Shaping the Future: Discursive Practices in Promoting Public Relations Education at UK Universities

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1 **Shaping the Future: Discursive Practices in Promoting Public Relations Education**
2 **at UK Universities**
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5 **Abstract**

6 **Purpose**: This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how discursive practices shape the

7 promotion of public relations undergraduate programmes in the context of market-driven UK higher

8 education.

9

10 **Methodology**: Research combines a descriptive analysis of the UK universities offering public

11 relations undergraduate degrees and a critical discourse analysis of the online prospectus entries of

12 25 public relations undergraduate programmes ('courses' in the UK) focusing on the

13 course/programme overview and career path sections

14

15 **Findings**: This wide-ranging review of UK universities' communication of their public relations

16 provision demonstrates that although the student as consumer has choice, the presentation of the

17 programmes is sometimes 'headline grabbing' and often positions public relations as a tactical

18 subject, emphasising promotion and practical skills. Overall, public relations is taught alongside

19 subjects such as marketing, journalism and advertising and it is these subjects that are foregrounded

20 in promotional material when discussing teaching and potential career paths. Public relations is a

21 difficult subject to explain within the confines of a university prospectus with the result that it is

22 frequently presented as a promotional practice with little connection to management, leadership,

23 or academic research.

24

25 **Originality/value**: To the best authors' knowledge, this is the first study exploring the discursive

26 practices that shape the promotion of public relations undergraduate programmes in UK

27 universities.

28

29 **Keywords:**

30 Public relations, higher education, discourse, university prospectuses, UK, university; public

31 relations education

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33

1   **1.   Introduction**

2   Public relations education plays a crucial role in preparing students for the dynamic and evolving

3   field of communications; careers in the discipline of public relations encompass many aspects of

4   internal and external communication management (James, 2014; Ki *et al.*, 2019; Macnamara, 2016).

5   Meanwhile, the academic context through which public relations teaching is delivered serves as a

6   key space for the development and dissemination of knowledge, theories, and professional

7   standards in the field. Understanding how public relations is taught and integrated into higher

8   education (HE) systems is essential for exploring the discursive practices that shape public relations

9   as an academic discipline.

10   In the UK, public relations is taught from within three main academic schools or perspectives. It can

11   be taught within a business school, within or alongside a journalism curriculum, or within or using

12   teaching from a critical media studies programme (Ruck and Bailey, 2023). All will result in a

13   difference in the way public relations is taught, how its value is perceived, and where the industry

14   'sits' in business, media, or social hierarchies. The current trend is for public relations at

15   undergraduate level to be taught as part of or with another programme (e.g., journalism, media or

16   advertising) with the result that there are currently only two stand-alone public relations

17   undergraduate degrees in the UK, down from 22 in 2004 (Fawkes and Tench, 2004), although at

18   postgraduate level the demand appears strong for single-honours degrees. There are currently

19   around 900 people enrolled on public relations-related undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in

20   the UK (Ruck and Bailey, 2023).

21   Despite this scenario, Yaxley (2023) does not believe that we are facing the potential demise of

22   public relations degree programmes (known as 'courses' in the UK; 'programme' is used consistently

23   throughout the article, keeping 'course' only in direct quotes), as the number of programmes has

24   barely changed since her search on the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website

25   in 2007 (para. 3). However, it appears that the public relations job market is evolving towards the

26   integration of public relations with other disciplines (e.g., marketing, advertising, and journalism)

27   which could lead to the diminished recognition and decline of the distinctive character of public

28   relations as a field.

29   This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how discursive practices shape the

30   promotion of public relations programmes in the context of market-driven UK HE. Specifically, it

1   critically examines the descriptions of public relations programmes available on the official websites

2   of HE institutions offering public relations degrees. This research uses critical discourse analysis

3   (CDA) approach (e.g., Van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) to shed light on the discursive

4   strategies employed in the programme descriptions. These play a pivotal role in shaping prospective

5   students' understanding of public relations education, and it is by understanding these discourses

6   we can gain a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural, historical, and market-driven forces that

7   shape public relations education and its promotion. Furthermore, this research can serve as a

8   foundation for further discussions on curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, the status

9   of public relations within the HE sector, and the role of public relations education in meeting the

10   needs of the industry and society at large. It also yields information on how public relations is

11   perceived and understood by institutions and policymakers.

12

13   **2.   Literature Review**

14   **2.1.   Shaping the Discourse of Public Relations in Higher Education**

15   Scholars and practitioners have discussed how public relations, an evolving field of study within the

16   social sciences (Ki *et al.*, 2019), should be shaped and taught for at least the last four decades

17   (Watson, 2013). According to some (e.g., Grunig, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000), it is an independent and

18   valuable field of study that contributes to a deeper and critical understanding of organisational

19   communication dynamics and their societal impact. Although it is also noted that public perceptions

20   of public relations can be vague (Chmiel and Moise, 2024).

21   The academy plays a pivotal role in configuring public relations, serving as a crucial space for

22   research, education, and practice in the field. It provides fertile ground for the development and

23   dissemination of knowledge, theories, and professional standards in the field of public relations

24   (Auger and Cho, 2016). A postmodern analysis of the discipline offered by Holtzhausen (2000),

25   challenges the traditional view of public relations as solely organisational communication

26   management and advocates for a broader understanding of the field. According to this perspective,

27   the discipline should be recognised as a catalyst for grassroots democracy, activism, and radical

28   politics, a theme which has been continued to this day with writing by Fawkes (2022).

