



Physiotherapist Career Choice Factsheet

Background

This study forms part of a wider project between Health Education England and the University of Winchester exploring Allied Health Professions (AHP) career choices.

An online questionnaire was disseminated to current AHP students in England (undergraduate and postgraduate) for four weeks between February and March 2021. The aim was to explore and understand key motivations, sources of influence and barriers to choosing their specific profession.

The information and findings from the questionnaire will be shared via profession specific factsheets to help shape targeted careers information and guidance. This factsheet focuses on physiotherapy as a career of choice.

Physiotherapy student population in England

In 2020/2021 there were approximately 3884 active students on physiotherapy courses in England. In 2021/2022 this has risen to approximately 3957 active students.

Survey sample

- 134 physiotherapy students completed the questionnaire. It is acknowledged that this represents only 3% of the student population in 2020/2021.
- 75.9% of participants were female and 23.3% were male.
- This finding compares well with national statistics from NHS England, who found that females comprised 76% of the number of qualified physiotherapists working for the NHS in England in August 2021 with 24% male (NHS Digital, 2021).

Ethnicity

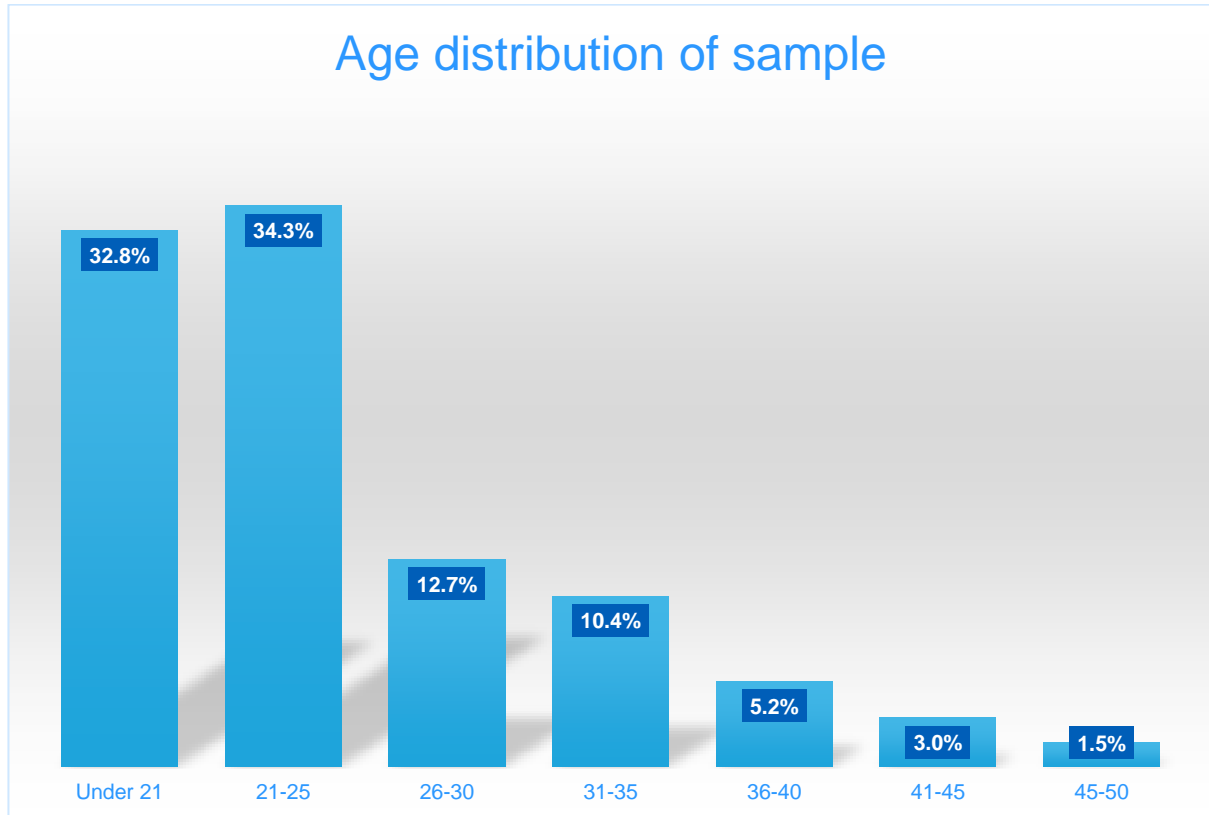
Ethnicity	Percentage of sample
White background	79.9%
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	7.5%
Asian background	7.5%
Black, African and Caribbean background	3.7%
Other	0.8%
Arab background	0.8%

