



# The Language of Discrimination

Research Findings | February 2023





Since the formation of Received Pronunciation (RP), the link between accent and class has become entrenched. The notion is that educated people speak in RP, while other accents are conflated with impropriety, poor education and even low intelligence.

**Jasmin Andersson,  
Journalist**



Accents and use of language are often seen (mistakenly) as a marker of class, level of education and socio-economic background. Many have lived with this from a young age and have changed the way they speak in different situations, changing their accent during job interviews, when they speak with authority figures or in the workplace.

They have been given the impression that changing their accent or language in this way will make them appear smarter, be taken more seriously or enable them to access careers and progress in certain sectors. Creative Access, a leading social enterprise specialising in diversity and inclusion, partnered with FleishmanHillard UK to explore the extent and impact of this “language discrimination” on employer cultures, employees and aspiring employees and on the work they produce in the creative industries and beyond.

## OUR RESEARCH CONSISTED OF TWO PARTS. 01. A MICRO VIEW IN THE UK:

Creative Access community views and lived experiences - a study with over 300 people, the majority from groups under-represented in the creative industries in terms of:



### DISABILITY

 **25% CONSIDER THEMSELVES TO HAVE A DISABILITY;**

### RACE AND ETHNICITY

 **41% IDENTIFY AS BLACK, ASIAN AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE;**

### LOWER SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

 **68% AND ARE FROM LOWER-MIDDLE OR WORKING CLASS BACKGROUNDS**

\* Creative Access defines lower socio-economic status as a combination of factors based on the Office for National Statistics guide, plus guidance from Arts Council England. We ask candidates to self-declare a number of factors, including eligibility for Free School Meals, accommodation type and whether or not they were the first person

## 02. A MACRO VIEW IN THE UK:

A NATIONALLY  
REPRESENTATIVE POLL OF

2000

UK ADULTS WORKING  
ACROSS ALL SECTORS

Our research discovered that 89% of our Creative Access community have felt prematurely and sub-consciously judged by others based simply on their accent and manner of speech. Many have lived with this from a young age and have adopted the practice of code switching; changing the way they speak in different situations, from changing their accent during job interviews, or speaking with authority figures and in the workplace.

They have been given the impression that changing their accent or language in this way will make them appear smarter and be taken more seriously or that they need to speak a certain way to access and progress in certain sectors. Our research also shows that these factors particularly impact people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and other communities under-represented in the creative industries.

At Creative Access, we aim to see a day when the UK's creative economy, and the books, films, TV, theatre, art and campaigns it creates, will truly reflect and represent our society.

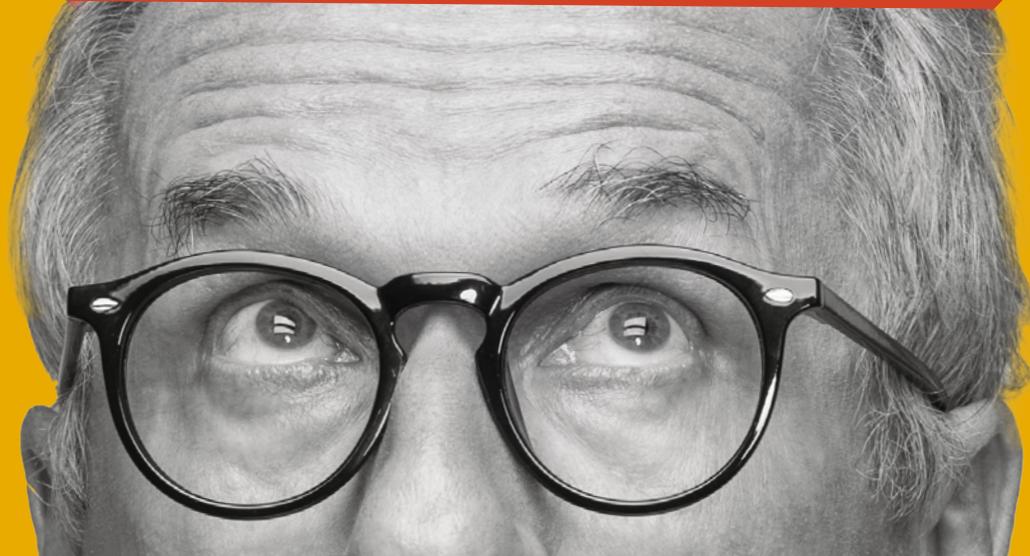
Our mission is to enable people who identify with characteristics that are under-represented in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and disability, to access, progress and reach leadership in PR and comms, marketing, publishing, film, TV, music, the arts, theatre and beyond. Through our unique mix of diverse recruitment, support and employer training, our goal is to bring about positive and sustainable change across the creative economy and break down barriers such as the language discrimination and accent bias highlighted in this report. Having a greater awareness and understanding of the role that this is playing in keeping us from realising that vision will only help in our efforts to create a better and more representative industry.