29   Other scholars support and reinforce the approach of public relations as a strategic management

1   function (e.g., Grunig, 2006; James, 2014). This approach emphasises the need to consider public

2   relations as a strategic function integrated into the overall planning of the organisation. Despite this,

3   Fitch (2017) argues that the prevailing corporate approaches to understanding public relations as a

4   strategic management discipline have little connection to the actual day-to-day practices of public

5   relations or to comprehending the social and cultural impact of public relations activities.

6   This highlights, as scholars suggest, the need for a more nuanced understanding of public relations

7   as a field (Bowen, 2009; Fawkes, 2022; L'Etang, 2013) and the necessity to bridge the divide between

8   theory and practice (Macnamara, 2016) in order to equip graduates with a well-rounded education

9   that prepares them for the challenges and complexities of this field (Ruck and Bailey, 2023).

10 However, the effect of marketisation of HE is becoming increasingly prominent (Busch, 2017

11 Askehave, 2007; Fairclough, 1993), and the way in which public relations is conceptualised, taught,

12 and integrated into HE systems reflects this influence (e.g., Leaning, 2015). Williamson *et al.,* (2020)

13 explain that in HE, "a market in which institutions, staff and students are all positioned

14 competitively," (p. 354) subjects (and this includes public relations) are ranked and compared with

15 others which means that unpopular or unsuccessful courses are unlikely to survive.

16 The marketisation of HE can be described as "the new order of the day within HE where cutbacks in

17 state funding forces universities worldwide to look for other sources of support and reconsider or

18 redefine their reasons for being" (Askehave, 2007, p. 724). It is part of the wider marketisation of

19 former public services and requires universities to constantly generate revenue (Holmwood, 2016).

20 Initially, public relations programmes grew as a subdiscipline of journalism (Grunig, 1989; L'Etang,

21 2013) but today educational programmes in which public relations is subordinate to disciplines

22 include advertising (Matilla *et al.*, 2018) and marketing (Fernandez-Souto *et al.*, 2020; Moloney,

23 1997). This shift raises concerns about the risk of these programmes becoming subservient to the

24 goals and methods of other disciplines, posing a challenge to the development of a well-defined and

25 critical understanding of the industry's specific practices.

26 As key actors in society, HE institutions fulfil the function of educating and preparing students for

27 their entry into the workforce (Kisiolek *et al.*, 2020) but the marketisation of HE has put pressure on

28 the range of degree offerings available (Alves and Tomlinson, 2021. *Williamson et al.,* 2020). The

29 growth of increasingly diverse student populations, as well as the positioning of students as

30 consumers by educational institutions, has added several layers of complexity to the way that

1 students select, and universities market, their programmes (Knight, 2019). As Askehave (2007)

2 observes, universities are dedicating an increasing amount of time to attracting fee-paying students,

3 competing for research grants, conducting research that appeals to corporate sponsors, and

4 developing marketable offerings. This shift in focus has resulted in a decreased emphasis on the

5 traditional civic mission of HE (Askehave, 2007), which encompassed the dissemination of

6 knowledge from academics, fostered human development, and created knowledge that was not

7 solely utilitarian in nature. Thus, there appears to be a shift in priorities that may lead to a

8 transformation of the discursive practices in HE, placing a greater emphasis on achieving differential

9 value between institutions. It is this transformation that will be examined in this article.

10 ## 2.2.   Higher Education Prospectuses

11 Prospectuses – which can be accessed both online via university websites and offline as printed

12 brochures and pamphlets - are fundamental materials for promoting educational offerings in HE.

13 They serve as essential tools for highlighting the distinctive values of educational programmes

14 (Fairclough, 1993; Knight, 2022; Mogaji and Yoon, 2019). The prospectus provides detailed

15 information on, for instance, degree programmes, admission requirements, university facilities,

16 internship and employment opportunities, and alumni experiences. The online nature of

17 prospectuses has expanded their reach, allowing potential students to explore and compare

18 educational offerings from multiple institutions (Knight, 2022) and increasing their accessibility to

19 international students too (Askehave, 2007). Furthermore, the many HE comparison sites (such as

20 WhatUni.com and Findamasters.com) make it easy for students to interrogate the information from

21 individual universities.

22 The prospectus is used as marketing material by HE institutions in the era of the massification of

23 educational offerings (Knight, 2022). Nevertheless, in the context of the UK, prospectuses are highly

24 standardised (Chapleo, 2011), and the symbolic value of degrees lies in the discourses employed

25 within them (Knight, 2019). These carefully crafted discourses convey encoded messages that

26 present a value proposition, projecting a distinctive image of the institutions with the aim of

27 attracting prospective students. This can include messages and images encompassing aspects such

28 as student experience (e.g., accommodation, facilities, student support), university credibility (e.g.,

29 place in league tables, alumni, history, and tradition), career progression (e.g., employability and

30 career services, graduate employment record, industry connections, work placements), place

1 branding (e.g., the city, the campus, social activities, culture, and population) and programmes (e.g.,

2 accreditation by professional bodies, teaching staff, programme structure), (Askehave, 2007; Bisani

3 *et al.*, 2022; Mogaji and Yoon, 2019).

