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# Seeking a New Way of Working in the Public Relations Industry – A Global View from Emerging Young Public Relations Professionals

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**PRCA UNIVERSITIES RESEARCH  
GROUP – GLOBAL STUDENT  
VOICE RESEARCH 2023**

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# Introduction

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The PR industry is facing a global talent and recruitment crisis. Across the board, agencies and in-house recruiters are struggling to secure the people they need, and various projects are underway to explore the reasons and seek effective solutions.

The Public Relations Communications Association (PRCA) is the world's largest professional PR body, representing 35,000 members in 82 countries. It is a global advocate for excellence in public relations. The PRCA's University Advisory and Research Group includes academics from across the world and its members aim to explore issues and themes which have the potential to bring new insight and benefits to students and the PR industry. As part of a new research initiative, the Group decided to take soundings from international PR/communications students about their views on working in PR. The aim was to capture valuable insight, from our soon-to-be PR practitioners, about the issues important to them as they look ahead to careers in the industry.

# Global Student Voice Study format and methodology

For the 2023 Global Student Voice project, a series of five one-hour online focus groups were held with undergraduate and postgraduate public relations and media and communications students from a variety of universities and country of origins. The themes of the focus groups covered the following research questions:

- **The Employee Value Proposition** – what kind of workplace would these students be seeking from their future employers?
- **Diversity** – whether the industry fairly reflects our diverse society and comes across as inclusive.
- **Sectors** – what are the most appealing sectors to work in and why?
- **Expectations** – what level of salary, progression and broader career expectations are new industry entrants seeking?

A focus group script was prepared to be followed in each workshop and a student researcher was employed to support each workshop, supported by at least two of the report authors in each session. 34 students were recruited who were studying a public relations related subject at one of four universities: Belmont (USA), Bournemouth (England), Sheffield (England), Swansea (Wales). Only those who actively participated in the discussions were counted (33).

UNIVERSITY	UNDERGRADUATE FEMALE	UNDERGRADUATE MALE	POSTGRADUATE FEMALE	POSTGRADUATE MALE
Belmont (USA)	4	1	3	
Bournemouth (England)			5	
Sheffield (England)	6		3	
Swansea (Wales)	3	2	2	2

Students originated from the following countries: Britain, Spain, China, Nigeria, Russia, USA.

The sessions were held on-line using the zoom platform enabling a video recording, as well as an audio transcript to be produced. The audio-transcript was checked to ensure it was a true reflection of the video and was used as the basis for analysis.

## Findings – Quantitative

The transcripts from the five workshops were broken down into phrases, providing units of analysis which were then thematically organised, using an inductive approach, into major themes and sub-categories. The individual units of analysis were uploaded to an excel spreadsheet to enable the data to be quantified against themes and categories as well as other analytical work being undertaken to interrogate the differences of views across gender, country of origin, place of study and level of study.

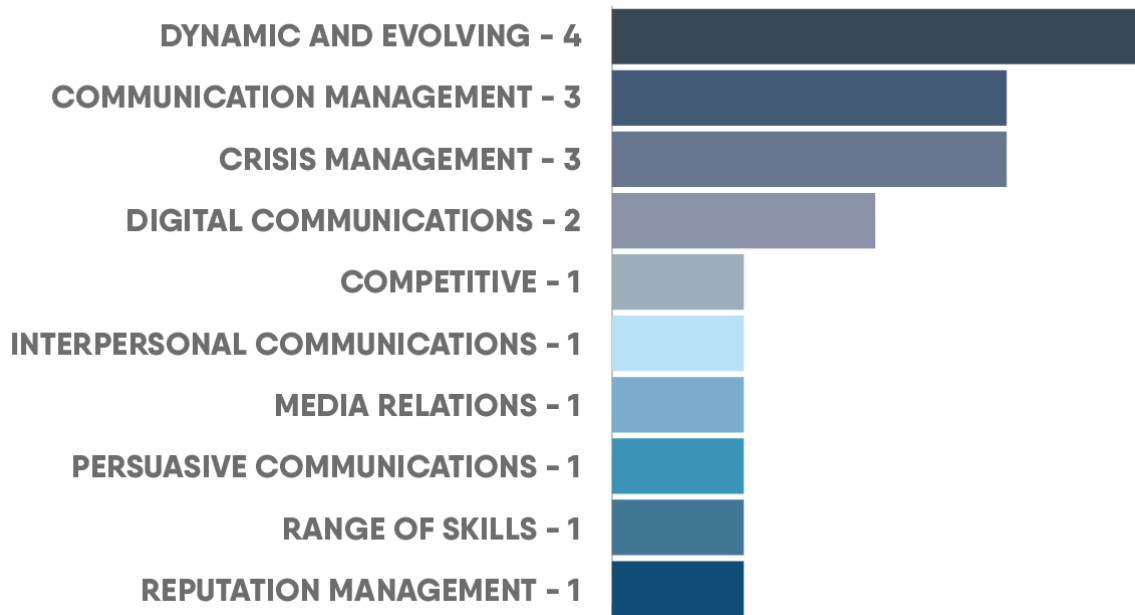
In keeping with qualitative thematic analysis approaches, a strong focus was placed on the actual language and phraseology used, staying close to the text of the audio scripts to draw out nuances of the themes.