The findings from our sample (shown in the table above) are lower than those from NHS England, who found that individuals from a white background comprised 87% of the number of qualified physiotherapists working for the NHS in England in August 2021 (NHS Digital, 2021).

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Age and stage at which participants made the decision to become a physiotherapist

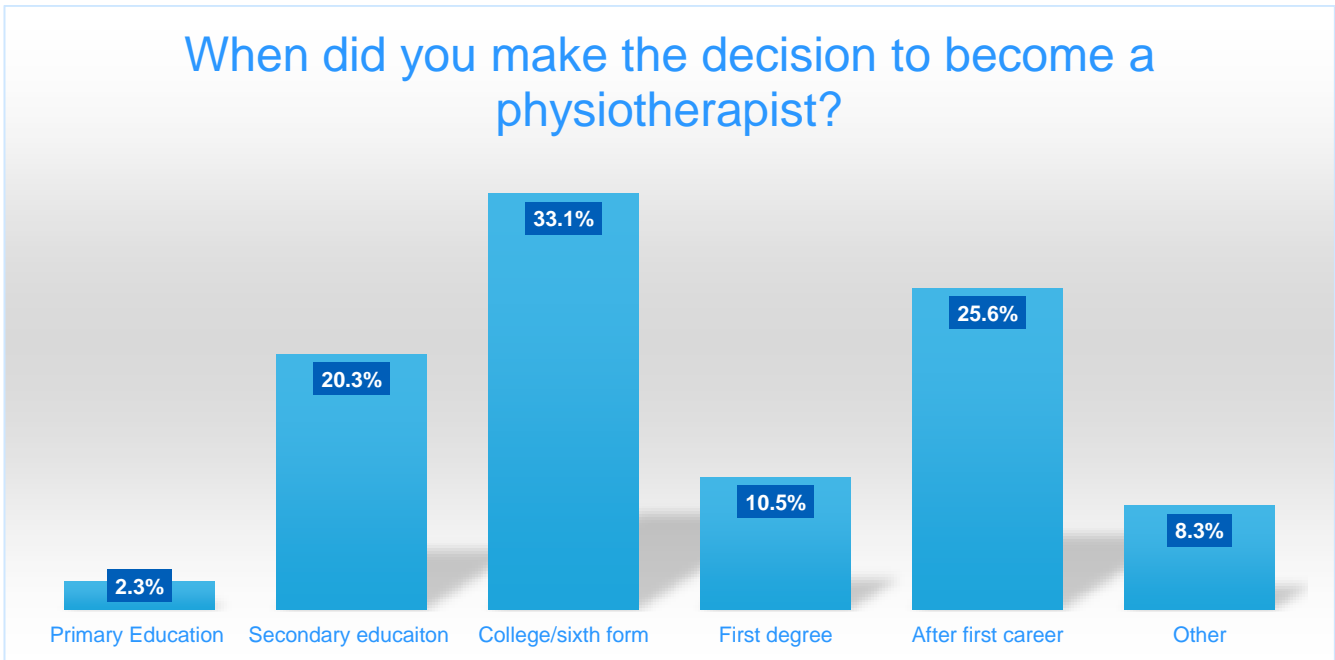
- In our sample, 67.1% of students were under 25.
- Only 4.5% of the sample were over 40 years of age, and no students were over 50.



55.7% of the sample had chosen physiotherapy during their school education. None had gone via university clearing. There was a large percentage of the sample (44.3%) who chose to become physiotherapist during their first degree, after their first career or at other stages.

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When did you make the decision to become a physiotherapist?