2.3. Public Relations in the UK Higher Education context

5 Historically, universities would have given students an academic background in a traditional subject

6 and public relations training would have been largely 'on the job'. This leads to one of the

7 fundamental issues in public relations teaching and programme development: The 'gap', or the

8 disparity between what students aspire to study, what employers require graduates to know, and

9 what academics (who may be former practitioners or academics in their own field) believe should

10 be taught or deem essential for students. This debate frequently revolves around whether

11 universities should provide 'oven ready' graduates who can fit immediately into any job or whether

12 they should ensure that students are employable by giving them knowledge and contexts to apply

13 to their public relations learning once they start work (e.g., Edmondson, 2023; Yaxley, 2023).

14 According to Yaxley (2017), there has been little UK-based empirical research into the career

15 implications of gaining a public relations qualification. Moloney *et al.* (1999) found that three-

16 quarters of graduates of the Bournemouth University Public Relations programme were employed

17 in public relations positions post-graduation, and over half of those reported holding strategic roles,

18 showing positive indications of career progression evident in their salary levels and job titles.

19 Meanwhile, the absence of a vocational degree is not necessarily a barrier to knowledge acquisition.

20 Pieczka (2006) observed that public relations knowledge was mostly transmitted through practice

21 and former Public Relations Consultants Association chief executive Francis Ingham (2011)

22 questioned the value of some public relations degrees to the industry, claiming that graduates

23 needed to be "of much greater, immediate value to employers. Oven ready so to speak" (Ingham,

24 2011). Ruck and Bailey (2023) and Watson (2013) moot that there has historically been tension

25 between the practitioners and educators in public relations regarding the validity and importance

26 of academic research and theory. Recent research indicates a shift in thinking, with practitioners

27 increasingly recognizing the value of academic insights (Ruck and Bailey, 2023) but it is unclear

28 whether public relations degrees past and present lean more towards the academic or vocational

29 (or combine both).

1   The Chartered Institute of Public Relations' criteria for university programme recognition (Table 1)

2   suggests a strong steer towards vocational skills. Universities, aware that this accreditation is valued

3   highly by potential students and employers (Kumar *et al.*, 2020; Saad, 2022), may feel obliged to

4   include these criteria alongside or in place of academic learning. Meanwhile, the USA-based

5   Commission on Public Relations Education (2023) report points to "seismic changes" that have

6   affected the delivery of public relations education in recent years. These changes include shifts in

7   teaching and working practices due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, unprecedented global events

8   such as the conflict in Ukraine [bringing recognition of the role of communication and public affairs

9   in new ways], the rise in social media and data analytics sophistication and use and the growth of

10   artificial intelligence (p. 18). These factors have all led to a change in public relations practice and

11   what industry bodies - and employers - deem important.

12   Table 1: Chartered Institute of Public Relations' programme recognition criteria

Key areas	Aspects
PR practice	Its role and scope; writing; commissioning design and photography; media relations; campaigns; research; planning; social media/digital communication; CSR; relationship, issues, crisis and reputation management; ethics; sponsorship; pressure groups and activism; current debates and trends
Communication knowledge and theory	The background and development of PR; systems theory; propaganda; persuasion; power; publics; co-orientation; critical perspectives on PR; Excellence theory; organisational, political and social culture; change and complexity theories; rhetoric; social psychology including motivation and influence; ethical theories; how PR impacts upon society politically, socially, economically and morally
Business skills and knowledge	IT skills; financial and budget awareness; time management; staff management; business planning; marketing; advertising
Professionalism	Codes of conduct; regulation; legal considerations; standards
Specialisations	Sector specialisations such as financial, consumer, B2B, health, environmental, leisure etc; role specialisations such as public affairs, investor relations, media relations, internal communication, crisis management, marketing communication, etc.

13   Source: (CIPR, n.d.).

1   According to a recent study by Ruck and Bailey (2023), the call for vocational training across the
2   industry seems strong; there are more practitioners enrolled on professional qualifications than
3   there are students on public relations undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in the
4   UK. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see professional qualifications as not having a strong
5   academic framework; Ruck and Bailey (2023) observed that the CIPR qualifications have been
6   underpinned by an academic framework since 2016.

7   Debate around the ideal content of public relations degree programmes is ongoing. As Brunner *et*
8   *al.* (2018) notes: "Historically, many practitioners have cautioned that public relations educators
9   ignore the input of those hiring graduates in order to meet the demands of students and
10   administrators" (p. 22), and this is potentially seen in programme descriptions which put the needs
11   of the university and student above the occupation of public relations. Similarly, the Summit of the
12   Commission on Public Relations Education (2015) suggested that educators need to help
13   practitioners to understand the way universities work and how they are often hampered by resource
14   limitations, accreditation issues and coursework requirements. Simply put, they cannot always
15   teach what practitioners want and this might be different from what the profession needs anyway.
16

17   The offer of a single-honours public relations degree is in steep decline. As mentioned above there
18   are only two single honours BA Public Relations degree programmes currently offered and many
19   universities (including Leeds Beckett, Bournemouth and Sheffield Hallam) have closed their single
20   honours degrees and offer public relations alongside other subjects instead.

21   A study which examined the convergence of public relations with other disciplines in undergraduate
22   degree programmes in Portugal, Spain, the US, and the UK has revealed a significant number of
23   programmes that integrate public relations and marketing in the title, sometimes combined with
24   advertising or media studies (Fernandez-Souto *et al.*, 2020). This reinforces the notion that
25   specialisation in public relations is losing ground in HE. In light of this, Yaxley (2023) emphasises the
26   importance of promoting specialised and recognized programmes in this field, enabling students to
27   acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become ethical, reflective, and strategic public
28   relations professionals capable of making informed decisions and driving positive change within
29   organisations and society as a whole.

