LITERATURE REVIEW
Diversity in the communication profession

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INTRODUCTION

- The NHS is the largest employer in the UK, and is more diverse now than ever, with 26.4 per cent of its workforce from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in March 2023, an increase of 13 per cent from 2022. (Workforce Race Equality Standard – WRES – 2023).

- This increase in workforce diversity exceeds the broader ethnic distribution in the UK where, according to the 2021 Census, 82 per cent of people in England and Wales are white, and 18 per cent identify as belonging to a black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic group.

- However, while the NHS is celebrated for its diverse workforce, there remain certain specialisms where this diversity is not adequately reflected. The communications profession within the NHS is one such area.

"The NHS workforce is more diverse today than at any point in its 75-year history."

AMANDA PRITCHARD
FORMER CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NHS ENGLAND

OVERVIEW

- The NHS communications profession, like the wider communications profession, has long held the ambition to improve the ethnic diversity of its workforce, including among its most senior leaders.

- The COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical reminder of the need for inclusive communication strategies within the NHS, underscoring that the involvement of ethnic minority professionals is vital for effective health communication and community response to build trust and credibility.

- A GOV.UK report from 2020 revealed that culturally appropriate, tailored health messages achieve a number of positive impacts, which include accessing 'hard to reach' communities and increasing behavioural factors such as knowledge, intention, motivation and behaviour change.

- The Taskforce for Diversity in NHS Communications has been working to tackle the racial disparities. Its first phase of work was devoted to undertaking a rapid review of the existing evidence base on racial disparities in the NHS and communications sectors. This pack captures what the review found.

Taskforce for Diversity
Working to address racial disparities, starting with a rapid review of current evidence.

Ambition
NHS communications aims to enhance ethnic diversity across all leadership levels.

OVERVIEW

- The literature review revealed a significant lack of evidence and insight specific to the NHS. Consequently, much of the existing data has been drawn from studies within the private sectors, which may not fully address the unique context of communicators in the NHS.

- To fill this gap, the taskforce conducted primary research to generate valuable insights specifically focused on ethnic minority communicators in the NHS.

- This pack is structured across three key segments: **access to**, **experience of**, and **outcomes from** roles in communications and the NHS for communicators from ethnic minority backgrounds. Exploring the research in this way has provided rich insights into the experiences of individuals at all career stages, and allowed the taskforce to make recommendations to support diversity at all levels of the NHS communications profession. The taskforce's report was published in July 2025.

Report structure
Evaluating access, experience and outcomes for ethnic minority communicators.

Report focus
Provide insights and recommendations for diversity at all stages in NHS communications.

Access

CONTEXT

- **Objective**: Access to careers in PR and communications is significantly hindered for underrepresented communities. This section identifies systemic issues affecting ethnic minorities entering the communications industry.

- **Barriers to entry**: A fundamental issue is the barriers to entry that prevent people from ethnic minority backgrounds from accessing early career opportunities in communications. Factors such as socioeconomic background, educational opportunity and a lack of industry networks disproportionately impact the ability of diverse candidates to enter these fields.

EDUCATION

- **Disparities in Educational Access**: The 2024 Employer Index Report revealed that 28 per cent of PR and communication professionals attended private schools, the Sutton Trust in 2021 found that 44 per cent of newspaper columnists in the UK have attended private schools. In the general UK population, approximately 7 per cent of schoolchildren attend private schools.
  - According to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Census 2023, about 60 per cent of students in private schools are white, while approximately 40 per cent are from a UK minority ethnic background. This ethnic make-up broadly mirrors that of all state schools.
  - While there is a notable percentage of ethnic minority pupils in private schools, this does not reflect the broader socioeconomic status of these communities. The data shows that in the UK, certain ethnic minority groups, such as Chinese and Indian families, have experienced significant economic mobility over generations and are more likely to invest in private education compared to others.

- **Subject choice**: Most PR and communication positions require a degree in communications or related fields. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) highlights that students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to pursue courses relevant to media and communications (EPI, 2019). According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), BME students were less likely to enrol in traditional media and communications courses.