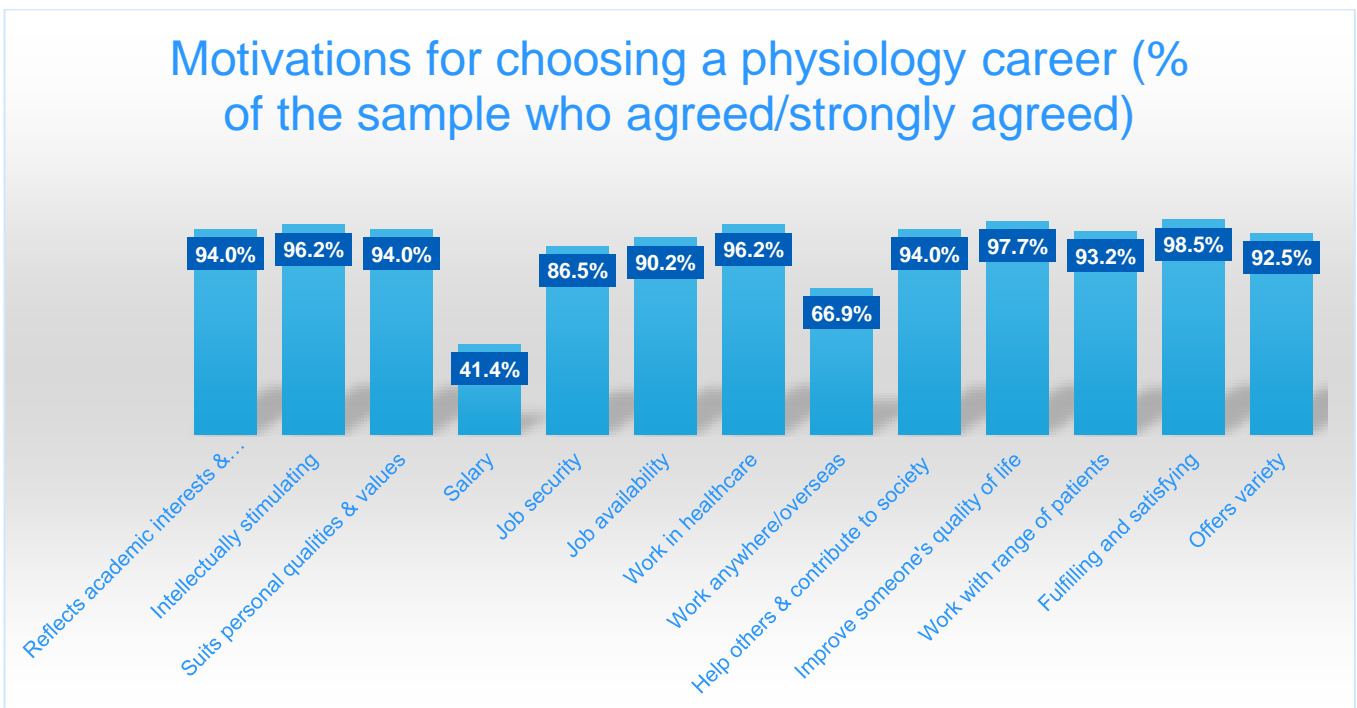


Motivations

Participants were asked to what extent different motivations impacted their physiotherapist career choice.

- Choosing a career 'that is fulfilling and satisfying' was the most popular motivation for choosing physiotherapy (98.5% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with this statement).
- The most commonly cited motivations are shown in the figure below.
- Across the 35 motivations in the questionnaire, only seven had less than 50% agreeing/strongly agreeing with the importance of the motivation.