1 Based on the literature discussed above, this study posits the following research questions (RQs) in

2 order to understand the current undergraduate public relations programme provision in the UK and

3 provide a comprehensive analysis of the discursive practices shaping their promotion:

4   RQ1: What disciplines are taught alongside public relations in the undergraduate

5   programmes offered in the UK?

6   RQ2: What rhetorical devices are employed by universities in online prospectuses to present

7   public relations as a discipline?

8

9 **3. Methodology**

10 This study examines the prospectuses of official undergraduate degrees in public relations in the

11 UK. The focus on undergraduate degrees offers a deeper exploration of a specific type of

12 programme.

13 **3.1. Data collection**

14 The public relations undergraduate degrees were identified through the Discover Uni website,

15 which is an official source of information about HE in the UK. It is managed by regulatory and funding

16 bodies of HE in the UK, such as the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, the Higher

17 Education Funding Council for Wales, the Office for Students in England, and the Scottish Funding

18 Council (Discovery Uni, n.d.), making it a suitable and reliable source. By searching for two keywords,

19 "public relations" and "PR", 29 UK undergraduate programmes were identified on November 16,

20 2022. However, only 25 were analysed as four had ceased to exist by the time the study was carried

21 out between June 2023 and January 2024 (see Table 2). It should be added that online prospectuses

22 (and programmes) are in a constant state of change which means that some of the programme

23 information may no longer be found on university websites.

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1   Table 2. Distribution of public relations undergraduate programme within the UK universities

Region	University	Faculty/College	School	Programme name
England	University of the Arts, London	London College of Fashion	School of Media and Communication	BA (Hons) Fashion Public Relations and Communication
England	University of the Arts, London	London College of Communication	Media School	BA (Hons) Public Relations
England	University of Bedfordshire	Creative Arts Technologies and Science	School of Arts and Creative Industries	BA (Hons) Media, Marketing and Public Relations
England	Birmingham City University	Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences	Birmingham City Business School	BA (Hons) Marketing with Advertising and Public Relations
England	Birmingham City University	Faculty of Arts, Design and Media	Birmingham School of Media	BA (Hons) Public Relations and Media
England	Bournemouth University	Faculty of Media & Communication		BA (Hons) Marketing Communications with Public Relations
England	Canterbury Christ Church University	Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education	School of Creative Arts and Industries	BA (Single or combined honours) Public Relations and Media
England	Coventry University	nd	Business School	BA (Hons) Marketing and Public Relations
England	University of Derby	College of Business, Law and Social Sciences	Derby Business School	BA (Hons) Marketing, PR and Advertising
England	Leeds Beckett University	nd	Leeds Business School	BA (Hons) Marketing and Public Relations
England	Leeds Beckett University	nd	Leeds Business School	BA (Hons) Public Relations and Brand Communication
England	London Metropolitan University	nd	School of Business and Law	BA (Hons) Advertising, Marketing Communications and Public Relations
England	Middlesex University	Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries	nd	BA (Hons) Advertising, Public Relations and Branding
England	Northumbria University	nd	nd	BA (Hons) Mass Communication with Public Relations
England	Richmond, the American International University in London	nd	School of Communications, Arts & Social Sciences	BA (Hons) Communications: Advertising & PR
England	The University of Salford	Journalism Faculty	Salford School of Arts, Media, and Creative Technology.	BA (Hons) Journalism with Public Relations
England	Sheffield Hallam University	College of Social Sciences and Arts	nd	BA (Hons) Journalism, Public Relations with Media
England	The University of West London	nd	London School of Film, Media and Design	BA (Hons) Advertising and Public Relations
England	University of Worcester	nd	Worcester Business School	BA (Hons) Marketing Advertising and Public Relations
North Ireland	Ulster University	Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	School of Communication and Media	BSc (Hons) Communication Management and Public Relations
Scotland	Edinburgh Napier University	nd	School of Arts and Creative Industries	BA (Hons) Mass Communications, Advertising & Public Relations
Scotland	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	nd	School of Arts, Social Sciences and Management	BA (Hons) Public Relations and Marketing Communications
Wales	Cardiff Metropolitan University	nd	Cardiff School of Management	BA (Hons) Public Relations (PR) and Marketing Management
Wales	Swansea University	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	School of Culture and Communication	BA (Hons) Public Relations and Media

2   Source: Author

3

4   **3.2.   Data analysis**

5   The data analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved a descriptive analysis of the

6   universities offering public relations undergraduate degrees. This analysis focused on data cleansing

1   and practical issues, such as verifying the existence of programmes titles. Additionally, it involved

2   reviewing and analysing factors such as the universities, faculties, colleges or schools where these

3   degrees are offered, their location, and the programmes titles.

4   The second stage involved the analysis of the main discourses utilised to present the public relations

5   undergraduate prospectuses, employing the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach as guided

6   by scholars such as Van Dijk (2015) and Fairclough and Wodak (1997). CDA allows delving into the

7   intricate relationship between language, power dynamics, and social structures (Fairclough and

8   Wodak, 1997). The CDA targets only two sections (the course/programme overview and career

9   paths), as these sections provide insight into how universities present public relations as a

10   professional and/or academic discipline and its possible career paths.

11   The CDA of the 'course/programme overview' section looked for phrases and words which offered

12   more than simple descriptions but were where universities tried to "explain them in terms of

13   properties of social interaction and especially social structure, and confirm, legitimate, reproduce,

14   or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society" (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 467).

