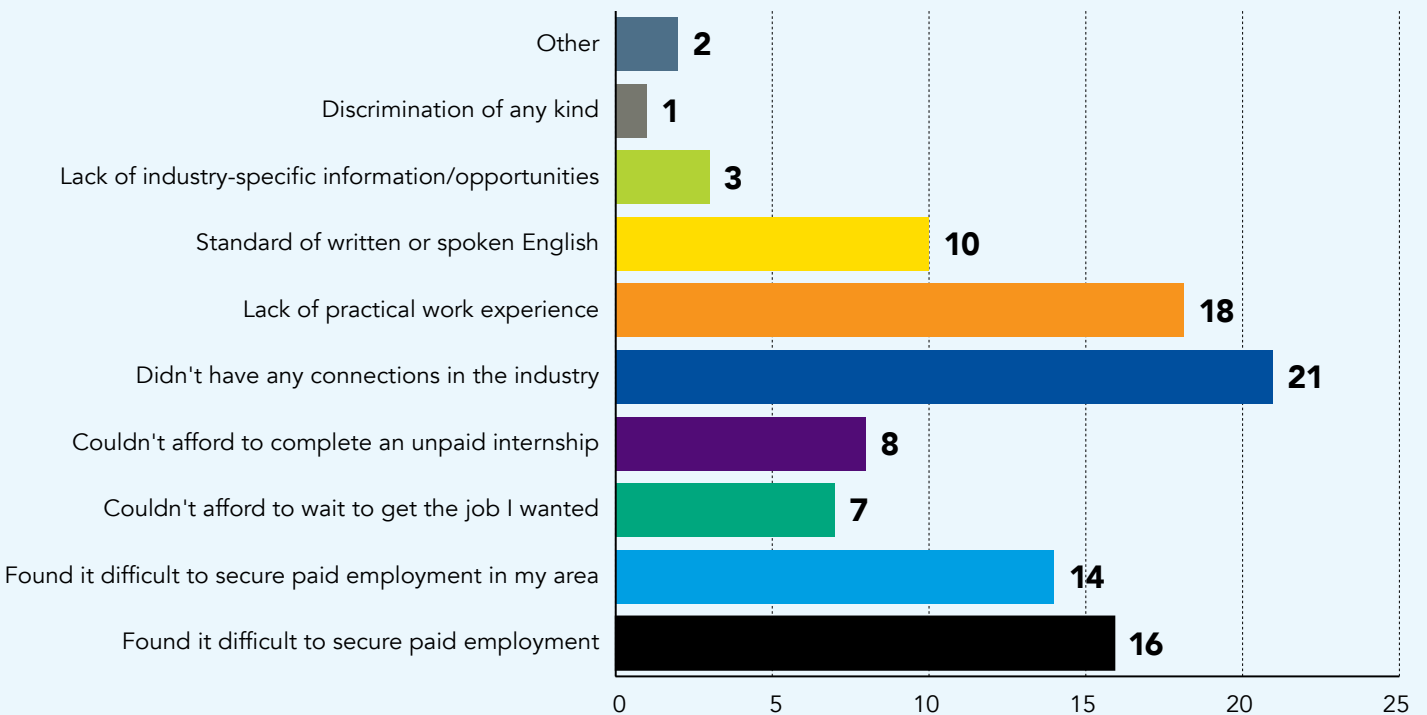
Cultural factors and discrimination were also mentioned, including common barriers for international students such as standard of spoken and written English (10%) and visa issues. Discrimination was reported by 1%, but racism was also mentioned. The focus group findings reinforced this, with one participant, a graduate working in the industry, saying that "Most of the people I knew in PR...were very privileged and had a privileged mindset.... Then those people hire talent that is also privileged." This raises questions about the recruitment pipeline, who controls it and the accountability for diverse hiring practices, factors that may be exacerbated by the use of AI in recruitment. In order to prevent this new, more diverse cohort failing to gain employment or leaving the sector prematurely, they will require targeted support.

4.6 Improvements

Given these findings, what can be done to improve the situation? The study participants responded enthusiastically when asked for what might have made their career path easier and what information would have made them more likely to choose PR as a career.

A massive 41% of respondents claimed that closer ties with industry, whether in the form of paid internships, work experience, networking opportunities or guest lecturers, would have helped them secure employment more easily. This represented the largest category by a significant margin.

