



Dietetics 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 pre-registration 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 dietetics as a career of choice.

Dietetics student population in England

In 2020/2021 there were approximately 511 active students on dietetics, and nutrition and dietetics courses in England. In 2021/2022 this has risen to approximately 594 active students.

Survey sample

- 108 dietetics students completed the questionnaire. It should be acknowledged that this represents only 21% of the student population in 2020/2021.
- 89.8% (n = 97) of participants were female, 9.3% (n = 10) were male and 0.9% (n = 1) were non-binary.
- This finding is similar to a study conducted by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2021) of 1968 dietitians who found that 93% identified as female and 6% as male.

Ethnicity

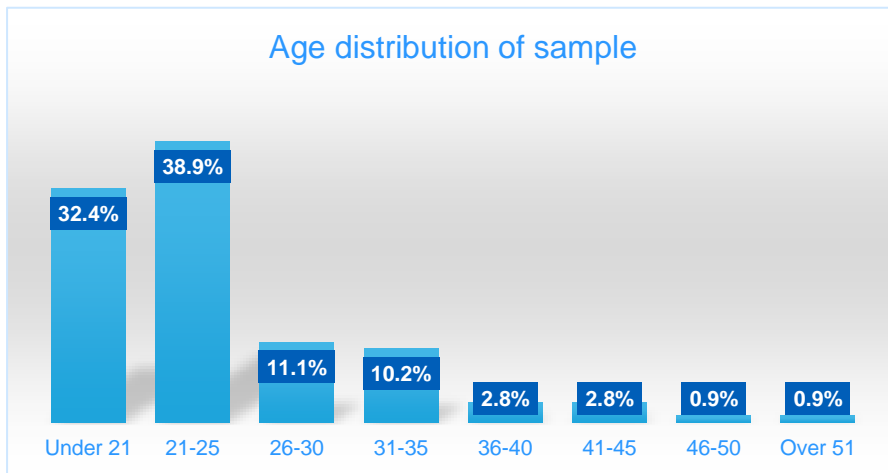
Ethnicity (Source: gov.uk)	Percentage of sample
White background	78.8% (n = 85)
Asian background	13% (n = 14)
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	4.7% (n = 5)
Black, African and Caribbean background	1.9% (n = 2)
Other	1.9% (n = 2)
Arab background	0%

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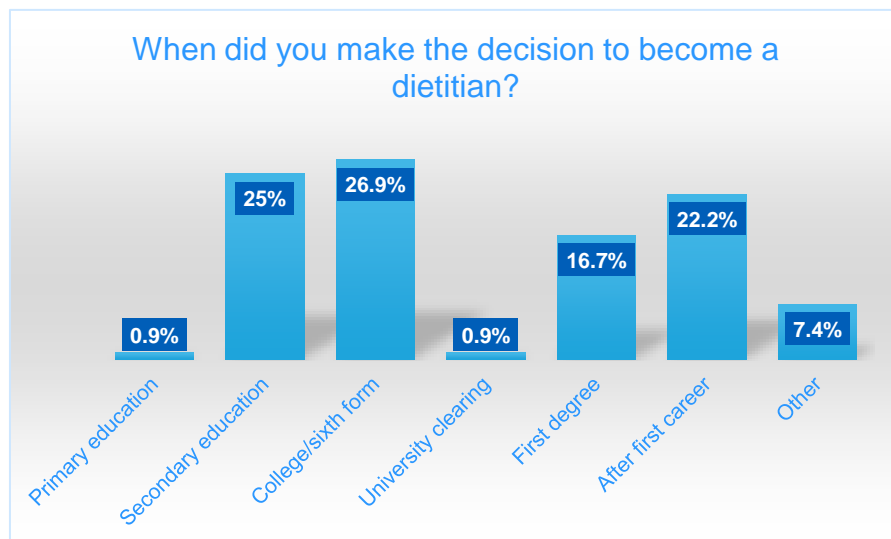
- Ethnicity figures from the questionnaire are summarised in the table above. These findings are similar to the HCPC (2021) study where 81% of dietitians were from a white background and 9% from an Asian background.

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

- In our sample, 28.7% (n = 41) of students were over 25 years of age.
- This finding is lower to that of the Office for Students (2019) who found that in 2016-17 in England, 41.2% of new dietetics undergraduate students were over 25.