15   Consequently, phrases which described how the institution *saw* public relations as a field of study

16   and its position in business/society was pivotal, as was how it viewed the student prospects of

17   pursuing a public relations career. As online prospectuses can be varied, this study focuses on the

18   following areas:

19   (1) how the programme described itself and, through this, how the institution saw public

20   relations, e.g., "Prepare for a career in the fast-moving fields of journalism, PR and media

21   — gaining the skills and knowledge you need for a range of exciting roles." (Sheffield Hallam

22   University);

23   (2) its content, teaching and learning and through this, the value placed on academic or

24   practical learning, e.g., "a real-life client-centred approach to learning through project work,

25   campaigns and consultancy in this dynamic sector" (Leeds Beckett University); "develop

26   your business skills along with your public relations counselling and planning capabilities"

27   (University of Bedfordshire). This section also allowed a reading of what words were used

28   to describe a more theoretical course (e.g., "theory", "globalisation", "research" and

29   "sociological") and those which were used when technical aspects were being discussed

30   (e.g., "real life", "fast-paced" and "hands on.")

1   (3) its learning environment/type of programme or university, e.g., "a dynamic and exciting

2   environment" (Northumbria University). This allowed us to explore how the university

3   positioned itself and its place branding.

4   The 'career paths' section serves as a crucial persuasive tool for universities to showcase the

5   programme's potential to direct students to successful public relations careers. A non-critical

6   reading would suggest that this section provides insights into the diverse career opportunities

7   available to graduates and records previous graduate success as well as discussing potential work

8   placements or internships available to students and gives ideas for future study (such as pursuing

9   master's degrees). However, this section gives valuable insight into how different universities 'see'

10   public relations and their ambitions for their students. As a result, the CDA explored the experience

11   and expectations of public relations degrees and where they were positioned within business and

12   wider society. For instance, Middlesex University foregrounds the entrepreneurial side of public

13   relations ("you may go on to become self-employed and run your own business, agency or start-

14   up") while University of Worcester tells readers how the course "prepares" students, thus

15   positioning its vocational attributes.

16   Understanding how universities present public relations as both a professional and academic

17   discipline offers valuable insights into their marketing and promotional strategies and sheds light on

18   the overall discourse surrounding public relations education and the positioning of public relations

19   as a discipline.

20

21   **4.   Findings**

22   **4.1.   Descriptive Analysis of Public Relations Undergraduate Programmes**

23   The descriptive analysis of public relations undergraduate degrees (RQ1) makes it possible to study

24   which universities offer public relations undergraduate programmes and to what extent these

25   programmes are associated with other disciplines. Table 2 illustrates an overview of the availability

26   of public relations undergraduate programmes within the UK. The majority (80%) of public relations

27   undergraduate programmes offered in the UK are taught in England, while the remaining 20% are

28   in Scotland (2), Wales (2), and Northern Ireland (1) (Table 2).

1 Most of these undergraduate programmes tend to be located within faculties or schools of Business

2 and Management, Media and Communication, or Arts & Creative Industries (Table 2). There are 17

3 cases where public relations is associated with other disciplines in the name of the undergraduate

4 programme (e.g., mass communication or marketing communications). Where three disciplines

5 make up a programme name (e.g., 'Media, Marketing and Public Relations' or 'Marketing,

6 Advertising and Public Relations', etc.), public relations can nearly always be found in third place

7 although it is not possible to say whether this is due to subjects being arranged alphabetically, in

8 order of importance, or in relation to the weight given to disciplines within a degree programme.

9 Some programmes are integrated with distinct aspects related to the same discipline (e.g.,

10 'Communication Management and Public Relations' or 'Public Relations and Brand

11 Communication').

12

13 **4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis of Public Relations Undergraduate Programmes**

14 This section explores the rhetorical strategies employed by universities in online prospectuses when

15 discussing their public relations programmes, place of study and career prospects in answer to RQ2.

16 **4.2.1. Course/Programme Overview**

17 *4.2.1.1. The position of the reader: Understanding the promotion of public relations programmes*

18 Askehave (2007) commented that some programme prospectuses have a "concern for the reader"

19 and it can be seen in our sample that many prospectuses address the reader (the prospective

20 student or their parents) directly—something we would anticipate in a market where a degree is

21 perceived as a marketable commodity. For instance, the University of Northumbria, Newcastle,

22 poses the question: *"Are you ready to immerse yourself in a dynamic and exciting environment?"*

23 presenting public relations as vibrant and active (although not necessarily emphasising its academic

24 aspects, a point explored later), directly engaging with the prospective student. Likewise, Swansea

25 University positions public relations in a similar way: "*Study a Public Relations and Media degree*

26 *with us, and you will be able to gain the skills to equip you for a successful career in this exciting*

27 *field*". The University of the West of London goes further: *"Want to promote, share and shout it*

28 *from the rooftops?".* The disconnect with public relations as a strategic management function and

29 the positioning of it as a tactical and modern career can be seen throughout the opening sentences

1   of the prospectus entries, presenting public relations as a fun, exciting, but not necessarily academic

2   or strategic pursuit. Few programmes present public relations alongside a management function

3   (such as Marketing Management or Communication Management) suggesting that this is not seen

4   as attractive to potential students.