- **Quality of education and outcomes**: Ethnic minority students are often more likely to come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, meaning they often attend underfunded schools, which can limit access to quality education and resources. Datasets from the Department for Education (DfE) indicated that students from lower-income households are also disadvantaged in terms of university outcomes.

ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

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Networking barriers: The communications field relies heavily on professional networks for job opportunities and career development. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations highlights the pronounced networking barriers ethnic minorities face, who often lack access to influential industry contacts. (CIPR, 2020)

Internships: Many entry-level positions in PR are often unpaid internships that exclude those who cannot afford to work without pay, thereby limiting access to individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Exposure: Individuals from backgrounds where PR and communications are not common career paths and do not have many friends and family within the profession lead to a lack of exposure, reducing their likelihood of considering them as viable career options.

Mentorship opportunities: A study by the PRCA found that only 22 per cent of BME professionals received formal mentoring (PRCA, 2021), leading to reduced upward mobility within the profession.

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Cultural norms and expectations can significantly influence career choices, potentially steering individuals away from PR and communications.

- **Perceptions of the industry**: PR and communications may be perceived as less prestigious compared to other professions like law, medicine or finance (Mendis, 2019).

- **Economic considerations**: Families prioritising financial stability might view PR and communications roles as lower-paying or less stable than traditional or technical careers.

- **Family expectations**: Research from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (2021) shows that family pressure to meet cultural expectations often leads ethnic minority students away from PR. Emphasis on familial obligations and pursuing 'safer' careers may align career choices with family values over personal interests in PR or communications.

- **Stigma around media**: In some cultures, media and communications can be viewed with scepticism, people may not want to engage in an industry seen as manipulative or misleading.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION

Many individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds may not see communications roles as accessible or viable career paths, particularly if they do not see others like them in these positions.

- **Limited role models:** The absence of relatable role models can diminish motivation and aspiration. When people do not see individuals from their backgrounds in successful positions, they may struggle to envision themselves in similar roles. According to a report by the CIPR (2020), many ethnic minority professionals report feelings of isolation or "otherness" in predominantly white environments.

- **Discrimination concerns:** Concerns about potential discrimination or bias within the workplace can deter candidates, if individuals perceive the industry as favouring certain demographics.

- **Perception of exclusivity:** A lack of diversity might create an impression that the communications industry is exclusive or unwelcoming to those from underrepresented groups. When individuals perceive an industry is not welcoming, it can lead to self-exclusion.

RECRUITMENT METHODS

The recruitment process can significantly contribute to the lack of diversity in the communications profession.

- **Unconscious bias:** Recruitment teams often have unconscious biases that influence their evaluation of candidates. Traditional recruiting practices often favour candidates with connections or similar backgrounds to current employees and interviewers.

- **Cultural fit over cultural add:** Often, recruiters look for candidates who fit the existing organisation's culture rather than those who can add to it.

- **Inequitable access to opportunities:** Recruitment processes that prioritise certain universities, internships or previous employers can create barriers for candidates from diverse backgrounds who may not have had the same access to these opportunities.

- **Job descriptions and qualifications:** The language used in job descriptions can inadvertently deter diverse candidates from applying. Research published in the Journal of Business Communication suggests that job descriptions may include culturally specific language that alienates potential minority applicants (Wood et al., 2019).

Experience

CONTEXT

- **Objective:** The previous section delved into the multifaceted experiences of ethnic minorities within the communications field, offering a nuanced understanding of their professional journeys. This section aims to illuminate the diverse challenges and successes encountered, exploring how these experiences shape career trajectories and personal growth.

- **WRES 2023 findings:** The WRES 2023 shows there is growth in the ethnic diversity of the workforce. However, for three WRES indicators, the picture in 2023 is pretty much the same they were in 2016.

  - White staff are still more likely to be appointed from shortlisting across all job posts.

  - White staff are more likely to access non-mandatory training and continuous professional development.

  - The percentage of staff from ethnic minority groups reporting experiencing discrimination from colleagues has always been more than double the percentage of white staff reporting the same.

- In non-clinical roles, BME representation was at 17.3 per cent overall. BME representation peaked at 19.8 per cent at AfC band 6. BME staff were underrepresented at senior roles AfC band 8a (16.5 per cent) and above, with BME representation falling to a low of 10.7 per cent at the very senior manager level.