**Bibi Hilton, CEO**  
Creative Access

# Part 01:

## Addressing accent assumptions



## Chapter 01: Addressing accent assumptions

**The way we speak is something we tend to grow into – based on where we're from, how our parents speak, how our classmates speak – rather than something we actively choose. Not being based on conscious choice, our accent really says less about what kind of person we might be than, say, what we've decided to wear that day.**

Despite this, our findings tell us that speech is still one of the top three characteristics we rank as important when it comes to forming a first impression about others. Among respondents from the Creative Access community (people working in or aspiring to work in the creative industries and the majority from backgrounds under-represented in the sector) as well as the general public, the way we speak ranked above height, weight and race in terms of the personal characteristics most likely to shape others' impression of us. And in an age when we're so often meeting new people virtually – when all the visual information we have available to us is limited to whatever fits into the frame of their laptop camera – how we sound arguably takes on greater significance.

By and large, however, the respondents from our Creative Access community disagreed that speech was a reliable basis on which to form judgement on others, with only 15% agreeing that you can tell how intelligent someone is by how they speak (this is true for 34% of the general population).

Despite the vast majority acknowledging the unhelpfulness of speech as an indicator in this way, it would seem that leaping to conclusions about people's speech is tricky to avoid – as if it's instinctive, or hard-wired. Indeed, over three-quarters of respondents (78%) believe they have made a subconscious judgement about someone based on their accent or how they speak.

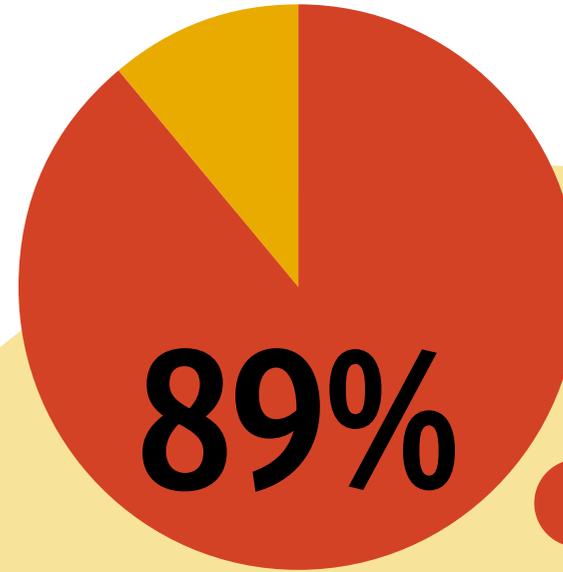
This figure rises when asked to consider the population at large, with nearly all (97%) of respondents believing that in the UK people make subconscious judgements about others based on their accent or how they speak.



## Chapter 01: Addressing accent assumptions

Knowing that we are judging others based on their accents and voices, it's no surprise that we're self-conscious about being judged ourselves. We see it, for example, in the evidence of code-switching discussed later on in this report. In fact, 89% of the respondents from our Creative Access survey believe that others have made subconscious judgements about them based on their accent or how they speak (compared to 65% among general population).

Like any other form of bias, correcting our own innate language biases isn't easy – and the findings which show significant incongruence between beliefs and behaviours support this.



**OF RESPONDENTS  
BELIEVE THAT OTHERS  
HAVE MADE SUBCONSCIOUS  
JUDGEMENTS ABOUT THEM  
BASED ON HOW THEY SPEAK**





**Part 02:**  
Lessons in *not*  
being yourself



**Looking beyond assumptions we form based on a person's accent and dialect, it could be argued that accent is *the* social signifier that sorts the myriad rapid and unconscious judgments we make about others, be they friends, family, colleagues, or new acquaintances. After all, our accents, and indeed our manner of speech, is how we express ourselves and put a voice to our identity<sup>1</sup>.**

But what happens when we worry that our accent inhibits our career ambitions? Or more to the point, what do the creative industries stand to lose when some of its workforce feel it necessary to hide or change a part of themselves when interacting with colleagues and clients alike?