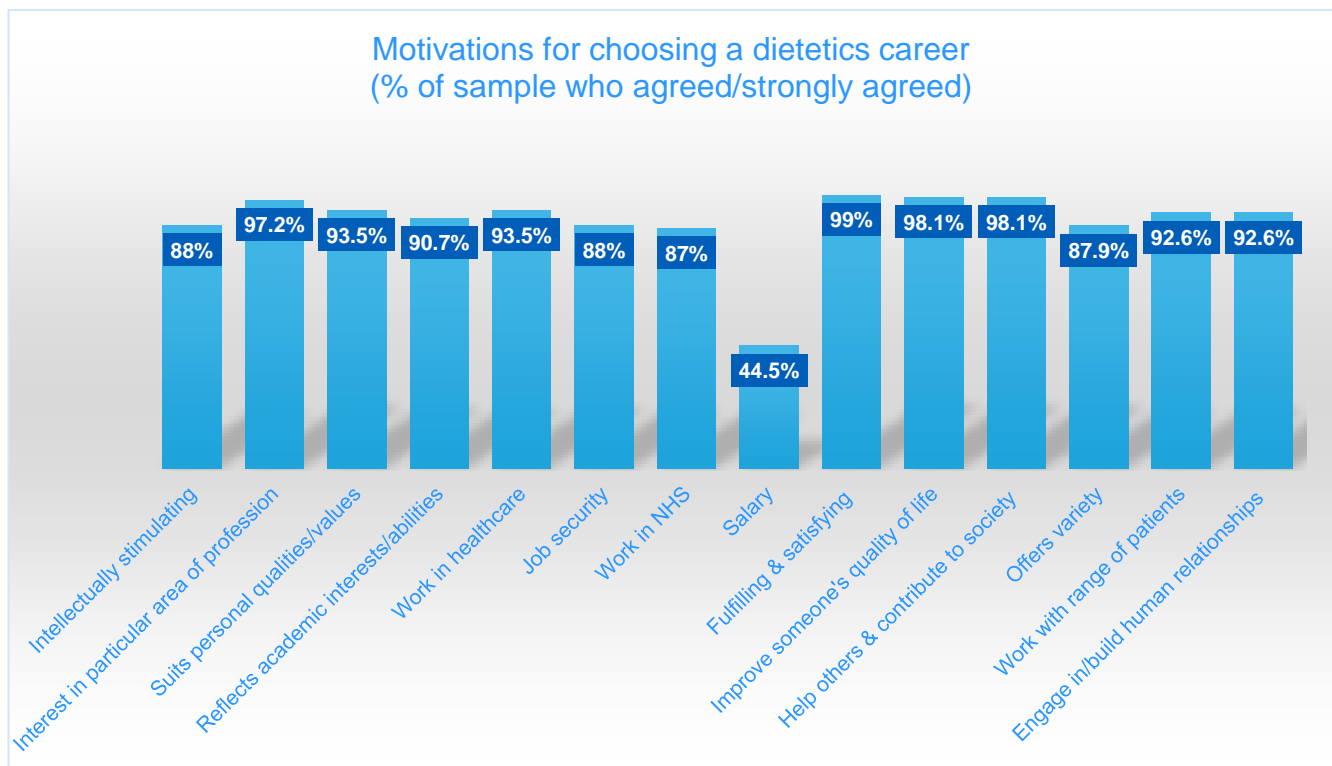
- Of the sample, 22.2% (n = 24) chose to become dietitians after their first career.
- 52.8% (n = 57) of the sample had chosen dietetics during their school/college education.



Motivations

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

- Choosing a career ‘that is fulfilling and satisfying’ was the most popular motivation for choosing dietetics (99% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with this statement).
- Most commonly identified motivations are shown in the graph below.
- Across 35 motivations listed in the questionnaire, based on a scoping review and focus groups findings, only seven had less than 50% agreeing/strongly agreeing with the importance of the motivation. Nine had more than 90% agreeing/strongly agreeing.



- Altruistic reasons had the highest percentages of responses.
- However, motivations relating to an interest in the profession itself were also important. For example, choosing the profession ‘Based on my interest in a particular area of the profession (e.g., art, language or technology)’ was seen as important or very important by 97.2% of the sample.
- Choosing dietetics because it was seen to be ‘intellectually stimulating’ and ‘reflects academic interests/abilities’ was important for most of the sample. This finding highlights the importance of career advisors (explored below) having knowledge of dietetics to encourage school/college students to take this career path. In addition, choosing a profession which ‘suits my personal qualities/values’ (93.5%) means that career advisors should also focus on this aspect of career choice.
- Participants were asked about the influence of the opportunity to work in the public and private sector. The public sector scored noticeably higher: 78.7% to 52.7%. It was interesting that the motivation to work in the NHS was higher (87%) than the motivation