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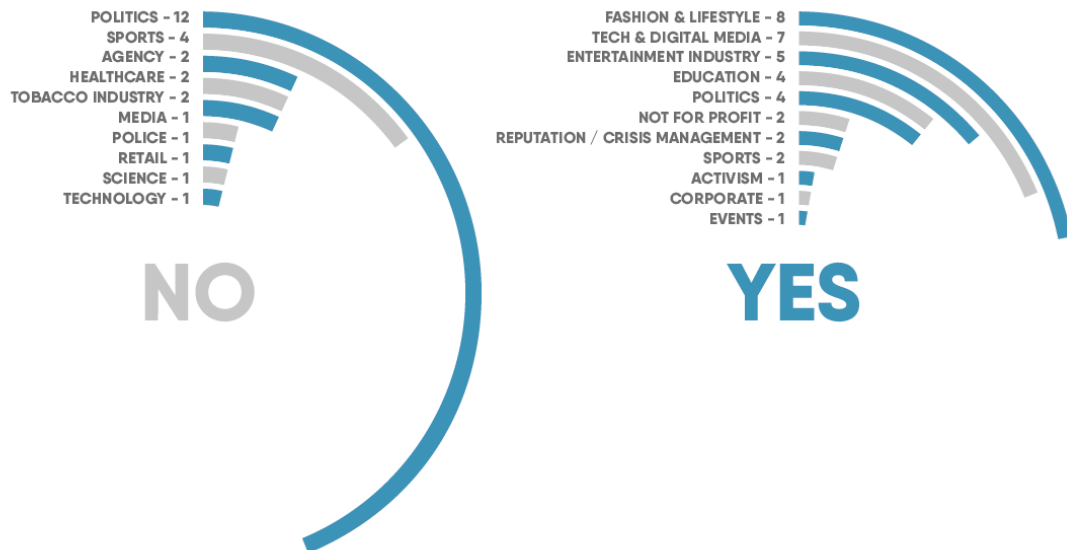
### Why did you choose to study PR?



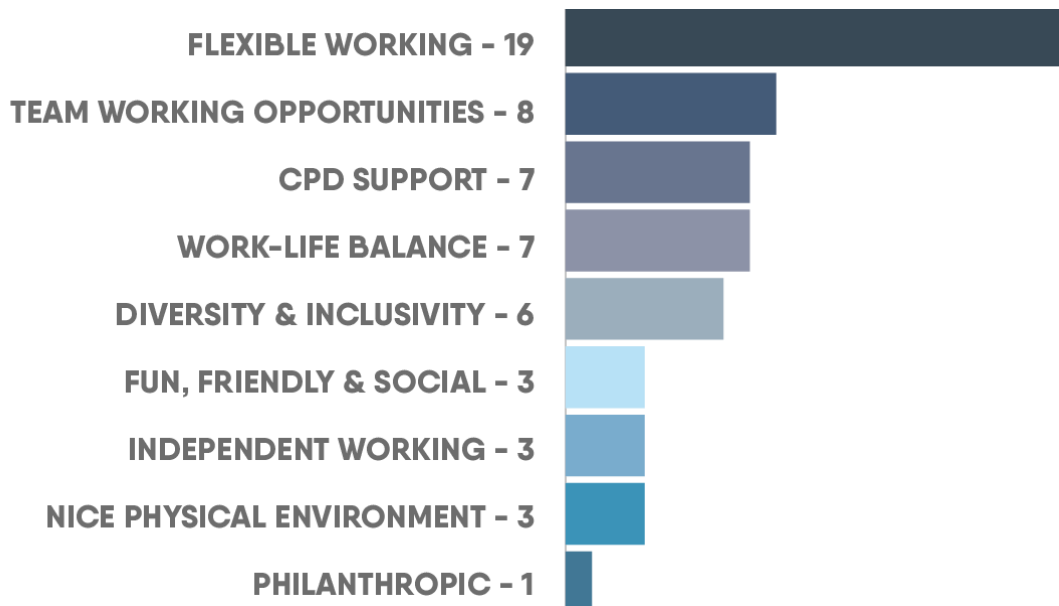
How would you describe PR?