Before we can answer these questions fully, first we need to frame and explore why some people working in the creative industries feel the need to downplay, soften, or downright change the way they speak in the workplace. One place to start, is looking back to the lessons and guidance these individuals were given during their formative years.

<sup>1</sup> "Accent, Identity, and Prejudice" by Dr Nicole Whitworth (2021)

**Speech teaching starts young, both at home and at school, and persists today**

According to respondents from the Creative Access community, it's clear that from a young age they were directed to be self-conscious about their accent and the way they speak. In fact, three in four (77%) report that their parents emphasised to them the importance of speaking 'properly' growing up. Looking more broadly at the UK, we find this guidance is something that most Brits received in their childhood years (60% of UK adults report this experience).

Further, the idea that one must “speak better” to land a job and be successful was reinforced by teachers, with 62% of the creative service professionals we surveyed agreeing with this sentiment (and 35% of UK adults).

Fascinatingly, speech teaching doesn't end after university, and persists well after people have made their way into the workforce. Indeed, one in three (35%) of our respondents from the Creative Access community report they have been told to change their accent or voice when talking to clients and customers. This is not isolated to those working in the creative industries, as our national poll found that one in five (21%) working UK adults have also had this experience in their current or past jobs.





I've had my own personal experience with discrimination based on my accent. My accent was seen as too common at school, so I had to have 'speech and drama' lessons to improve it.

**- Female creative industries professional**



Considering these findings perhaps it comes as no surprise that many people deem it necessary to change and adapt their accent or speech, also known as code-switching.

Code-switching is defined as the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting<sup>2</sup>.

Among respondents from the Creative Access community, 81% report that they code-switch for a variety of reasons, including a wish to be taken more seriously, to be seen as smarter or to be seen as having a higher social class.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, Carlos D. "code-switching". Encyclopaedia Britannica, 30 May. 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching>.

## REASONS WHY PEOPLE WORKING IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES CODE-SWITCH:

67%

TO BE  
TAKEN MORE  
SERIOUSLY

32%

TO BE SEEN  
AS A HIGHER  
SOCIAL CLASS

53%

TO BE SEEN  
AS SMARTER





**81%** OF RESPONDENTS  
REPORT THAT THEY  
CODE-SWITCH FOR A  
VARIETY OF REASONS

These responses suggest a perception among many people working in the creative industries that their accent could act as a barrier to earning and keeping the trust and esteem of their peers, colleagues, and clients. And while many of us probably recognise – and would admit – that we adjust our behaviour and speech according to different social situations, we can't ignore the fact that the practice of code-switching is one that is more important among those sharing identity characteristics under-represented in the creative industries in terms of race, ethnicity or socio-economic background. For individuals with minoritised racial, ethnic or lower socio-economic backgrounds, there is a higher risk of negative consequences for failing to code-switch, a reality that can cause anxiety and even burnout<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Costs of Code-Switching" by Courtney L. McCluney, Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith, and Myles Durkee, Harvard Business Review, 15 November 2019

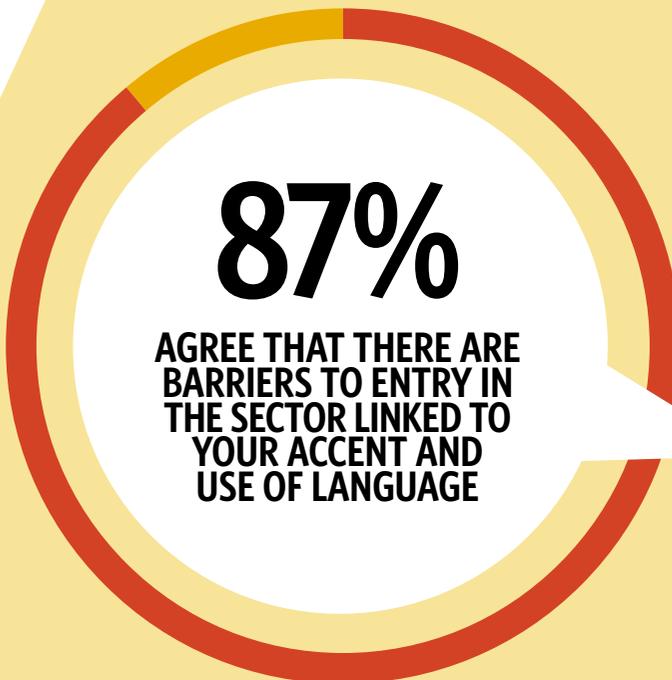
# Part 03: The Sound Barrier



**Whether we like it or not, when we apply for a new position, the decision-making process is unlikely to be based purely on the content of our CV. How we present ourselves and how we carry ourselves will unavoidably play a role.**

In an industry like PR and comms – where language is such a large part of the product – it makes sense to hire candidates with an aptitude for words. This is not the same, however, as affording disproportionate significance to how candidates speak. Indeed, among those working in PR and comms, a large majority (87%) agree that there are barriers to entry in the sector linked to your accent and use of language. For comparison, only 32% of working UK adults agreed with this sentiment for the sector they work in.