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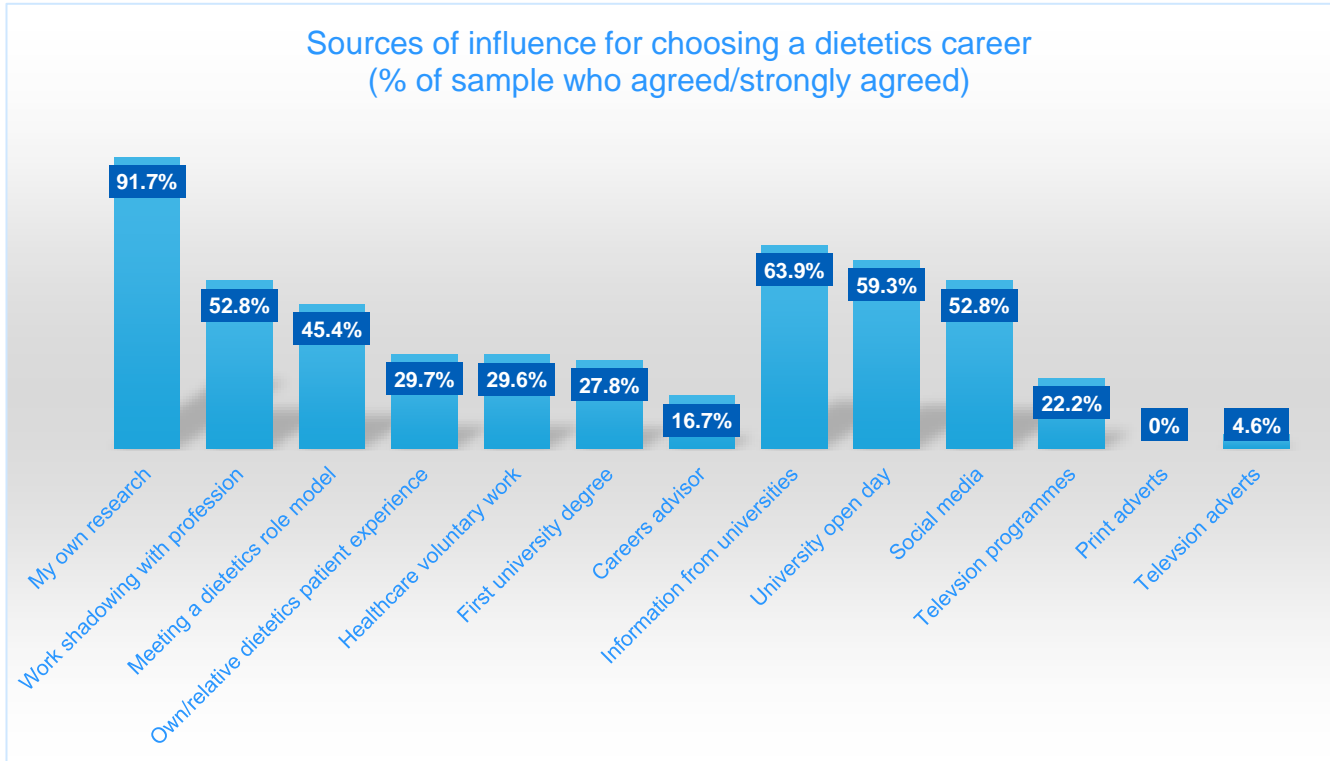
to work in the public sector more generally (78.7%). This may be owing to the NHS being a more known entity.

- In terms of professional motivations, whilst 'salary' was seen as an unimportant motivation in comparison to other motivations, it was still seen as important by nearly 45% of the sample. Additionally, job security was the most important professional motivation.

