

Why do so few male students chose to study Business and HRM?

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As part of her Academic Development Programme, Lucy Rees, CESR member and Senior Lecturer at UWE explored the under representation of male students studying Business and Human Resource Management at UWE in comparison with other Business degrees.

Background

It is widely recognised that the Human Resource (HR) profession is dominated by female managers. The Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD), the professional body which represents the profession, states that 77 per cent of its members are women (Gombas and Harris, 2014).

At universities, including the University of the West of England (UWE), students can study Business and Human Resource Management (B&HRM) at undergraduate level. This is increasingly one of the main routes to enter the HR profession. The aim of this research project was to explore the under-representation of males in HR in comparison with other business degrees. In addition, the research considered what UWE can do to encourage more male students to study B&HRM.

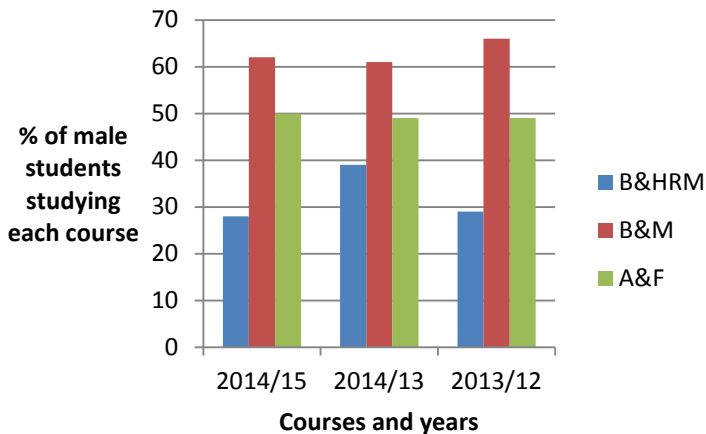
The basis for the research was 967 male undergraduate students at UWE studying B&HRM or two other business degrees, Business and Management (B&M) and Accountancy and Finance (A&F) in 2014/15. UWE's Business and Law Student Administration Team (FBLSAT) provided data on the numbers of male undergraduate students studying B&HRM and the two comparator degrees. A questionnaire was used to obtain student opinions in relation to why male students studying B&HRM at UWE are under-represented and what UWE can do to encourage more male students to study B&HRM. In addition, to explore the questionnaire data in more depth interviews were conducted with students. As the research took place at the end of the academic year only a small number of students participated; 30 responses to questionnaires were received and six interviews with students were conducted.

Explaining under-representation

In 2014/15, only 28 per cent of undergraduate students studying B&HRM at UWE were male, a trend which is reflected in the two previous years (Figure 1). This proportion of male undergraduate students studying B&HRM was lower than the proportion of male undergraduate students studying the two comparator business degrees. In 2014/2015, 62 per cent of students studying B&M were male and 50 per cent of students studying A&F were male; a trend which is also reflected in the two previous years (Figure 1).



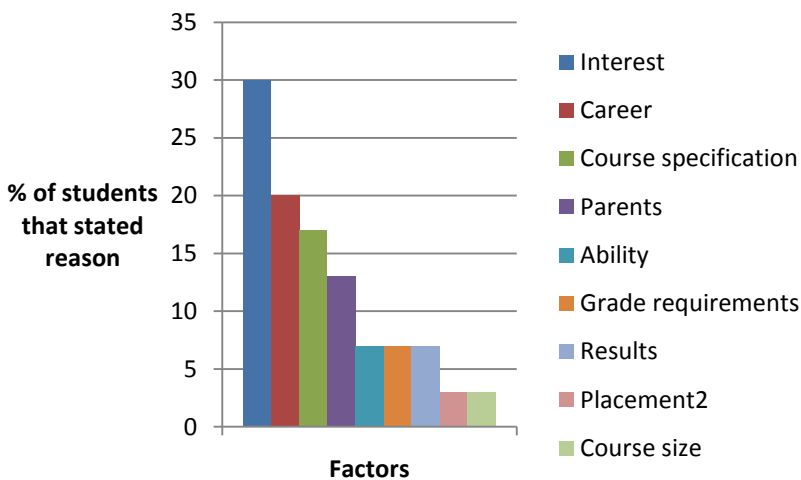
Figure 1 – UWE data: Percentage of male students B&HRM, B&M and A&F between 2012 and 2014