For PR and comms professionals looking to hire someone who can hit the ground running and quickly slot in with clients and colleagues, it's possible a "posh" accent may function as a form of short-hand indicating a 'plug-and-play' candidate.



**87%**

**AGREE THAT THERE ARE  
BARRIERS TO ENTRY IN  
THE SECTOR LINKED TO  
YOUR ACCENT AND  
USE OF LANGUAGE**



## Chapter 03: The sound barrier

### What we say versus how we say it

But if and when we get the job, surely, we'll be judged on the quality of our work, not the accent in which we deliver it? The findings suggest otherwise.

A huge majority (89%) of those working in PR and comms agree with the statement that "your accent and use of language affects how you're seen in PR and comms". This is compared to 41% of working UK adults who agree with this sentiment for their sector. More than this, our accent may well impact the day-to-day job responsibilities we are assigned.

**Nearly three-quarters (72%) of those working in PR and comms agree that being able to interact with clients depends on your accent and use of language (compared with 42% of working UK adults).**

In an industry where our performance is partly measured on our ability to build and strengthen client relationships, access to clients being dependent on how we speak has worrying implications.



69%

**...OVER TWO-THIRDS**  
OF PEOPLE IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES SAY THEY  
DON'T HEAR MANY PEOPLE WITH SIMILAR ACCENTS  
OR WHO USE LANGUAGE SIMILAR TO THEIRS IN  
THEIR WORKPLACE



### Representation at work needs work

Accessing and progressing in the creative industries is hard enough, even when you have access to role models whose life experiences resonate with yours, and who might look and sound like you. But over two-thirds (69%) of respondents working in the creative industries say they don't hear many people with similar accents or who use language similar to theirs in their workplace (compared to 34% of working UK adults). Without suitable role models, how can we expect the next generation of industry leaders to be made up of diverse voices?

With 70% of Creative Access community respondents agreeing that there is a lack of diversity of accents and use of language among their colleagues, this is a widespread problem that isn't currently being actively tackled by employers. Forget the perils of hiring in our own image; the reported homogeneity of accents in the creative industries would suggest that even hiring in the image of our colleagues wouldn't much improve matters.

These findings suggest that if we're to take down the sound barrier at entry level, we need to start scrutinising how we sound higher up the ladder, too.

# Part 04: Pronunciation and progression

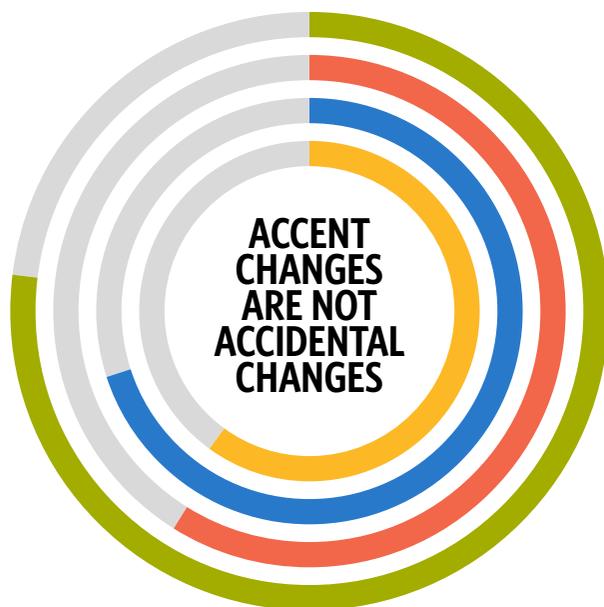


## Chapter 04: Pronunciation and progression

**So, once you've found your way into a career in the creative industries, just how much of a factor does your accent play in your career progression? As it turns out, it could play more of a role than you think. According to respondents from the Creative Access community, nearly two in three (60%) agree they have had to change their accent to progress their career (this is true among one in four UK adults).**

This code-switching starts during the job interview process and then continues in the workplace. Of particular note, it appears to be most prevalent during client and customer conversations with 77% of people working in the creative industries (and 45% of working adults generally) agreeing they change their accent in these situations.