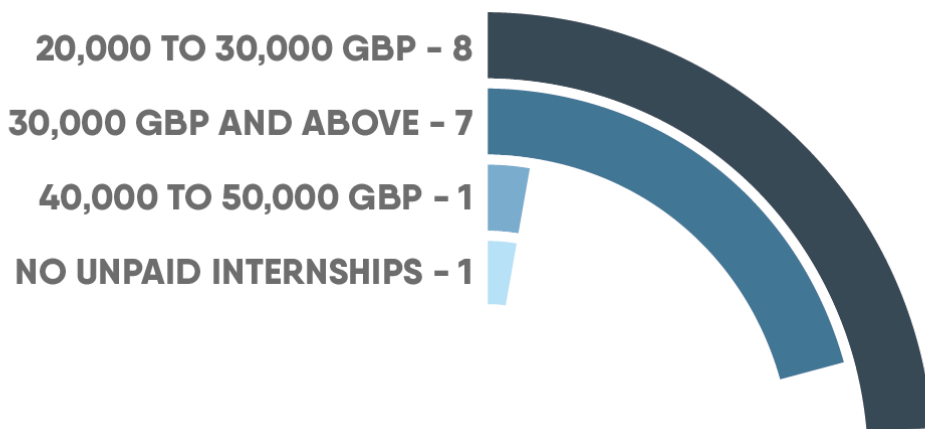
Would you like to work in these sectors?



What are the characteristics of the ideal workplace?



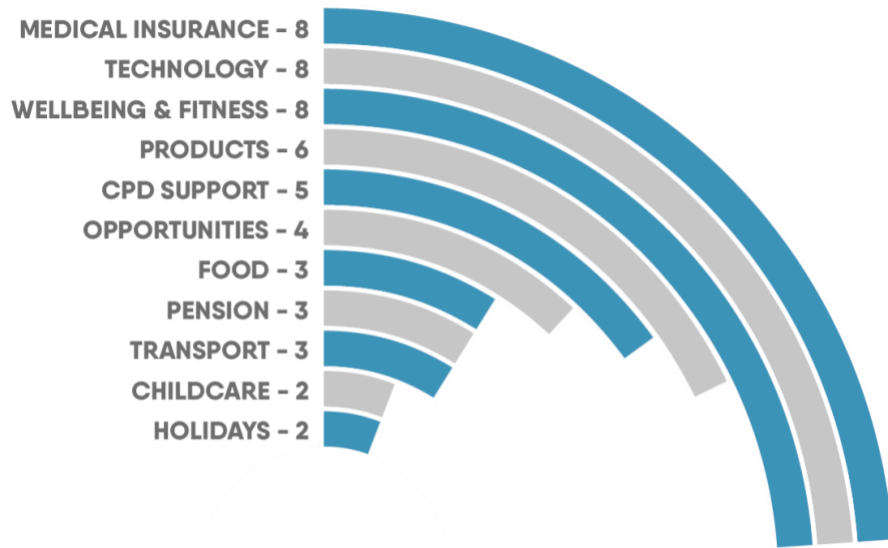
What are your salary expectations?