5   Through these and similar statements it appears that applicants to public relations-focussed

6   programmes in the UK are being groomed for lower paid and lower status roles in public relations

7   which may not be what the programme and marketing teams intend when they wrote the

8   prospectus copy and further examples of this will be given when careers are discussed below (4.2.2).

9

10   Symes (1996) noted that university prospectuses "must appeal to a constituency of students for

11   whom the appeal of further study does not provide the primary raison d'etre for attending university

12   and for whom the academic protocols of the university are often alien and unfamiliar" (p. 139) which

13   points to the need to sell the idea of life after university rather than university itself.

14   Such students are - inadvertently - being prepared for what Cline *et al.* (1986) termed the 'Velvet

15   Ghetto.' This refers to the tendency for women's roles in public relations to be concentrated in

16   lower-paying positions, such as event planning and administrative roles, while men dominate

17   higher-level positions and decision-making roles. This phenomenon is rooted in societal

18   expectations, gender biases, and limited opportunities for career advancement for women and it is

19   the 'Velvet Ghetto' which restricts women's access to higher-paying positions and hinders their

20   professional growth and development. Women outnumber men in media-related degree

21   programmes - the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2018) noted that in 2017/18, 77% of students

22   in the UK graduating with a degree in Media Studies were female while 23% were male and the

23   authors have noted a similar gender split in their public relations classes in the UK and Spain. These

24   gender ratios, coupled with language that sees public relations as a tactical and fun occupation,

25   appear to further reinforce the idea of a 'Velvet Ghetto'.

1 It could be argued that the language used in prospectuses is gendered, furthering the idea that

2 public relations is a feminised career and presenting it as frivolous and unchallenging and ultimately

3 post-modern. For instance, Canterbury Christ Church University presents public relations as a

4 tactical career with no clear career path or management progression. The phrase 'talent for

5 communications' suggests a skill that people are born with, and it can be manifested through tactical

6 public relations work rather than leadership or other higher-level careers.

7 *Learn how to identify a target audience, prepare effective messages and select the right*

8 *media channels as you develop your talent for communications. Explore the world of social*

9 *media and learn how to use your creative and digital skills to influence audiences on behalf*

10 *of your clients.*

11 This can also be seen in the course description for Coventry University which claims that a career in

12 the marketing industries is "fast-paced, exciting and fun." None of the negative aspects of careers

13 in the cultural industries (e.g., long hours, lack of social diversity) are ever discussed.

14 Meanwhile, Bournemouth University positions public relations as a management function and,

15 perhaps drawing on its heritage as one of the first UK universities to offer a public relations degree

16 (L'Etang, 1999), presents its Marketing Communications with Public Relations programme as one

17 which produces leaders and innovators in industry - one of the few universities to do so:

18 *This programme is designed to produce visionary Marketing Communications professionals*

19 *[...]. Our graduates will be able to define new industry practices and benchmarks for*

20 *excellence in their field; they will be facilitated and supported in becoming independent,*

21 *innovative, strategic, creative, entrepreneurial, and ethical practitioners. Our most*

22 *successful graduates will be capable of contributing to the transformation of their industries.*

23 Most programmes run a middle ground between describing a public relations career as tactical or

24 managerial (such as the University of Bedfordshire which tells applicants they will "*develop business*

25 *skills along with your public relations counselling and planning capabilities*") and focus on a mix of

26 tangible learning and soft skills (such as counselling). It is interesting to note that Krishna *et al.* (2020)

27 observed that US practitioners saw the top three skills for aspiring public relations practitioners as

28 being writing, listening, and creative thinking - themselves intangible and soft skills, further

29 complicating what can be described in the context of public relations teaching. Meanwhile Leeds

30 Beckett claims that students will learn to 'manage relationships' and highlights the interdisciplinary

1   nature of the programme (*"Develop a critical, reflective and creative approach to the study of*

2   *marketing, PR and digital communications"*) using, in common with many other provider's language

3   which may mean little to those new to university study, but which enhances the value of a degree

4   through the promise of new knowledge. On the whole, public relations is seen as a well-paid and

5   exciting career for the present. Management and leadership knowledge and opportunities are

6   largely backgrounded.

7   *The position of the reader: Public relations as an academic discipline*

8   Public relations can be taught as an academic discipline from several critical perspectives as outlined

9   above. According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency,

10   2014) students who have completed an undergraduate degree should have "a systematic

11   understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed

12   knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a

13   discipline" and be able to "critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data

14   (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a

15   solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem" (p. 26) which positions a degree as being

16   more than a technical training programme. Overall, the programme descriptions make reference to

17   theory or the academic credentials, but these tend not to be foregrounded. As discussed above,

18   although recognition of the value of theory is increasing among practitioners (Ruck and Bailey,

19   2023), the value of public relations theory "is one of the most contingent and conflictual topics in

20   PR" (Chmiel and Moise, 2024, p. 7). In addition to this programmes are having to align their offering

21   with the needs of accreditation professional associations such as the CIPR - which can lead to a more

22   vocationally-focussed approach. Sheffield Hallam University is typical of many universities where it

23   confirms that the programme has an academic component ("*you'll examine key theories and issues*

24   *relating to journalism, PR and media*") but with little further explanation. Some programmes

25   mention elements of study (such as psychology or sociology) but leave it to the reader to work out

26   how this fits into the study of public relations.