**77%** AGREE THEY CHANGE THEIR ACCENT/VOICE SPECIFICALLY WHEN TALKING TO CLIENTS/CUSTOMERS

**59%** HAVE CHANGED THEIR ACCENT OR THE WAY THEY SPEAK IN THEIR WORKPLACE

**70%** HAVE CHANGED THEIR ACCENT OR THE WAY THEY SPEAK IN JOB INTERVIEWS

**60%** AGREE THEY HAD TO CHANGE THEIR ACCENT/VOICE TO PROGRESS THEIR CAREER

\*Stats among Creative Access community

Indeed, these perceptions are a continuation of an issue that has been highlighted in the UK for some time. Research conducted by the Social Mobility Commission in 2015 highlighted that “poshness tests” – which emphasised stereotypes related to accents and mannerisms – were being used by elite British companies to filter out working-class job applicants in favour of those from private schools<sup>4</sup>. Further, the Accent Bias in Britain Report: 2020<sup>5</sup> found that people “evaluated job candidates who spoke in a Received Pronunciation (RP) accent as more informed and more suitable for professional employment, even when speakers of other accents gave identical answers.”

Our research points directly to this misconception of intelligence and talent persisting in the creative industries. As it turns out RP and PR share more than just its letters. Among respondents from the Creative Access community who work in PR and comms, 90% agree that those who speak in RP are more likely to be hired AND promoted within the industry. This also holds true more broadly across the UK, as nearly half (48%) of working UK adults agree this applies to the industry they work in.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jun/15/poshness-tests-block-working-class-applicants-at-top-companies>

<sup>5</sup> <https://accentbiasbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Accent-Bias-Britain-Report-2020.pdf>

## SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS OF THOSE WORKING IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES IN 2020:

26%  
WORKING CLASS

52%  
PROFESSIONAL



And while more research is necessary to explore the material effects that accent bias has on a person's career outlook and advancement, in PR and elsewhere, it's clear that our sector needs to promote and advance more socioeconomic diversity and inclusion. This lack of diversity in our field has been highlighted by the Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre<sup>6</sup>, which in 2020 found that 52% of those working in the sector are from a professional background compared to only 26% from a working-class background (compared to 38% for all industries).

Given the role our accent plays in expressing our identity, and the implicit and explicit biases that persist in the UK related to class and socio-economic status, we should not ignore the impact and connection between pronunciation and promotion within the creative service industries, especially PR and comms.

<sup>6</sup> <https://pec.ac.uk/research-reports/social-mobility-in-the-creative-economy-rebuilding-and-levelling-up>



**Part 05:**  
Voices for change

## Chapter 05: Voices for change

**Tackling issues of biases and stereotypes is never easy and requires not only individual commitment to education and change, but also a commitment to changing and acting on a broader scale. As accent is, and will likely remain, inextricably linked to perceptions of class and socio-economic status, it's important that we tackle the challenges that remain for the creative service industry.**

In looking at workforce changes for the sector from 2014 to 2020, we see that growth has disproportionately favoured those from more privileged backgrounds. Two-thirds (66%) of the additional 400,000 jobs added to the sector came from upper-middle class professionals, which meant that fewer than 100,000 people (22%) came from lower socio-economic backgrounds<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://pec.ac.uk/research-reports/social-mobility-in-the-creative-economy-rebuilding-and-levelling-up>

Furthermore, results of the PRCA's 2021 UK census found that changes in social mobility for the industry remain stagnant, with most PR professionals continuing to come from upper- and middle-class backgrounds<sup>8</sup>.

The importance of addressing these workforce demographic trends and changing their course cannot be understated, especially when we look at the intersectionality of socio-economic status with gender, race and disability. The chances of finding a place within the creative industries for people who are minoritised due to visible identity characteristics is even lower, especially when combined with socio-economic status.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.vuelio.com/uk/blog/6-stats-on-diversity-from-prcas-uk-pr-and-communications-census-2021/>





Discrimination based on accent, voice or dialect is inherently linked to racism, xenophobia, and classism. It prevents social mobility and guards the privilege of those with ‘posher’ accents.

**- Female PR professional**



So, while we know that improving social mobility in PR won't happen overnight, equally we know that acting today is a must. The first step in that journey is to recognise the unconscious biases that exist when it comes to socio-economic status, and how we rush to judgement simply based on a person's accent and manner of speech.