Barriers face as a %

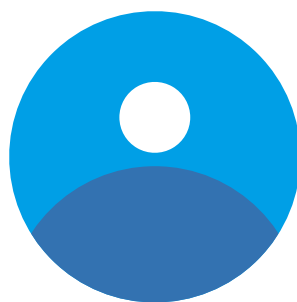


Other suggestions included more help in starting up a freelancing business, not going to university at all in favour of a more practical course, and being able to afford to wait to get a PR job rather than getting the first job they were offered simply because it provided them an income. Interestingly, course content was also mentioned, as one participant felt that the case studies used were predominantly drawn

from from the private sector and consumer brands, while they had ended up in the public sector and therefore lacked awareness of career paths into those roles.

Participants were asked what information would have encouraged them to consider PR as a career option, with three dominant themes emerging from the results. First, the emphasis on industry and practice; 21% said more exposure to industry would have helped them, coupled with 14% who said that having an industry specialist as a lecturer had helped. The second theme concerned advice on entry routes into the industry – 20% of respondents felt they lacked the specialist guidance and advice on how to break into PR. Finally, young people communicate mainly through social media platforms – it is how they interact with each other and seek information – 21% said they wanted more social media content featuring young people working in communications and PR.

In a free text box asking what participants would like to communicate to the CIPR, there were a range of responses, although again the largest category was on work experience (17%) and career advice (17%). Participants felt they couldn't access the industry for internships or work experience, or even to see what a career in the sector might look like. Respondents felt that more information was needed on how to get into the industry and there were suggestions that the CIPR and educators could take a more active role in recruitment. This included developing alternative routes into the industry such as apprenticeships and providing scholarships to enable young people from different backgrounds to access the career path.



5. Recommendations

The findings of this study have produced three key themes that require action from multiple stakeholders:

- raising awareness of PR and Communications as a discipline and career choice
- providing access to industry professionals and paid work experience
- delivering targeted support for specific groups who are at a disadvantage accessing this career path

In this section, we discuss the specific actions that could address these issues, combining suggestions from respondents, the work already in existence in the sector and ideas for new initiatives or updated information as required.

5.1. Raising awareness of PR and communications

This study and previous research have shown that awareness is a top factor in students choosing a career (O’Grady, 2012). In any recruitment campaign, there is a need to fill the top end of the sales funnel with potentially interested parties, and this interest is created by relevant content designed to engage audiences and delivered in ways that are relevant to the target group. Here the industry has an advantage – this is what we do for a living, after all – so, although we may face other barriers, (such as budget or resource) identifying and designing solutions should not be a problem.

The first universally accessible channel for student information should be the curriculum. As previously discussed in section 4.4, extra-curricular activities may not be available or accessible to all students, so embedding the relevant information and access to industry within the curriculum is key. However, as discussed in section 4.4, in these new broader, multi-disciplinary degrees, PR and Communications content cannot be guaranteed, either at all or in-depth. How can we make it easier for lecturers who may not specialise in PR and Communications to provide relevant, correct information on the subject and career path?

Recommendation 1: Teaching Toolkit – materials specifically on PR and Communications and entering PR, plus ideas for educators of all levels

To provide a Teaching Toolkit that covers the relevant information in a downloadable format that lecturers can use within their course content. The Toolkit would provide the following information:

- Subject information, including what PR is, key theory e.g., Grunig & Hunt, useful textbooks, links to CIPR research and materials
- Career information, including relevant job titles and specialisms, what the role entails, highlighting the variety, interest and transferrable nature of the career
- How to get a job in PR, including contacts such as the CIPR, PRCA, Taylor Bennett Foundation, industry initiatives e.g., paid internships
- A series of short videos from a range of stakeholders, including recruiters, recent entrants to the industry, practitioners from diverse backgrounds
- Ideas for industry content, including links to case studies from a range of sectors (B2B, B2C, public and third sector), guest lecturers, offsite visits
- The Toolkit would also contain accessibility features to ensure that it is available to all

The Toolkit can be downloadable on the CIPR website, used as social media content, and distributed via the CIPR's education contacts, containing relevant key phrases to make it searchable. This would also help lecturers who are facing increasing demands on time, particularly when it comes to preparing new materials.