Sources of Influence

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

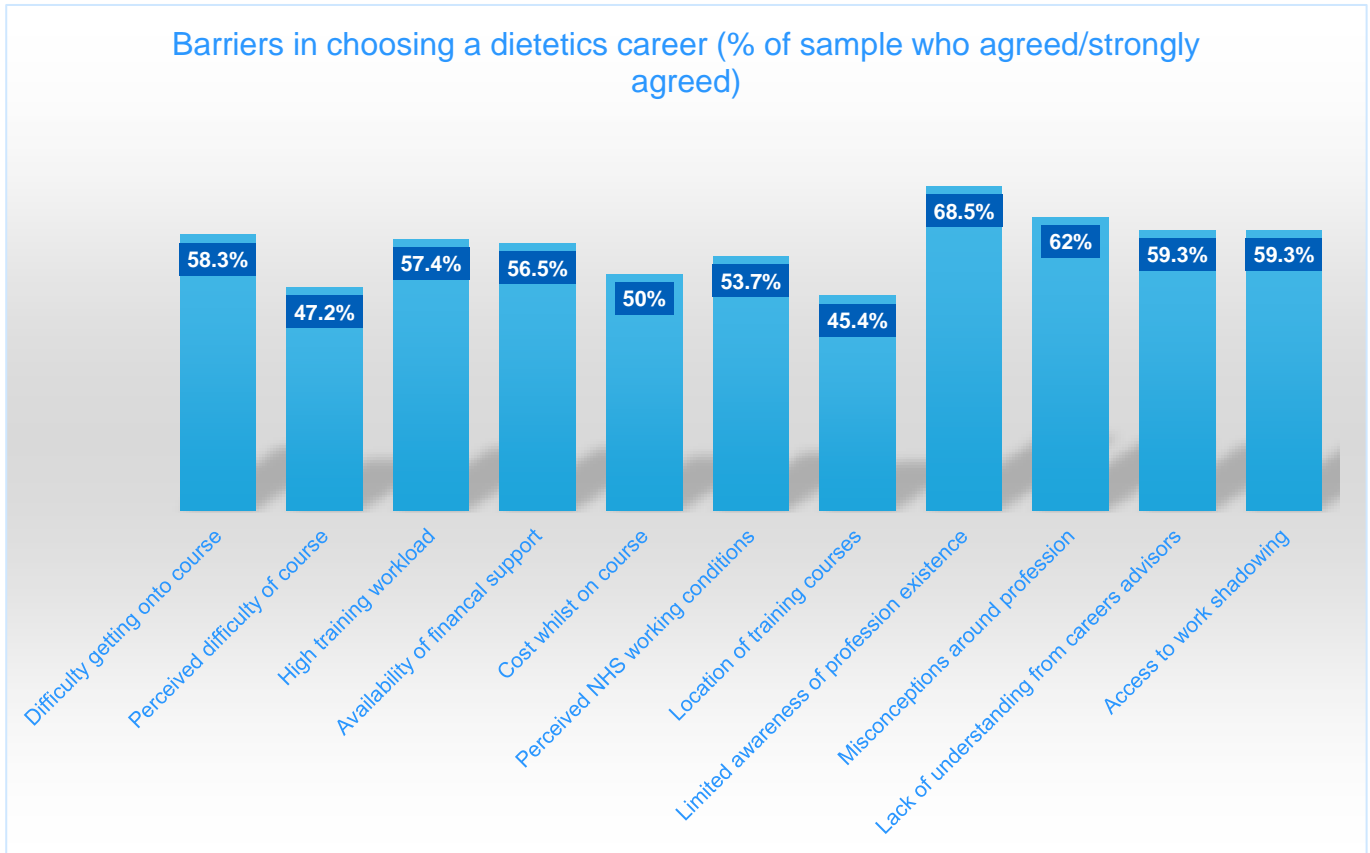
- The most influential factor was 'conducting my own research' into the profession (91.7% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed).
- Selected sources of influence are shown in the graph below.
- Of the 25 sources of influence, only five scored higher than 50%.
- The findings show an obvious reliance on 'conducting my own research' in comparison to all the other sources of influence.
- Sources of influence relating to universities: 'Information I got from universities', attending a university open day and, to a lesser extent, 'my first university degree', were identified as important sources of influence. This highlights the important role universities play in promoting dietetics as a career.
- Social media was a key source of influence for 52.8% of the sample. This was the only form of media which was important for over 50% of the sample and suggests the importance of this platform to promote and provide accurate representations of the profession. This is especially important owing to 0% of the sample seeing print adverts as an important source of influence and only 4.6% seeing television adverts as a source.
- Meeting a dietitian was seen as a key source of influence in choosing a dietetics career: 'Work shadowing experiences with the profession' (52.8%), Someone in the profession I saw/met who was a good role model for me (45.4%) and to a lesser extent, 'My own experience of being a patient/a relative receiving care from the profession' (29.7%). With less than 30% of the sample having interactions with dietitians, highlights the importance of meeting dietitians through other means such as work shadowing.