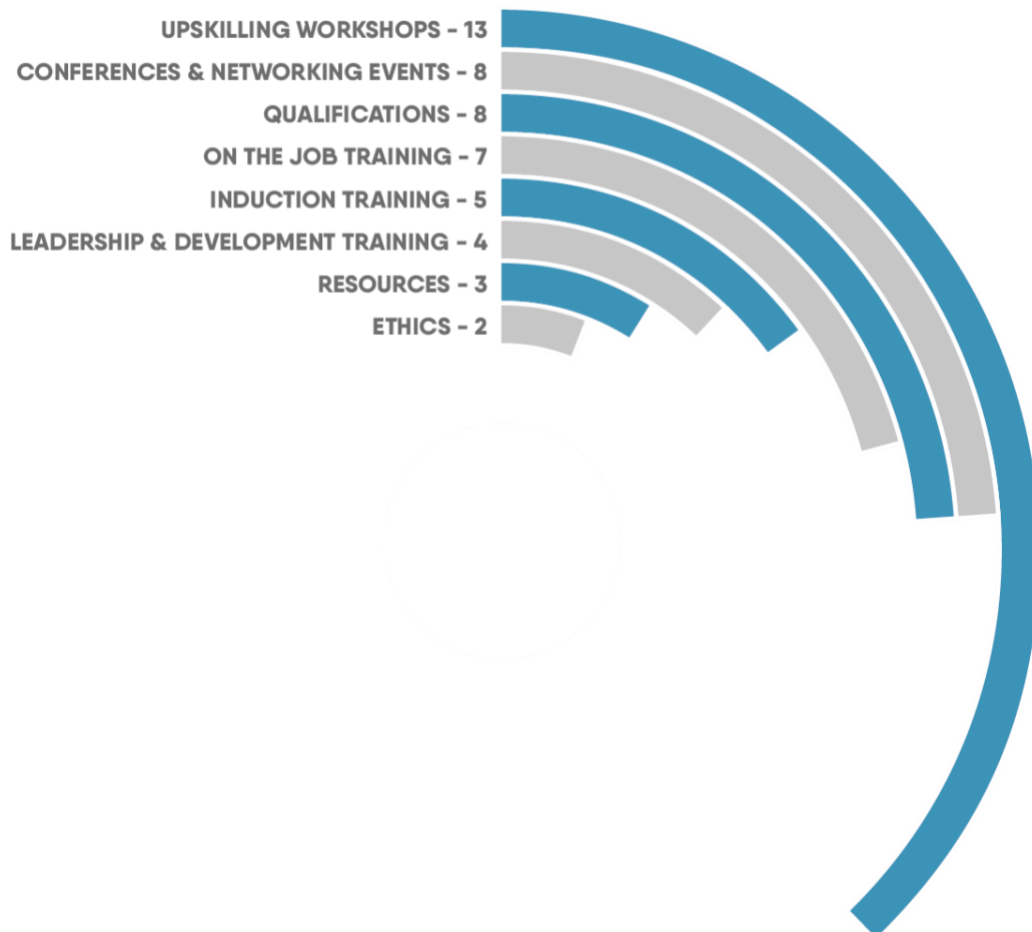
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What are your benefit expectations?



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What type of CPD do you expect?



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In your opinion, is the PR industry diverse?



## Findings – Qualitative

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### 4.1 What motivates students to study and what is their understanding of the public relations and communications professions?

Over 40 percent of the students who responded to a question about why they had chosen to study public relations, explained that they were initially interested in marketing, psychology, or journalism. It was through taking undergraduate modules in public relations that they found out more about the subject and then either switched their undergraduate course or chose to undertake a postgraduate course in public relations. A typical response being: “Since learning about [PR] I've I absolutely loved it” (Student 23).

For those who chose to study public relations from the beginning of their course, they were motivated by the opportunity to study modern, digital communications and to work with businesses, spurred on by the knowledge that PR is a growing industry with good job prospects. For some postgraduate students there was a desire to improve their knowledge of a particular area of public relations such as crisis and reputation management, whereas a couple of undergraduate students felt it suited their extrovert personalities or their desire to be creative.

The students describe public relations as dynamic and evolving requiring a wide-ranging skill set which needs to be kept up to date for the digital age. They understand it as a communication and management function, highlighting its interpersonal and persuasive nature, as well as spontaneously equating public relations with specialist areas such as crisis and reputation management.