The Toolkit would also help level the playing field in regard to location, as a lecturer outside of London, it can be difficult to attract guest lecturers or industry representatives who are reluctant to travel (even to Leicester, which is an hour by train from St Pancras).



5.2. Providing access to industry professionals and paid work experience

Once students are interested in a relevant career, the next challenge is converting this engagement into sustained entry into the profession. This study shows that the strongest conversion tactics are work experience and access to industry professionals, so how can the industry support this?

Recommendation 2: Enhance 'Careers in public relations' part of the CIPR website

The 'Careers in public relations' part of the CIPR website could be updated to help anyone, not just students, to access the industry. Sections could include an FAQ, a career-entry Chatbot, testimony from recent career entrants and video content e.g. 'A Day in the Life of a PR Exec', and videos from recent graduates from diverse backgrounds. In order to help potential candidates access industry support, the section could provide a 'Find a Contact' field, so that candidates could find someone in their local area to talk to, and a list of specialist recruiters by region. Fresh content could be provided by a feed from relevant industry social media accounts and Thought Leaders. All sections would be optimised for the relevant keywords. Participants also suggested that use of new technologies such as VR and body cam footage be incorporated to bring content to life.



5.3. Targeted support

This study has shown that current and future candidates for the industry will come from a broader, more diverse student base, and may require targeted support to access the industry. Providing this support will help the industry to move towards its long-held goals of representation and a more diverse workforce. However, this has the potential to be resource-intensive, and industry bodies are limited in terms of budget and resources. So how can we best address this?

Recommendation 3: CIPR Shadow Board

Other industry organisations, such as Women In PR, operate a Shadow Board – an elected Board for early-career professionals that provides leadership experience. For the CIPR, a Shadow Board could assume responsibilities such as looking after issues around recruitment, career entry and early-years retention. This could include producing social media content on careers in PR, accessing the industry and the challenges the sector faces on diversity. The Shadow Board could also run live, bi-annual ‘How to Get into PR’ online events, to answer questions, provide advice on everything from course selection to CVs and interview techniques. The events could include speakers such as recruiters, employers, Thought Leaders and recent career entrants. All of which could address the issues raised in the study, providing support to those who don’t know where to turn, ideas and advice for those experiencing barriers to entry and positive role models from a range of diverse backgrounds.



Conclusion

The original aims of this research were to identify and analyse awareness, perceptions and barriers to entry to the UK PR and Communications industry for students and recent graduates. Whilst this study has shown that in general awareness is good, there are improvements that need to be made to maintain this position – the changes in PR teaching in HE mean that the subject will be competing with others in broader curricula with teaching staff who may not be industry experts.

In terms of perceptions, there is positive news here – many of the ‘pull’ factors towards a PR career include opportunities to learn and travel in what is considered an exciting, dynamic role. However, its multiplicity is also a weakness, as job titles and terminology change, young people struggle with nomenclature and access – what job roles should they be searching for? – and the disconnect between industry and academia only exacerbates this, especially when there are so few agencies that engage with universities for placements or internships, or universities that reach out to practitioners. This needs to change. First, to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have access to industry practitioners and the potential for paid work experience. Second, to ensure that learning materials presented to students are factually correct and maintain a high level of exposure as part of these broader degree courses.



However, it is in the findings on barriers to entry that some of the most significant challenges emerge. Some of this study's findings won't be a surprise to practitioners; it has long been acknowledged that there is a workforce diversity issue, and this stems, in the main, from exclusive recruitment practices that reflect and replicate the status quo. The recent developments in HE and the new degree courses that are teaching, and will teach PR in the future, provides the industry with access to a new, more diverse talent pool. However, in order to recruit and retain those potential candidates, the industry needs to recognise the needs of the emerging candidates, and provide additional, targeted support, or face losing top talent to other industries that are perceived as more ethical and diverse. In short, the PR and Communications industry is being presented with an unique opportunity to rectify its workforce diversity issue, but it is a risk – do nothing and the sector faces a dwindling pool of talent, perceived as outdated, ethically dubious and unsupportive to anyone perceived as different.