The factors explaining under-representation

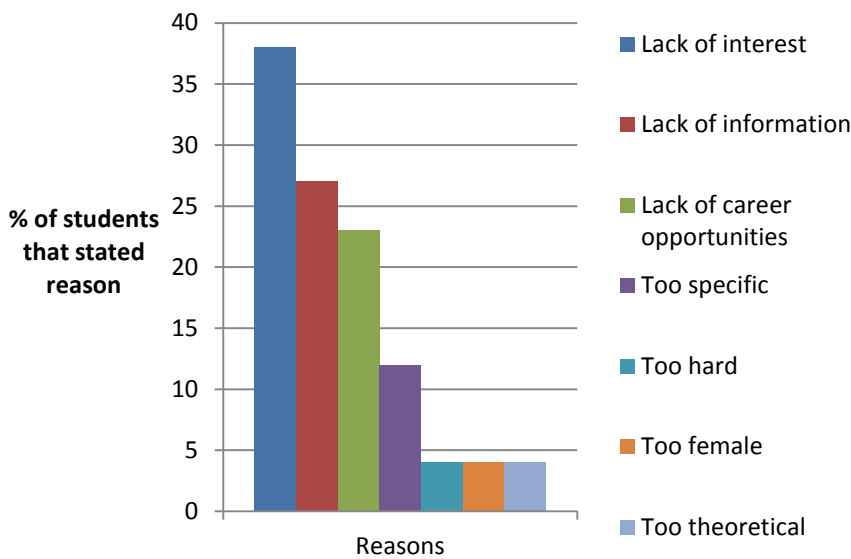
The most common factors which affect students’ choice of degree course were interest in the subject (30 per cent of questionnaire responses) and career opportunities (20 per cent). This is inconsistent with research by Maringe (2006) which identifies career opportunities as more common than interest. However, if A&F students are excluded, career opportunities were the most common factor. Other factors are set out at Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Survey: Factors which affect all male students’ choice of course



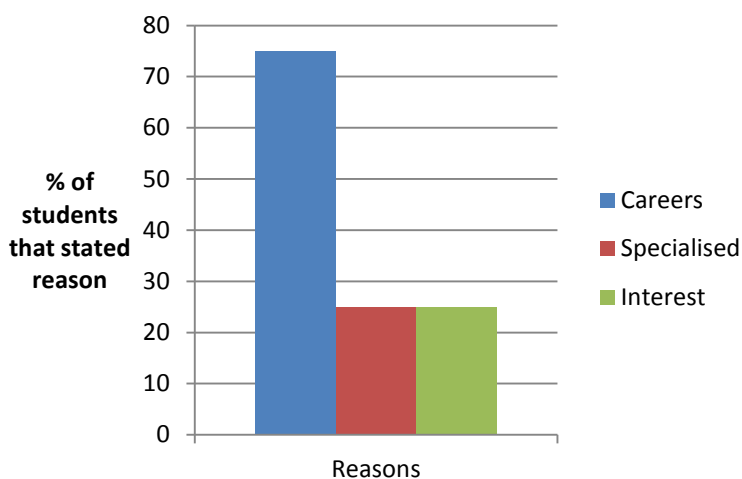
Over one third (38 per cent) of the comparator degree students’ questionnaire responses and all of the comparator degree students that were interviewed stated that the reason why they chose not to study B&HRM was because they were not interested in it. Other reasons included lack of information about the subject (27 per cent); lack of career opportunities (23 per cent); and that B&HRM was too specific and they wanted to do a more general degree (12 per cent) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Survey: Reasons why students studying comparator degrees chose not to study B&HRM at UWE



Three quarters (75 per cent) of B&HRM students’ questionnaire responses and all of the B&HRM students that were interviewed stated that the reason why they chose to study B&HRM was because it had good career opportunities. Other reasons included that it was specialised (25 per cent) and that it was of interest to them (25 per cent) (Figure 4). In the interviews, B&HRM students explained that their perception that HR had good career opportunities and/or their interest in HR had been gained through advice from parents or schools, male HRM lecturers at open days or work experience.