### 5.2 Which Public Relations sectors and practices are most attractive for young people and which areas do they seek to avoid?

The most popular sectors which appealed to the young people in the study were fashion and lifestyle, along with technology and digital media, which were each mentioned by a fifth of the participants. The next popular sectors were entertainment and education, and also politics, which was mentioned by four students. Other areas which appealed to students included not-for profit organisations, sports, and crisis management. If the preference for politics, non-for-profit and activism is grouped, then again this forms a fifth of the answers, suggesting some broad interest in policy and making a difference.

In terms of those sectors which did not appeal to students, politics (and government relations) was the least popular sector in which to work, identified by 44% of the participants as an area they would not wish to pursue for a career. There was also polarisation with sports. Four students said they would not like to work in the sports sector despite others finding it appealing. Other unpopular sectors mentioned were healthcare and the tobacco industry and a couple did not enjoy previous experiences in agencies, preferring in-house work. From the focus group discussion, it seems that it is the students' own interests, along with the work experience and internships that they have undertaken, which drive these

preferences, for example “I currently have an internship with a non-profit locally, and I really love that” (Student 8), or “the agency sector wasn’t a good fit for me” (Student 17).

### **5.3 What do emerging practitioners expect from their employers as they begin their public relations careers and what are their preferred working conditions?**

Nearly two thirds of the students taking part in the focus groups (19) said that they would like to have flexible, hybrid working when asked what their ideal workplace characteristics would be. They are seeking some “flexibility to work from home” (Student 6) as they see the combination of working in the office, with some home working as ideal: “I really love a hybrid environment” (Student 8). A minority of students like the nature of independent working that this provides, but the key driver behind the strong focus on hybrid working seems to be the wish to achieve a good work-life balance, making up 14% of the answers, with a need to consider family and the social side of life, alongside promoting “hobbies in sports, art, or music” (Student 24).

It is important to note that despite the overwhelming focus on flexibility, students were strong in advocating the importance of being in the office because of the team-working opportunities. Again, this made up 14% of answers. In part this was to do with the creation of a fun, friendly and sociable community in a ‘nice office’ (Student 24), but more importantly it was about collaboration and learning opportunities, with students looking for a “collaborative workplace, opportunities to talk through real or theoretical situations” (Student 28). Students were emphatic about this; “I love getting to be part of a big collaborative team” (Student 17), and across the board were extremely positive about group working: “if you meet as a team, you know what their objectives are” (Student 11); “I also love collaborating with people and working with groups” (Student 3).

When asked about their ideal work environment, six students mentioned a workplace which was open in terms of diversity and inclusivity where they would feel welcomed and respected. They are seeking “a diverse inclusivity where you feel safe, or you feel accepted” (Student 15) and see a real benefit for this in terms of public relations from having a team which is “diverse with different perspectives” (Student 4). Students are seeking “a supportive environment where it is OK to make mistakes” (Student 15) and where “people trust each other” (Student 16). Linked to this 14% of the answers spontaneously mentioned that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) would be an important factor in an ideal workplace, specifically mentioning mentoring.

### **5.4 What salaries and benefits do entry-level practitioners expect?**

Many students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, were unaware of the kind of salary levels offered in public relations, or the type of benefits which might be involved. Only half of the overall respondents participated in this area of discussion. Of those who answered 50% were expecting a salary between £20,000 and £30,000 GBP and a further half expected an entry salary of between £30,000 and £40,000. This latter group were mainly undergraduate students, suggesting that students who go on to further study develop a greater understanding of the realities of the industry. One student highlighted the fact that the industry should not be asking students to undertake unpaid internships in order to get into the industry.

In terms of the kinds of benefits that students would be seeking in their public relations jobs, the most frequently occurring themes were medical insurance, technology, and wellbeing & fitness, each discussed by 15% of the students. The students who mentioned medical insurance were all non-British and it was clear that this would be a standard expectation of all employers. Likewise, three who mentioned pensions were postgraduate students from the USA, with some experience of the workplace. The discussion around technology related to students being supported in their hybrid working and needing to have “technology provided like a new computer, extra phone” (Student 7). One mentioned having the internet paid for, whilst another focused on software that would be required “like adobe creative studio or the pro version of whatever tools” (Student 8).