Motivations for choosing a physiology career (% of the sample who agreed/strongly agreed)



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- Altruistic reasons such as 'where I can use my skills to improve the quality of life for a patient/service user' (97.7%), 'to help others and contribute to society' (94.0%) and choosing a career which is 'fulfilling and satisfying' (98.5%) were the most popular motivations for choosing physiotherapy.
- However, motivations based on the variety associated with the job were also important: choosing a job which 'offers variety' (92.5%), allows for 'working with a range of patients' (93.2%) and 'working in different environments' (87.2%) all scored highly.
- The perception of the nature of the job was also important for a large percentage of the sample. Choosing a career which 'reflects academic interest and abilities' (94.0%) and is 'intellectually stimulating' (96.2%) was an important motivation. It was less important for the participant whether physiotherapy had 'a good public image and prestige' (54.9%). Similarly, 41.4% agreed or strongly agreed that salary was a motivating factor.
- Participants were asked about the influence of the opportunity to work in the public and private sector. The public sector scored higher: 82.7% compared to 54.9%. It was interesting that working in healthcare (96.2%) and working in the NHS (87.2%) scored noticeably higher than the motivation to work in the public sector more generally, which may be due to unawareness of the scope of the physiotherapist's role.

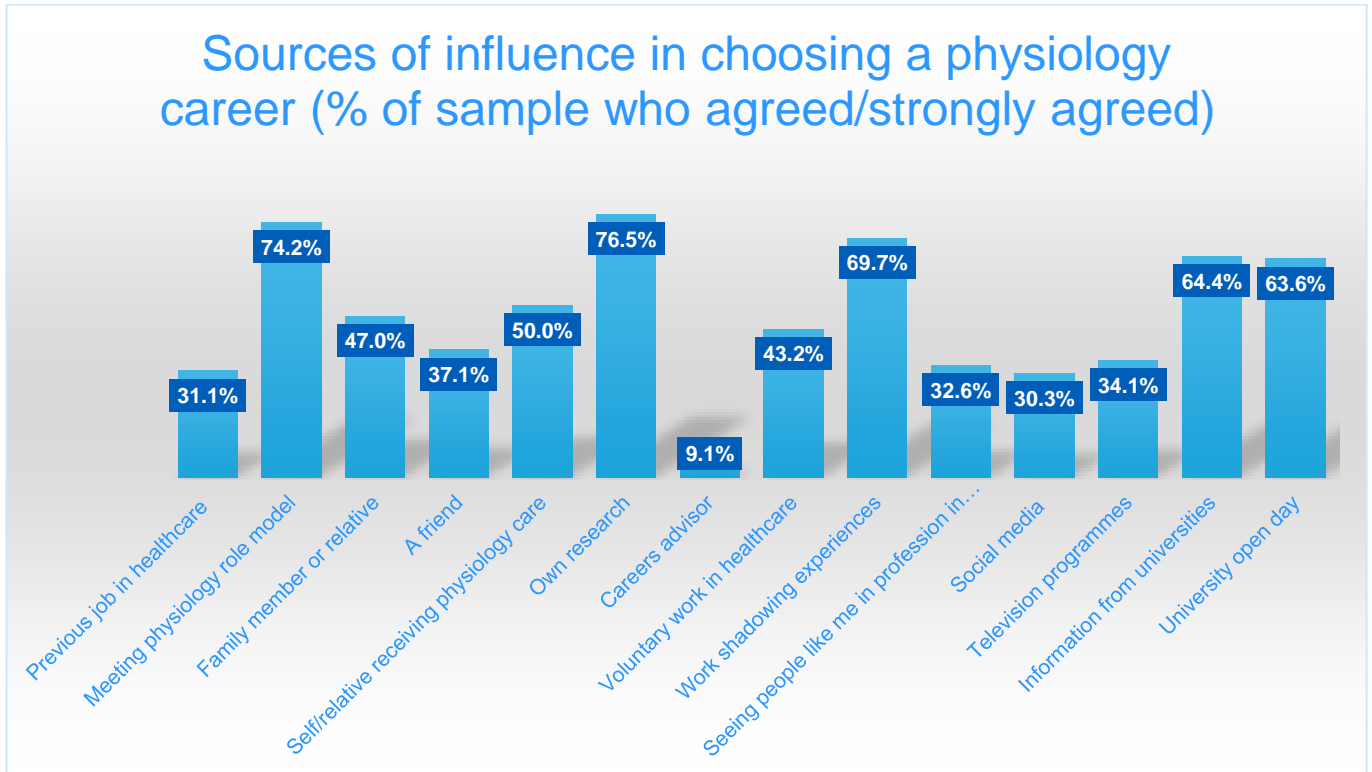
Sources of Influence

Participants were asked about the sources that influenced their career choice.