27   It is noteworthy that while theory or academic content is widely mentioned it is usually as part of

28   the programme narrative and given the same weighting as other skills-based or professional

29   components. Unlike other practical areas of the curriculum, it is rarely explained in more depth, the

30   London College of Communication being one of the few exceptions:

1   *You'll consider both the theory and practice of PR through promotional, relational and*

2   *dialogic lenses. You'll also consider publics and stakeholders from sociological, cultural and*

3   *socio-psychological perspectives.*

4   Sometimes the purpose of learning theory is explained:

5   *A key aim of the course is to give you a deeper understanding of different theory & ideas and*

6   *how these relate to the professional and working environment.* (Ulster University)

7   In some cases the programme overview (the 'sub-headline' for the prospectus entry) highlights the

8   importance of the critical aspects of study, positioning the study of public relations as an academic

9   discipline from the outset:

10 *It also provides you with an informed understanding of the social, political and historical*

11 *forces that have produced our contemporary media forms and institutions.* (University of

12 Bedfordshire)

13 Overall, however, theory is generally positioned as one of a list of competencies rather than a

14 foundation of degree level study:

15 *From podcasting to political journalism, content creation to crisis communications, you will*

16 *gain a firm grounding in the theory and practice of both journalism and PR.* (University of

17 Salford)

18 While certain programmes may not prioritise theoretical content in their descriptions, it does not

19 mean they lack academic rigour but rather that the prospectus authors decided to prioritise what

20 the market (or the University management) demanded. Nonetheless, Leaning (2015) observes in

21 the teaching of media students that media theory "often seems a radical departure from the

22 students' expectations and preferred activities (the creation of media texts)" (p. 156), adding that

23 students without knowledge of media are often surprised that the subject is informed by a

24 theoretical body of knowledge and find assessments difficult. This suggests that the promotion of

25 an academic element of a programme to students who are not expected to receive high grades at

26 'A' level or BTEC (specialist work-related qualifications provided by the Business and Technology

27 Education Council) may be deliberately backgrounded.

28

1   **4.2.2. Career paths**

2   *4.2.2.1. Employability promises*

3   As Mogaji and Yoon (2019) argued, "students do not want to pay a large amount of school fees and
4   not secure their future" (p. 1574). In the pursuit of promising career paths, university prospectuses
5   become crucial as they pledge skills development to enhance employability. For instance, Leeds
6   Beckett University confidently states, "*[y]ou will have strong employment prospects across*
7   *industries, and particularly in communications,*" and the University of Derby assures "[y*]ou'll have a*
8   *great foundation to begin a successful career in areas like account, product, brand, or*
9   *communications management.*" While these promises are aligned with the scope of communication
10   and establish public relations as a management function (Tam *et al.*, 2022), other universities
11   venture beyond these realms:

12   *"This course prepares you for a career in one of the many sectors of the marketing and*
13   *advertising industry"* (London Metropolitan University)

14   *"others will secure successful associate and account management roles in public relations*
15   *and marketing industries in the UK and worldwide"* (University of the Arts London)

16   They emphasise marketing and advertising as the primary career paths for graduates, positioning
17   public relations as a subset of these frameworks in the employability offer (Yaxley, 2023). This
18   disparity can raise critical questions about the perception and positioning of public relations within
19   these programmes. Possible explanations for the emphasis on marketing and advertising might be
20   that they are perceived as more appealing to students and employers, or it suggests a
21   misunderstanding of the complex field of public relations and the resulting use of the word
22   'marketing' to describe public relations.

23   As a result, it appears that universities are prioritising marketing and advertising over public
24   relations in their programme offerings and career guidance. However, this narrow focus on
25   marketing and advertising overlooks the crucial role that public relations plays in reputation
26   management, crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, and fostering long-term
27   relationships with stakeholders. By downplaying the significance of public relations, universities may
28   unintentionally perpetuate the misconception that it is merely a supportive function of marketing
29   and advertising, rather than a strategic and indispensable discipline on its own (Tam *et al.*, 2022).

1 This could result in a lack of awareness among students about the diverse career opportunities and

2 value that public relations professionals bring to organisations.

3 In addition, the historical association of public relations programmes with journalism (Grunig, 1989;

4 L'Etang, 2013) remains evident. For instance, the University of Salford positions public relations

5 alongside various journalism-related careers. The connection to journalism may inadvertently

6 perpetuate the misconception that public relations focuses solely on media relations and press

7 releases.

8 Some undergraduate degrees also promise developing technical competency in "*audio-visual and*

9 *digital content creation, alongside advanced skills in media and creative communication*" or building

10 skills in "*professional working environment*". However, the majority focus on the professional skills

11 that the Chartered Institute of Public Relations suggested for university programme recognition

12 (CIPR, n.d.).

13 *4.2.2.2. Work placements*

14 In recent years, work placements have gained considerable attention in university prospectuses,

15 particularly for institutions where the discourse emphasises graduate employability as a primary

16 goal (Knight, 2020). Universities actively integrate work placements into career paths as they offer

17 the opportunity to gain practical experience, develop personal and professional skills, and build

18 professional relationships. For instance, Birmingham City University highlights the benefits of its

19 programme; thus, the option of local or worldwide placements meaning that every type of applicant

20 can feel that their needs are met:

21 *"By choosing this course, you'll have the opportunity to undertake a one-year, paid work*

22 *placement. We have links with many businesses across industries, locally and worldwide."*

23 Nevertheless, most universities present work placements as an optional component of the

24 programme:

25 "*The option of including a year of experience in the industry in year three has been included*

26 *to allow you to complete the degree with a level of practical experience."* (Cardiff

27 Metropolitan University)

1   This optional industry experience aligns with the concept of "hope labour" discussed by Allan (2019),

2   where internships and work placements are perceived as investments that may lead to future

3   employment. While this approach provides students with flexibility to tailor their studies according

4   to their interests and career goals, it also raises concerns. The optional nature of industry experience

5   may create challenges for students who choose not to partake in it due to their economic or social

6   circumstances. They might miss out on valuable practical skills, potentially putting them at a

7   disadvantage in competitive job markets. This situation is reminiscent of the difficulties faced by

8   marginalised groups in accessing volunteer opportunities that could develop their essential skills

9   and networks (Allan, 2019).