This worry about paying for the things they will need for their job was also manifested in three students saying they would consider covering transport costs to be important, and three others saying they would wish for free lunch, meals, or restaurant vouchers. Several students talked about free or reduced access to products being a bonus. Typically, they spoke of negotiating “discounts for whichever other companies they’re collaborating with” (Student 15). Often these kinds of benefits were discussed as important because entry level salaries would be low, or even insufficient to live off with one mature postgraduate student saying, “I started at 28,000 USD, I was eating beans for dinner” (Student 17).

The third significant area of benefits that students mentioned spontaneously related to wellbeing and fitness. The key driver here seems to be that students are seeking employers who “care in some way about me” (Student 26). Several students mentioned free or reduced gym membership as a positive benefit, but there was also a focus on mental wellbeing as well with four students talking about “Somewhere to go to get mental welfare support” (Student 11). The desire for support also extends into the kind of working culture, with five students spontaneously mentioning CPD as a benefit, and four others saying they were looking for opportunities to travel, go overseas or experience working in different sectors.

## **5.5 What kind of professional development or support do you people expect in their first public relations roles?**

A quarter of the students specifically talked about upskilling workshops as the kind of training they would be expecting in the workplace. They visualise these as an interactive “in-house crash course” (Student 7). These would be expected to cover technology, apps, professional software, and current trends and might include resources for relevant subscriptions. Separate to this, 14% of students mentioned on-the-job-training which they saw as mentoring, supervision, support from peers or support for “development & promotion opportunities” (Student 9). Four students focussed specifically on the theme of leadership, explaining they would be looking for a clear promotion pathway and the “ability to always progress” (Student 13). In contrast to this stated ambition, five students specifically mentioned induction training when they first arrived, suggesting a nervousness about entering the industry; “the initial training, especially for our positions, is very, very important” (Student 16).

Continuing professional development was also seen as something that takes place outside the organisation. 16% of students were keen to be supported in terms of time and money to

go to conferences and networking events and to “attend conventions where you're surrounding yourself with professionals” (Student 13). This might also involve professional organisational memberships. Similarly, 16% also identified that being supported to take relevant external qualifications was important. This might be an education stipend to attend further or higher education classes such as an MA, or “intense, independent training from a body or an institution” (Student 22).

### **5.6 To what extent does public relations reflect the diversity of society?**

Not all the students felt able to answer this question as they felt they lacked experience within the industry, but 50% of those who engaged with the topic said they felt the industry was not diverse, with three saying they felt it might be difficult to progress for those from different backgrounds. Some of the students could not identify successful role models from different ethnic backgrounds; “[Me personally I don't think I've seen anyone [like me] reach the executive level” (Student 11) and felt that the industry they experience through internships does not reflect diversity: “the majority of professionals that I've met personally have been white females” (Student 17). This lack of diversity was also identified by some students as being reflected in those who chose to take public relations courses: “short answer would be, No, from my undergraduate experience” (Student 20).

A quarter, however, did feel that the industry was diverse, and two students felt it was becoming more diverse, partly because this is something that clients expect and are seeking from their own communications; “brands want to portray that image of being diverse” (Student 19). In terms of inclusivity quite a few students were worried about progression within the industry, feeling that this was less clear for people working in-house: “in order to advance, you often have to leave the organization that you're in” (Student 20).

## Recommendations

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1. More awareness of public relations as a profession and as a career option amongst 16- and 17-year olds, ahead of their decision making around higher education study. Perhaps this needs a global PR campaign aimed at younger people.
2. The offer of flexible, hybrid working as a way for employees to achieve a good work-life balance.
3. A need to raise awareness of the kind of entry-level salaries and benefits offered by the public relations industry, along with the opportunities to progress.
4. Provision of a range of benefits to support young people on low starter salaries including computer and mobile technology for home working, professional software and other perks supporting food and transport.
5. Industry to focus on providing both physical and mental wellbeing support and opportunities, alongside a commitment to champion and facilitate the importance of a good work-life balance.
6. Industry and academia to focus on providing role models from BAME communities to encourage greater diversity.

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