- The most influential factors were 'conducting my own research' (75.6% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed) and 'someone in the profession who was a really good role model' (74.2%).
- Selected sources of influence are shown in the figure below. These were selected either as the most cited influences or as an important recommended marketing opportunity (e.g., careers advisors and social media).
- University related sources tended to score higher (e.g., information from university 64.4% and open days 63.6%) than personal sources (e.g., family member 47%, friends 37%) and educational sources scores had the lowest score. Media sources were more influential than marketing sources.
- The impact of meeting a physiotherapist through personal interactions such as 'My own experience of being a patient/a relative receiving care from the profession' (50.0%) and 'Meeting someone in the profession who was a really good role model for me' (74.2%), emphasises the influence these encounters have on individuals choosing a physiotherapy career. It also highlights the opportunity for physiotherapists to act as career ambassadors when meeting patients but also in their daily life.
- The low percentage (9.1%) being influenced by career advisors is a concern. This finding is noticeable in that 33.1% of the sample chose to become a physiotherapist at college/sixth form suggesting reliance on external sources, such as university and personal sources.
- Exposure to the profession through working in a healthcare setting acted as a source of influence to varying degrees for the sample. Work shadowing specifically with physiotherapists had the highest influence factor (69.7% of the sample). 'Voluntary work in healthcare settings' was influential for 43.2% of the sample. 'My previous job in healthcare' was had only influenced 31.1% of the sample in choosing physiotherapy.

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- 30.3% had been influenced by social media. Interestingly this was higher than the influence of television programmes (34.1%) or television adverts (8.3%). This suggests a possible shift in the influence of different forms of media in promoting the profession.
- There was overall a large spread the source of influence in choosing a physiotherapy career, which may be linked to the relatively good recruitment rate for this profession.