10   Pieczka's (2006) view that public relations knowledge is predominantly imparted through practical

11   experience can be seen in the drive by universities to provide the best prospects of employability

12   through the integration of work placements and contact with employers into the degree. By doing

13   this, students can acquire a diverse skill set and gain first-hand exposure to real-world scenarios,

14   thereby fostering their readiness to meet the demands of the promised dynamic job market.

15   Through work placements, students can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and

16   practical application, ensuring a comprehensive preparation for their future careers.

17   In this context, some universities boast about their connections with local and international

18   businesses as well as their reputation in specific sectors as part of their promotional strategy.

19   Meanwhile other universities lack specificity about the companies or organisations with which

20   internships or practical experiences can be obtained.

21   **5. Discussion and conclusions**

22   We set out to answer two research questions in this article. Firstly, to discover what public relations

23   undergraduate degrees were offered in the UK and the extent to which programmes were

24   integrated with other disciplines, and secondly, to discover the rhetorical devices used to present

25   public relations as a professional and academic discipline by universities in the online prospectuses.

26

27   As noted in previous studies (Ruck and Bailey, 2023), public relations is rarely a standalone subject

28   within the context of British education. The placing of the public relations subject within

29   undergraduate curricula unveils a multifaceted connection between this discipline and other

30   academic domains. The strategic placement of public relations in either the secondary position or

31   as a collaborative component alongside other subjects in programme titles underscores the

1   subordinate nature to which public relations is subjected in UK universities (e.g., Fernandez-Souto

2   *et al.*, 2020; Matilla *et al.*, 2018; Moloney, 1997). The infrequent instances in which public relations

3   is positioned as the primary focus within programme titles give rise to questions as to how

4   universities see the discipline and whether they feel it is attractive to students in its own right -

5   something which may be dictated by the organisational climate of the university.

6

7   This wide-ranging enquiry around public relations provision at British universities also demonstrates

8   that although the student is a consumer with choice, the presentation of the programmes is

9   sometimes 'headline grabbing,' making informed choice difficult, and can position public relations

10   as a tactical subject through a heavy emphasis on promotion and practical skills. Thus, while the

11   programme of study may contain these aspects, it may also include learning which the student may

12   not have expected.

13

14   Universities pledge to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the

15   professional world (e.g., Mogaji and Yoon, 2019; O'Neil *et al.*, 2023). Yet the commitments

16   universities make in their prospectuses concerning career prospects in public relations highlight a

17   complex dynamic. This reflects both the acknowledgement of public relations' significance and the

18   challenges it encounters in establishing its distinct position within the broader communication

19   industry. Many institutions place a strong emphasis on employability with a predominant focus on

20   marketing and advertising as potential career destinations. However, this concentration on

21   marketing and advertising careers inadvertently overlooks the strategic and indispensable role that

22   public relations plays in managing reputation, handling crises, and engaging stakeholders (e.g.,

23   Grunig, 2006; James, 2014). Consequently, the focus on careers in the marketing industries risks

24   perpetuating the misconception that public relations functions merely as a supportive appendage

25   to these functions, rather than as a specific discipline.

26

27   The limitations of this study lie in its specific application to the UK university context, and particularly

28   as it focuses on only two sections of prospectuses: career paths and course/programme overviews.

29   For future research, it would be interesting to supplement the study with other prospectus sections

30   (Bisani *et al.*, 2022; Mogaji and Yoon, 2019). Extending the scope to diverse university contexts

31   globally could also offer a more comprehensive understanding of how public relations programmes

32   are presented and promoted. A comparative analysis might uncover regional variations and best

1 practices which would contribute to the positioning of public relations as a distinctive discipline in

2 HE. Moreover, future studies could focus on understanding the influence and perspectives of those

3 who write and commission university prospectuses in the UK, examining whether descriptions

4 reflect the viewpoints of programme teams or whether promotional staff or university policy dictate

5 the programme narrative and presentation. Subsequent studies might also explore multiple

6 viewpoints, including those of students, parents, and industry professionals, considering the

7 potential risk of oversimplification for the new generation of applicants unfamiliar with the subject

8 of public relations and of university study.

9

10 Future studies could also explore whether aligning promotional materials more closely with the

11 actual nature of public relations programmes could contribute to a better understanding of the

12 industry and its career paths. This, in turn, may foster an improved understanding of the discipline

13 and its strategic significance in the industry. This impact could be further explored through surveys

14 or interviews with students to comprehend their degree choices. Additionally, investigating whether

15 graduates from these programmes feel adequately prepared for the workforce could involve

16 surveys or interviews with recruiters, enabling comparisons based on student outcomes. Lastly,

17 exploring faculty perceptions of online descriptions and their alignment with actual teaching and

18 crucial programme aspects could yield valuable insights.

19

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