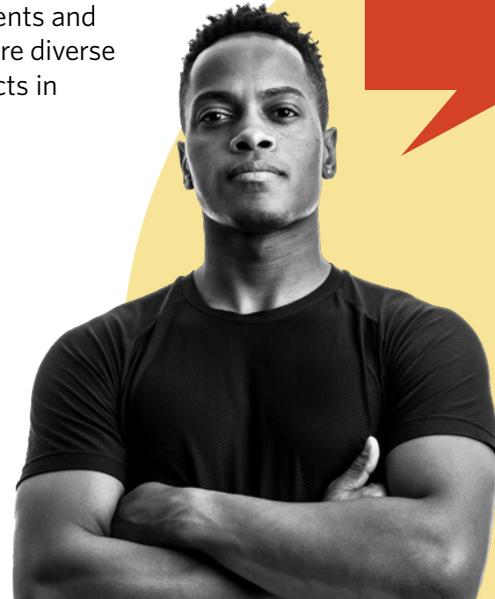
Indeed, our results found that more than four in five (84%) respondents from the Creative Access community believe that “discrimination based on accent, voice or dialect” is an issue in the UK today (this is true for nearly half, 47%, of the general UK public).

To mitigate the issue of accent bias – and thus by extension the persisting issues associated with social mobility in UK society – both members of the Creative Access community and the UK public at large believe we need to start by improving the representation of the United Kingdom's truly diverse population across culture and society. Seeing, and hearing, people that you identify with in politics, the workforce, and the media matters. Among respondents that work in the creative industries, about four in five believe that to address language discrimination we must have increased representation of accents and dialects in government (82%) and more diverse characterisation of accents and dialects in TV and film (79%).

## 4 IN 5 BELIEVE WE MUST HAVE INCREASED REPRESENTATION OF ACCENTS AND DIALECTS IN:

82%  
GOVERNMENT

79%  
TV & FILM





Furthermore, for the public relations industry to truly change, and better serve and represent the audiences and stakeholders it seeks to reach with communications, it needs to act deliberately in its approach to recruitment, hiring, talent development, and promotion. On the importance of recruitment, nearly three in four (72%) of the creative industry professionals surveyed cited 'guidance for recruiters and interviewers' as a means of addressing language discrimination (this figure was 36% among the general UK population).

When viewed in context, it's clear that social mobility and its importance to the UK's economy continues to be somewhat overlooked. As our research found, among working UK adults, nearly two in three (60%) report that their company has a DE&I policy and goals in place. However, among those respondents, only a quarter (24%) say their company aims to improve the representation of employees with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

With better and expanded representation in places of authority, culture and the media comes improved awareness and understanding. Ultimately, as an industry we should aim not only to work towards these quantitative improvements but also to push ourselves to shape an industry culture of belonging for all.

### **About Creative Access**

Creative Access is a leading social enterprise combining an unrivalled network of talent from communities under-represented in the creative economy, with progressive career support and development. Our mission is to enable people, to access, progress and reach leadership in PR and comms, marketing, publishing, film, TV, music, the arts, theatre and beyond.

### **About FleishmanHillard**

FleishmanHillard specialises in public relations, reputation management, public affairs, brand marketing, digital strategy, social engagement, and content strategy. FleishmanHillard was named 2021 PRovoke Global Agency of the Year, 2021 ICCO Network of the Year, 2021 Campaign Global PR Agency of the Year, 2022 PRWeek U.S. Agency of the Year and Outstanding Extra-Large Agency of the Year; 2021 PRovoke APAC Consultancy of the Year; 2021 PRWeek UK Large Consultancy of the Year; Human Rights Campaign Best Places to Work for LGBTQ Equality 2018-2021; and was on Seramount's (formerly Working Mother Media) "Top Companies for Executive Women" list 2010-2021. FleishmanHillard is part of Omnicom Public Relations Group and has nearly 80 offices in more than 30 countries, plus affiliates in 45 countries.

### **Research methodology**

Survey results in this report are based on two surveys conducted by FleishmanHillard UK's in-house research practice, TRUE Global Intelligence. Fieldwork was conducted in July and August 2022. The first was a 41-question survey, conducted online, among 301 Creative Access community members. The second was a 41-question survey, conducted online, among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 UK adults. The nationally represented survey was fielded by Vitreous World and was reflective of the general population based on age, gender, region, ethnicity, sexual orientation and socio-economic status.