Figure 4 – Survey: Reasons why students studying B&HRM chose to study it



When students were asked why they thought that so few male students chose to study B&HRM, approaching half (43 per cent) of the questionnaire responses and half of all of the interviewees stated that it was due to the gender stereotyping of HR; HR is still regarded as a woman’s role (Churchard, 2013). Interestingly, very few of the comparator degree students gave gender stereotyping as the reason why they personally chose not to study B&HRM, but this may be because the researcher was a female B&HRM lecturer. Other responses in relation

to why so few male students chose to study B&HRM included that jobs in HR are not important, demanding or well-paid, that there is lack of career progression and that senior businessmen who are their role models usually come from finance or operations backgrounds and not HR.

What can UWE do to encourage more male undergraduate students to study B&HRM?

If UWE wants to attract more male students the internet is vital (Brown *et al.*, 2009); 93 per cent of all of questionnaire responses stated that the internet was the most important source of information. Open days are also important because although only ten per cent of students reported that they had attended an open day, when students did, it fundamentally influenced their decision making, especially if they met a male lecturer.

Other suggestions to encourage more male students to study B&HRM at UWE included: increasing students' awareness of B&HRM, promoting career opportunities for males in HR, details of salaries, male B&HRM students attending open days, and making the HRM course more practical and less 'fluffy'. However, a few students did comment that it may be difficult to attract more male students to B&HRM until HR loses its feminine image.

Conclusion

At UWE male students are under-represented on B&HRM undergraduate courses, a trend which is mirrored in the HR profession (Gombas and Harris, 2014). Furthermore, the proportion of male students studying B&HRM is lower than two comparator undergraduate business degrees at UWE and particularly in B&M.

This research indicates that at UWE, excluding A&F, career opportunities are the most common factor in relation to students' choice of subject, which is consistent with research by Holmegaard *et al.*, (2012) and Maringe, (2006). However, students don't just want career opportunities; they want jobs which are 'meaningful', 'challenging' and 'provide opportunities for learning or self-development' (Holmegaard *et al.*, 2012: 31). In addition, it is argued that male students 'attach significantly greater importance than do females to extrinsic factors such as financial reward and status' (Johnston *et al.*, 2006: 188). Students studying the comparator business degrees chose to study them because they believed that they had better and/or wider career opportunities. There was a perception that male students do not study B&HRM because they do not identify HR as a career which will be demanding, important, well paid and will enable them to achieve senior positions in business.

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Interest in the subject is also an important factor in students' decisions. Students studying the comparator degrees chose not to study B&HRM because they were not interested in HR, however they also did not have enough information about it. Only those students, who had acquired knowledge of HR as a suitable career and/or an interest in it through their schools, parents, work experience or male lecturers at open days, chose to study B&HRM.

Importantly there is work to do to counter the gender stereotype of HR. Although only one student studying a comparator degree stated gender stereotyping of HR as the reason why he personally chose not to study B&HRM, students felt that the gender stereotyping of HR does negatively affect male students' decision to study B&HRM as it does with other professions (Johnston *et al.*, 2006). The findings of this research suggests the need for UWE's B&HRM web page to be updated to include information about careers, salaries, senior businessmen from a HR background and quotes from leading male HR managers. In addition, the attendance of male B&HRM lecturers and students at UWE open days could encourage male students to choose B&HRM over other degrees. The perceptions of male business students demonstrates a need to build awareness of HR as a profession that is not defined exclusively as female and offers good career opportunities for men – something that UWE could consider in conjunction with the CIPD.

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