CONTEXT

- **Distinct cultures:** The NHS and PR/communications consist of many separate organisations with distinct cultures, policies and processes.

- **Career affinity:** Staff in both fields feel a strong affinity for their careers, describing "love" for the NHS and "pride" in PR, but also report bullying and discrimination. Communicators from ethnic minority backgrounds feel positively towards PR and communications as a career, with the overwhelming majority (94 per cent) surveyed by the CIPR saying they would recommend a career in PR.

- **A feeling of exclusion:** Ethnic minority professionals often feel like outsiders, despite their commitment to their careers.

- **Limited opportunities:** The CIPR 2020 Race in PR report found that ethnic minority practitioners face racism, microaggressions, unconscious bias, and inflexible work cultures, limiting their opportunities compared to their white colleagues. They also report being judged to a different standard than their white colleagues.
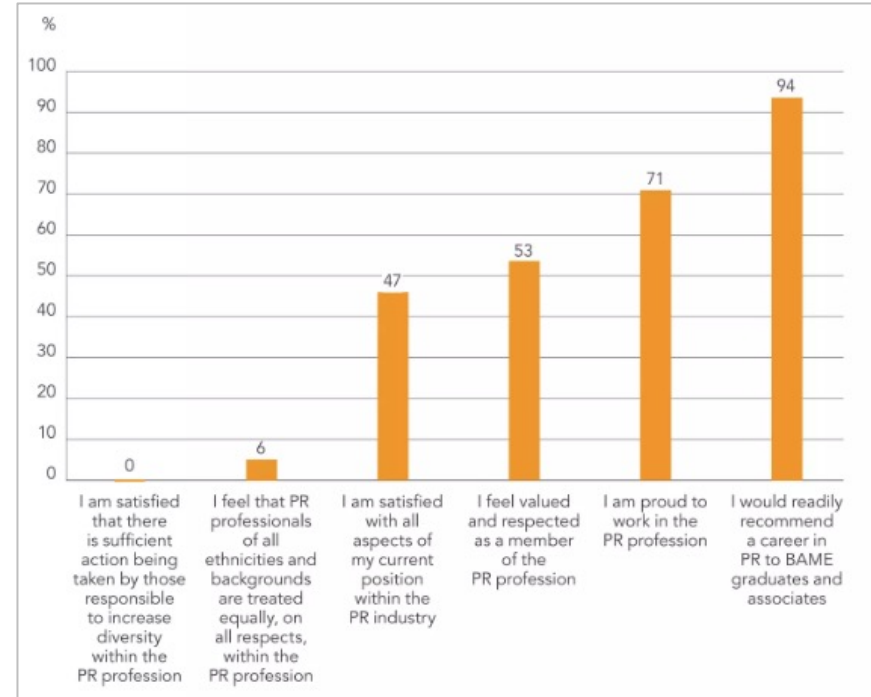
CIPR Race in PR "Asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a number of summary statements about their feelings towards the profession and a career in PR"

CULTURAL MISFITS

Many BME individuals feel that their identities and working styles do not align with the prevailing white, middle-class and elite culture of the communications profession.

A significant number (67 per cent) of black and mixed-black communications professionals felt the need to "tone down" their personalities during their early careers to fit into the workplace (CIPR).

Approximately 80 per cent of graduates from ethnically diverse backgrounds have indicated feeling uncomfortable in the workplace at some point in their careers (CIPR).

CULTURAL MISFITS

There is a perception of greater scrutiny of BME staff's performance. About 63.4 per cent of BME staff report feeling that their behaviour is subject to rigorous scrutiny compared to their white counterparts. This concern intensifies at senior levels, with 71.3 per cent of BME staff at higher bands (8 and above) reporting similar issues (NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard).

BME staff experience higher rates of bullying and harassment and more 'hostile' working environment at work, with 27.7 per cent of ethnic minority staff reporting such experiences compared to 22 per cent of white staff. (NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard).

The perception of institutional racism and structural disadvantage is prevalent, with 47 per cent of BME practitioners feeling undervalued and disrespected within the PR profession. This suggests that many BME employees accept these inequalities as a norm in their careers (CIPR).