Barriers to entering dietetics

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

- The greatest barrier was 'Limited awareness of the existence of the profession', 68.5% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with this statement).
- Most commonly identified barriers are shown in the graph below.
- There was a wide range in the percentage of the sample agreeing/strongly agreeing with potential barriers: this ranged from 68.5% to 10.2%.
- Over 45% of the sample saw the geographical location of the training course as a barrier. This suggests that promoting alternative routes to becoming a dietitian may be beneficial, such as expanding providers of apprenticeships which offer more flexibility in terms of geographical location.
- Financial barriers, 'Funding the course and availability of financial support' and 'Cost of training whilst undertaking the course (e.g., costs of placements)' were seen as barriers by 50% or more of the sample. This suggests that communication surrounding financial support available for dietetics students' needs to be strengthened.
- Limited awareness of the existence of the profession as the largest barrier is a concern. This is especially as the sample involved individuals who had chosen dietetics and therefore the barrier is likely to be larger for those who have not chosen the profession.
- Perceptions of a 'high workload and pressure of training' and 'perceived working conditions in the NHS' being seen as barriers suggests that promotion of support available for students undertaking their dietetics course would be beneficial.



Additional findings

The participants were asked what they thought the public perception of dietetics was, 63.8% of participants answered this question. The majority of answers focused on the misconceptions about the role in terms of scope. For example, many participants highlighted the perception of dietitians only focusing on helping with weight loss and healthy eating. Associated with this perception was frequent mention of dietitians as the ‘food police’ who are disapproving of unhealthy food choices. The role of a dietitian was sometimes perceived to be only in the form of telling people what they can and cannot eat. The inclusion of ‘diet’ in the job title was perceived to be a reason for the perception of dietitians only creating diet plans. The perception of what the role of a dietitian involves meant that participants felt that as dietitians they would eat very healthily. Participants wished to highlight the scope of a dietitian’s work including the work done in hospitals and providing nutritional support to malnourished patients. A number of participants mentioned the role was perceived to be interchangeable with nutritionists. Participants believed that personal experience with dietitians led to a positive perception of the role but there was a concern that without this knowledge, the misconceptions surrounding the dietitian role may lead to a negative perception.

Key findings

- **Individuals are making the decision to become dietitians at different stages in their life.**
- **Altruistic reasons were the key motivations for choosing dietetics.**
- **The most important sources of influence overall were personal and educational sources. There was a noticeable reliance on ‘conducting my own research’ as a source of influence.**
- **Limited awareness of the existence of the profession was the key barrier to choosing dietetics. Misconceptions around the profession was also identified as an important barrier and this was confirmed through responses to the open question ‘what do you think the public perception is of your profession?’ which highlighted several misconceptions.**

Recommendations

- **Altruistic motivations scored exceptionally highly: for example, 99% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with choosing dietetics as a profession ‘that is fulfilling and satisfying’. This shows the importance of marketing highlighting this aspect of dietetics.**
- **Work shadowing experiences with dietitians was an important source of influence for over 50% of the sample. However, nearly 60% of the sample identified ‘poor access to work shadowing’ as a barrier to choosing dietetics. This highlights the importance of upscaling work experience specifically in dietetics to help prospective students learn about the profession but also it is important to increase promotion of work experience.**
- **Social media as a source of influence was influential for over 50% of the sample. This finding suggests an opportunity to provide accurate representations of what the role comprises to reduce misconceptions. This could help raise the awareness of the profession; ‘limited awareness of the existence of the profession’ was identified as the key barrier to choosing dietetics.**
- **Over 50% of the sample were choosing dietetics during their time at school/college. Yet our findings showed that educational sources associated with schools/colleges scored low as a source of influence. This indicates a reliance on other sources but it also suggests the opportunity to focus on trying to improve the influence of sources, such as career advisors or future careers programme run by schools/colleges.**
- **Misconceptions about the profession were the main 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 diet plans and weight loss. It would therefore be beneficial to emphasise the scope of work dietitians undertake when promoting the profession.**
- **Our sample comprised 89.8% female participants with only 9.3% male. 78.8% of the sample were from a white background. Prospective students, such as males or those from minority ethnic groups, may not see themselves represented in the existing workforce and therefore not choose the profession. These findings suggest that there needs to be further exploration as to how to improve diversity and action taken accordingly 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 Lucy Wallis from the University of Winchester utilising the data responses from the Motivations for choosing an Allied health Profession career questionnaire 2020. Lucy was assisted by Dr Rachel Locke, Tanya Rumney, Professor Beverley Harden and Carrie Biddle. For more details, please contact Rachel Locke: Rachel.Locke@winchester.ac.uk

References

Health and Care Professions Council (2021). HCPC Diversity Data Report 2021: dietitians <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/globalassets/resources/factsheets/hcpc-diversity-data-2021-factsheet--dietitians.pdf>