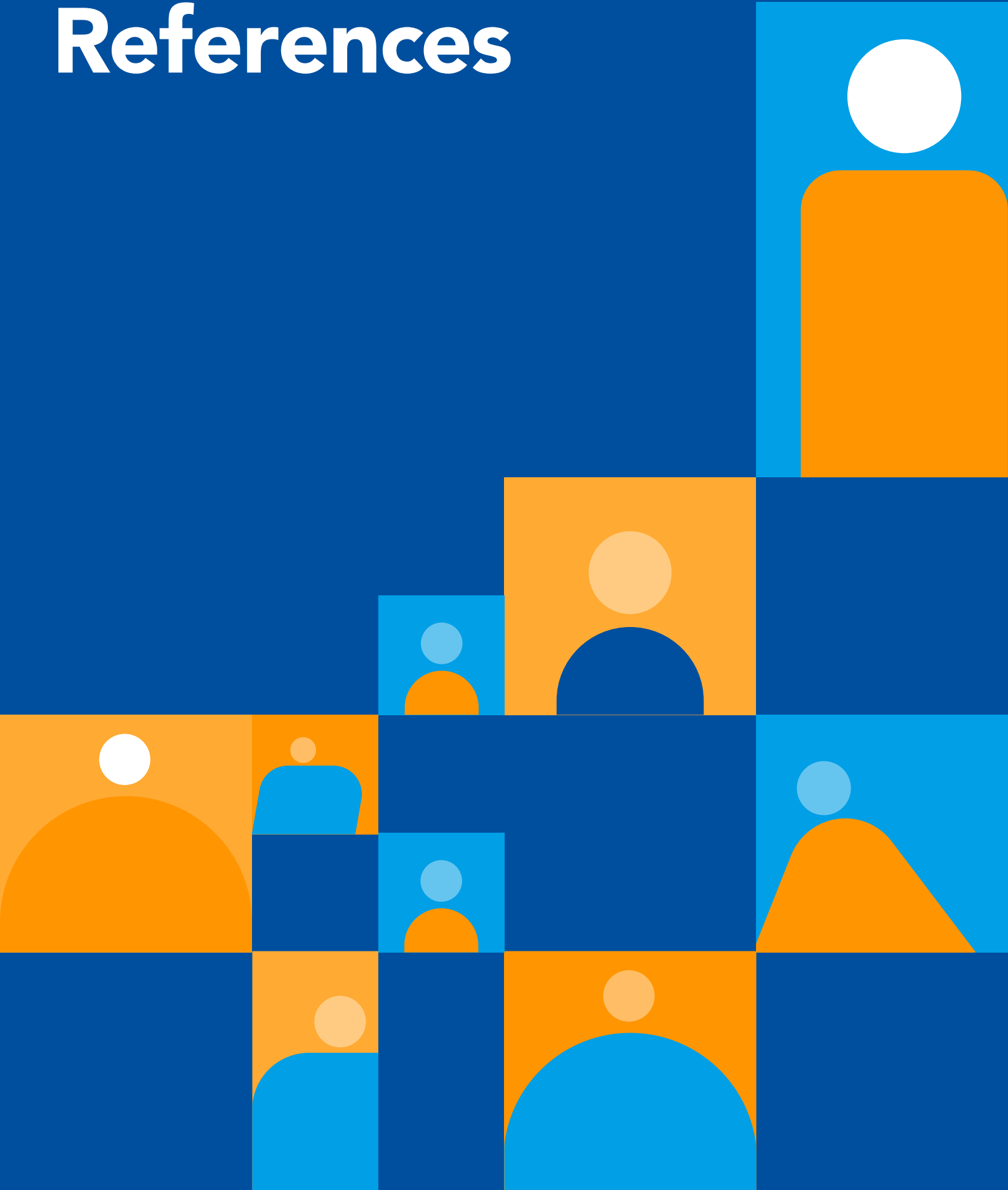
Current and future generations are less forgiving of corporate inaction. By identifying their wants and needs for a career in PR, we can provide a blueprint for securing a talented pool of graduates for the future, something that is vital to the survival of the sector in a rapidly changing world.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Data provided by DMU Careers team for Business and Law.

UG Placement Year	Number of Students
18 / 19	202 Students
19 / 20	167 Students
20 / 21	95 Students
21 / 22	92 Students
22 / 23	100 Students
23 / 24	68 Students
24 / 25	60 Students

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