CULTURAL MISFITS

Networking plays a crucial role in career success, with BME individuals more likely to be disadvantaged by a lack of personal connections. The notion that "who you know" is more important than "what you know" disproportionately affects those from less affluent backgrounds within the industry

The Runnymede Trust's report, The Future Leaders: The Quest for Diversity in the Media (2020), indicated that 47 per cent of ethnic minority professionals faced challenges related to networking and access to influential networks, which are often vital for career progression in the media and communications sectors.
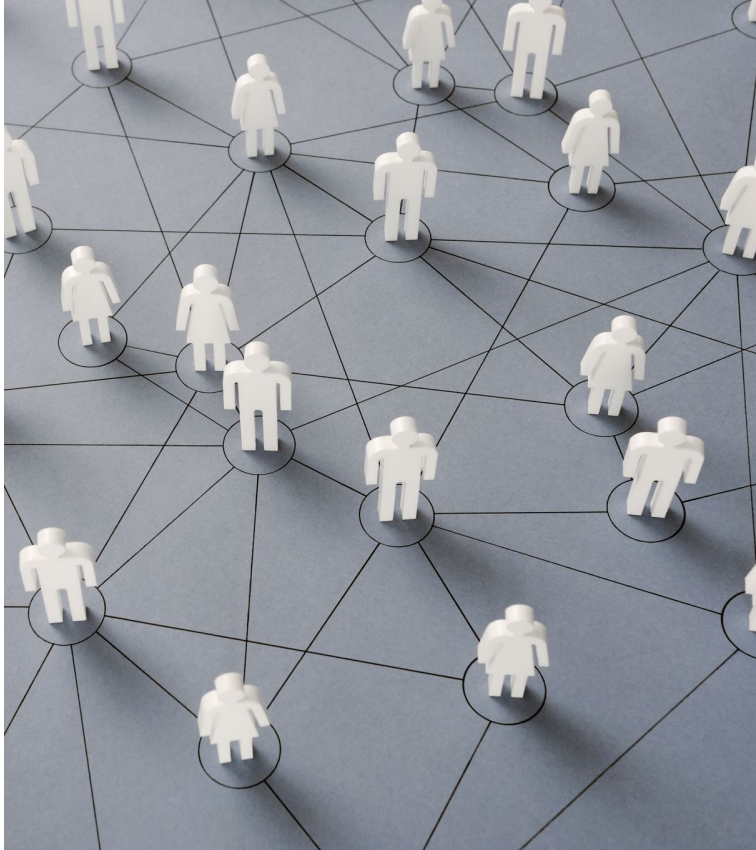
There is a perception that there is limited support for BME professionals in recognising their culture and experiences and helping them achieve their career goals.

OUTCOMES

The outcomes section focused on the current state of ethnic diversity within the NHS and communications sectors and the broader implications of ethnic minority representation in communications.

This section examines outcomes related to career progression, organisational success, and industry innovation.

CONTEXT

A report published in March 2024 on the landscape of health service communications, The State of NHS Communications, by the NHS Confederation, NHS Providers, and the Centre for Health Communications Research (CHCH), appears to indicate that the NHS is going backwards with regards to improving diversity within the NHS communications profession.

The report suggested ethnic minorities remain disproportionately underrepresented in senior leadership roles within the NHS communications profession, with less than 5 per cent of the most senior NHS communications professionals from an ethnic minority background. In addition, almost two-thirds (61 per cent) of senior NHS communicators say they do not have a communications workforce that is representative of the local communities they serve.

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

- **Career inequality:** BME professionals frequently feel they do not have the same opportunities as their white counterparts to progress in their career.

- **Perceived unequal opportunities:** Only 39.3 per cent of NHS staff from a black background believe their trust provides equal opportunities for career progression or promotion, with levels below those of other ethnic groups (46.4 per cent), compared to 59.1 per cent of white staff (NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard).

- **Desire for mentoring:** The Taylor Bennett Foundation reported that 73 per cent of BME respondents in their survey expressed a desire for more training and opportunities for mentoring that would enhance their advancement prospects in PR and communication roles. (Taylor Bennett Foundation, The State of Diversity in Public Relations, 2020).