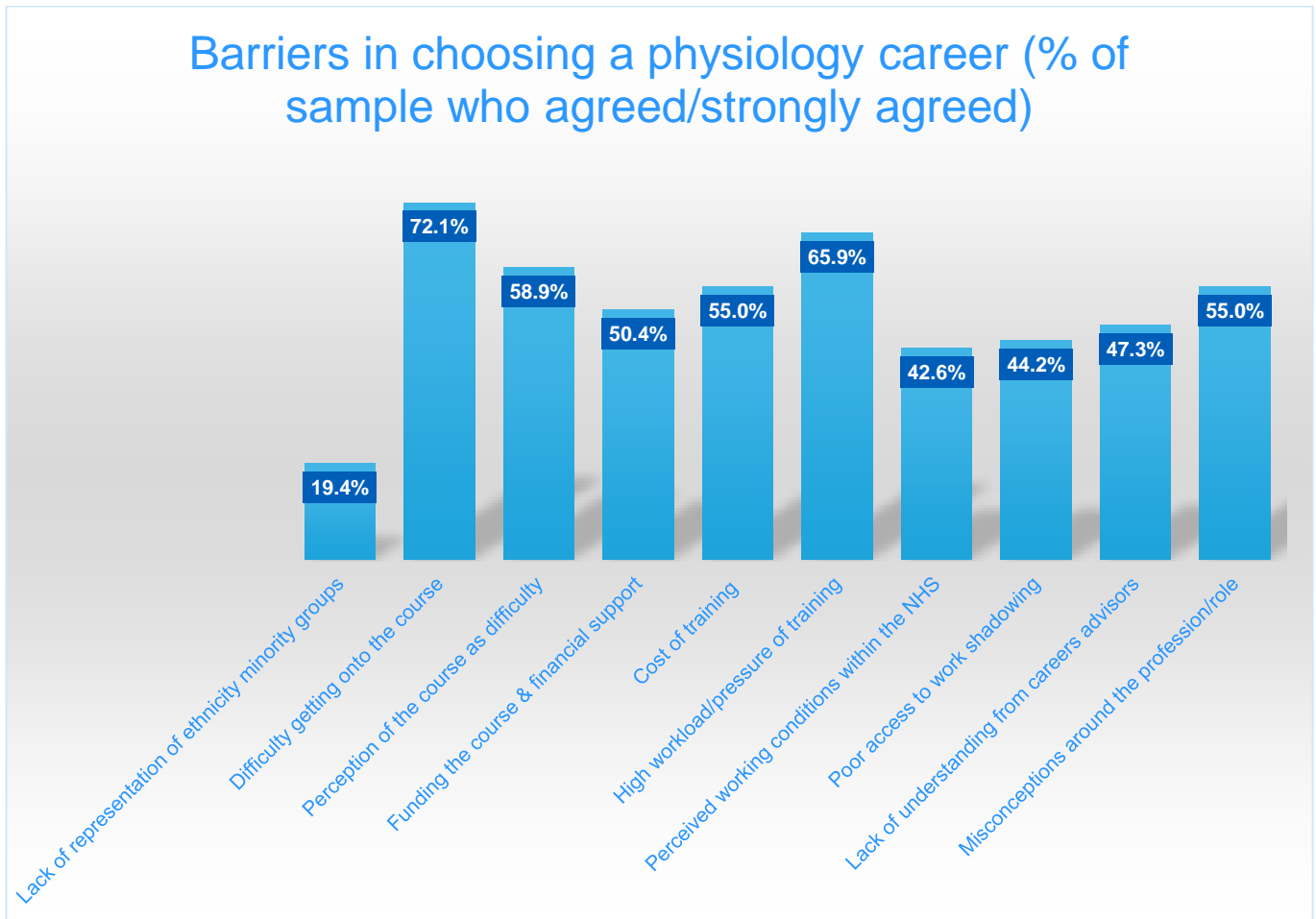
Barriers to entering physiotherapy

Participants were asked how their career choice had been affected by potential barriers to entering a physiotherapy career. The participants recognised barriers and overcame them to still choose physiotherapy.

- The most influential barrier was 'Perceived difficulty getting onto the course' (72.1% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with this statement). Followed by 'high workload and pressure of training', a barrier identified by 65.9%
- Most common and unexpected barriers are shown in the graph below.
- The majority of barriers were not chosen by a large number of respondents; only six out of the 23 barriers were chosen by 50% or above of the sample.
- Financial barriers to choosing physiotherapy were recognised by over half the sample. 55% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed that 'Cost of training whilst undertaking the course (e.g. costs of placements)' was a barrier and 'Funding the course and availability of financial support' was recognised by 50.4% of the sample as being a barrier. This suggests that increasing and strengthening the communication about the availability of financial support needs to be strengthened. This is made more important with the finding that in our sample 44.4% chose physiotherapy as a second degree or career, and although it is possible to receive funding for second degree, this is only if the first degree was not a healthcare related subject.

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- Knowledge of the profession was seen as a barrier by 31% of the sample. However, understanding what being a physiotherapist involves was seen as a much stronger barrier, to which 55% agreed/strongly agreed. 47.3% agreed a 'lack of understanding from career advisors' was as a barrier to choosing the profession. Additionally, 'poor access to work shadowing' was seen as a barrier by 44.2% of the sample. Interestingly, 19.4% agreed or strongly agreed that a 'perceived lack of representation in the profession in terms of ethnicity' acted as a barrier.



Additional findings

Participants were asked about the public perception of physiotherapy. The question was answered by 45% of respondents. Public perception was overall seen to be very positive.

The profession was seen to be respected, but with a lack of understanding of the breadth and scope of physiotherapy. Respect and awareness the clinical aspects of the profession were seen to have increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, almost all participants frequently highlighted the public perceptions of what being a physiotherapist involves. The most common perception is that physiotherapists treat sports injuries and massage patients. Participants suggested that this view means a lack of appreciation for how clinically capable physiotherapists are and the range of skills they possess, particularly in acute settings.

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The misconceptions of physiotherapists were mirrored by 55% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to misconceptions around the profession and what it involves acts as a barrier to pursuit a physiotherapy career.

It was suggested that awareness/recruitment campaigns, e.g., similar to advertisement campaigns promoting different roles within the British Army ['We are NHS'] may be an effective means to inform the public of the varied roles within the Allied Health Professions.

Key findings

- **In our sample more participants had chosen physiotherapy during secondary education and college/sixth form, rather than at other life stages. Although, 44% did had made the choice later. This may be associated with a difficulty getting onto the course and students only enter physiology at the second attempt of application.**
- **Having a fulfilling and satisfying career, as well as altruistic reasons, such as improving the quality of life for others and contributing to society, were the key motivations for choosing physiotherapy.**
- **Only 4.5% of the sample were over 40 years of age, and no students were over 50**
- **Educational sources were the most impactful sources, but personal sources of influence still played an important role. There was overall a large spread the source of influence in choosing a physiotherapy career, which may be linked to the relatively good recruitment rate for this profession.**
- **'Perceived difficulty getting onto the course' was the most influential barrier to choosing physiotherapy. Financial barriers were also important.**
- **Public perception of the profession was seen to be positive. However, the role was seen to be misunderstood in terms of the scope of what physiotherapists do.**

Recommendations

- **Altruistic reasons were overwhelmingly the most influential motivations for choosing physiotherapy. Therefore, when promoting the profession, the altruistic aspects of the profession should be emphasised. However, it is also important to highlight other motivations, the variety of the profession and that it is seen as intellectually stimulating.**
- **Over half of our sample chose physiotherapy during their time at school/college, which is reflected in the impact of educational sources, especially from universities. Although, awareness of the profession is not a barrier for most, it is surprising that only 9% were influenced by a career advisor. It is important that prospective students need to have a clear understanding of the role. It is therefore important to utilise sources of influence at school/college, such as career advisors, to promote the profession accurately to ensure clear expectations of the physiology career.**
- **Work shadowing experiences with physiotherapists was an important source of influence for almost 70% of the sample. However, nearly 45% of the sample identified 'poor access to work shadowing' as a barrier to choosing this profession. This highlights the importance of upscaling work experience specifically in physiotherapy to help prospective**

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students learn about the profession but also to increase promotion of work experience.

- Social media as a source of influence was only influential for over 30% of the sample, which is relatively low compared to other professions. This finding suggests an **opportunity to increase marketing via social media and provide accurate representations of what the role comprises.**
- Misconceptions about the profession were the focus of the responses to the question of 'what do you think the public perception of the profession is?' This was especially in relation to the profession being seen as narrow with only focusing on sports injuries, rehabilitation and giving massages. **It would therefore be beneficial to emphasise the scope of work physiotherapists undertake when promoting the profession.**
- Two key barriers to choosing physiotherapy were the 'perceived difficulty getting onto the course' and 'high workload and pressure of training'. It may therefore be beneficial **when marketing the profession to increase advisors of the entry requirement to the course, as well as emphasise a supportive environment when undertaking training.**
- Prospective mature students only 4.5% of the sample were over 40 years of age, and none over 50 years may not see themselves represented in the existing workforce and therefore not choose the profession. Although, 20.3% of participant were for minority ethnic groups, 19.4% found 'lack of representation of ethnic minority groups' to be a barrier to choosing the profession. These findings suggest that **there needs to be further exploration as to how to improve diversity and action taken to encourage all individuals to choose the profession. For example, through outreach work in primary, secondary schools, and colleges.**

Acknowledgements

This factsheet was produced by Dr Maja Fuglsang Palmer from the University of Winchester utilising the data responses from the Motivations for choosing an Allied Health Profession career questionnaire 2020. Maja was assisted by Dr Rachel Locke, Dr Lucy Wallis, Anita Watson, Professor Beverley Harden, and Carrie Biddle. For more details, please contact Dr Maja Fuglsang Palmer: Maja.Palmer@winchester.ac.uk

References

NHS Digital (2021). Allied Health Professionals by selected Equality and Diversity metrics. <https://digital.nhs.uk/supplementary-information/2021/ahps-by-protected-characteristics-aug-2021>