- **Overlooked for promotions:** The Runnymede Trust's report, The Future Leaders: The Quest for Diversity in the Media (2020) stated that around 60 per cent of participants expressed feeling overlooked for promotions compared to their white counterparts.

DATA

- **Ethnic diversity decline:** The CIPR's Race in PR report highlights a profession with declining levels of ethnic diversity and insufficient action being taken to address the issue. A profession good at 'talking the talk' but not at 'walking the walk'.

- **Support vs reality:** Despite apparent support for diversity, CIPR's State of the Profession reports show the industry is becoming less diverse.

- **Retention challenges:** The report explains why retaining BAME professionals is difficult, with many opting out of the profession or becoming independent or freelance practitioners.

- **Comprehensive study:** In 2024, CIPR published the most detailed study of PR, examining diversity, employment patterns and demographic shifts in England and Wales. This is the first published analysis by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) of Census 2021 data on PR and communication practitioners.

DATA BREAKDOWN FROM THE CIPR POPULATION REPORT

The report found that 87 per cent of PR practitioners are of white ethnicity, 5 per cent Asian, 4 per cent mixed ethnicity, and 3 per cent black. Practitioners from white backgrounds make up 90 per cent of directors. Practitioners from Asian backgrounds are twice as likely to have director positions than any other ethnic group.

Ethnic group	Director		Professional		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	849	4%	2,448	6%	3,297	5%
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	307	2%	1,485	3%	1,792	3%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	470	2%	1,845	4%	2,315	4%
White	18,125	90%	36,941	85%	55,066	87%
Other ethnic group	283	1%	805	2%	1,088	2%
Total	20,034	100%	43,524	100%	63,558	100%

87%

of practitioners are of White ethnicity, 5% Asian, 4% of Mixed ethnicity and 3% Black.

There is greater ethnic diversity among those in the Professional group than those in the Director group, among females than males, and among practitioners aged 16 to 34 than older age groups.

CIPR PR population report 2024

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

- Diversity in the NHS workforce is increasingly recognised as essential, and the NHS workforce is more diverse than ever. However, despite these promising numbers, challenges persist. The 2023 Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) data indicated that staff from ethnic minority groups reporting experiencing discrimination from colleagues is double the percentage of white staff reporting the same.

- The significance of ethnic minority professionals in NHS communication roles became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tailored health communications were crucial in reaching minority groups effectively, as revealed in a GOV.UK report from 2020.

- The report highlights the challenges BME professionals face regarding access to education, professional networks, and cultural barriers. The perception of institutional racism and structural disadvantage is prevalent, leading to feelings of being marginalised within the industry. Additionally, inadequate support structures and networking barriers further hinder the career progression of BME individuals.

- Approximately 28 per cent of PR and communication professionals attended private schools, compared to the general UK population of approximately 7 per cent. The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds in private schools is similar to that in the state sector. However, a higher percentage of students from an Asian background attend private schools.

CONCLUSION

- The majority of PR and communications professionals are of white ethnicity (approx. 87 per cent). Practitioners from white backgrounds make up 90 per cent of directors. People from an Asian background are the largest ethnic minority in the profession and are twice as likely to have director positions than any other ethnic group.

- Recruitment practices, cultural fit and inequitable access to opportunities contribute to the sector's lack of diversity. Despite efforts to improve diversity, BME communicators are still significantly underrepresented in leadership positions. This lack of diversity at the top levels of the profession can contribute to feelings of undervaluation, isolation and exclusivity among BME practitioners.

- Despite these obstacles, the report highlights that BME communicators have a strong affinity for their chosen careers, with a majority expressing love for the NHS and pride in their work in PR and communications. However, the negative experiences of abuse and discrimination within these environments indicate a disconnect between their personal drive and the treatment they receive.

- The report outlines the urgent need for greater support, representation and inclusivity within the NHS and communications sectors to address racial disparities and foster a more equitable and diverse professional landscape. It emphasises the importance of creating a work environment where BME professionals feel valued, respected and empowered to thrive in their roles.

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