Northern Ireland
Social
Care
Council

Review

of the Degree in Social Work

October 2024

Contents

Forward

by Joanne Sansome

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I have been involved in social work education for 18 years. Over the years, I have contributed to the modules Introduction to Social Work, Law and Preparation for Practice at Queens University Belfast and Belfast Metropolitan College, and over the last year I have contributed to the Open University programme. I am also a member of the Social Care Council Participation Partnership and the Strategic Advisory Group for Social Work Education.

Through my work on the Participation Partnership and involvement in social work education, I was keen to, once again, be a member of the research team for the Review of the Degree as it combines my research interests and involvement in citizen articipation and co-production, as well as providing some continuity with the coproduced research process of the last review.

As a researcher and Citizen Educator, the opportunity to be part of and observe the development of service user and carer involvement over the years has been significant, considering my own involvement began from a one-off presentation within a group seminar delivered to students. This progressed to the service user and carer teaching group, influencing the questions asked at the admissions stage, the content and structure of modules via modules reviews, briefings and meetings, right through to having a statement of expectations embedded in the Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (The Degree). This review highlighted that this approach in the delivery of learning continues to develop, and as such, it remains positively evaluated. Practice Learning Opportunities (PLOs) were also rated highly as another aspect where students are learning practice with service users and carers.

I have been involved in reviews of the Degree before as a consultee and as part of the review team of the last Review; therefore, as part of this Review team, I have once again participated in the initial planning and development stage through to the data collection, analysis and writing of this report. This involvement was an opportunity for me to hear from all stakeholders about their experiences, such as the positives of superseding the expectations concerning digital readiness as highlighted in the last Review. While this was

a result of necessity due to the pandemic, it was clear that social work and social work education continued to be delivered during the pandemic and after, and that delivery was flexible and adaptable. Given the circumstances, quality of delivery remained of a high standard, for the most part, in unprecedented circumstances. We heard clearly in this review regarding the benefits and opportunities of digital capacity and capabilities and the fact that people were able to adapt during the pandemic; however, we also heard that people were conscious of the importance of in-person contact to build relationships, understand someone's environment and learn from colleagues to ensure graduating social workers know that they are not coming into service users or carers lives to solve every concern. However, they should be enabled to support and encourage people to make informed choices, supported by the knowledge, to signpost or advocate appropriately as per the situation, guided by the Social Work Practice Continuum. Graduating students and practitioners need to have clear expectations that the Degree is the foundation of a professional knowledge base. As professionals, they should actively commit to encouraging and supporting those shared expectations, given that learning is approximately 50/50 (academic/practice-

based); on occasion, it appeared that some stakeholders had somewhat unrealistic expectations of students and newly qualified social workers. Lifelong learning needs to be recognised and included in all expectations of social work education to ensure a flow into the continuum of the professional learning journey from the Degree, through Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) and Professional in Practice (PiP).

Stakeholders, also, need to be mindful of societal issues and concerns, which impact on students' learning such as the current financial impact as a result of the increasing cost of living. This was highlighted in the last Review but it is evident that this has increased and, as such, was mentioned by all stakeholders in this Review.

To conclude, the review also highlights, that although feedback has been mostly positive, the Degree needs to take account of some emerging needs including our diverse population, and ensuring the content of the Degree reflects those needs.

Section 1

Executive summary

This report is the outcome of the fourth Social Care Council's Periodic Review of the Degree in Social Work (the Review). On the basis of annual monitoring over the past five years, and on the findings of this Review, the Social Care Council are satisfied that the provision of the Degree continues to meet the Social Care Council rules, standards and requirements.

The Review team would like to thank all of the stakeholders who contributed to the Review for their cooperation and positive engagement.

This report highlights a number of strengths of the Degree provision across teaching and practice learning. It is clear that stakeholders in the Degree have worked in partnership to maintain standards, particularly through the Covid-19 pandemic. It also, draws attention to areas for development that should be progressed to take account of the findings of the Review and further develop the Degree into the future, with a view to continuous improvement.

Curriculum

Based on the findings from this Review, the Social Care Council is satisfied that the curriculum as set out in the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification* (2015) and delivered through teaching and practice learning, prepares students to respond to current and emerging needs of individuals, groups and communities. Practice learning, service user input and teaching are all evaluated positively by students and Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW).

Looking to the future, the review uncovered emerging topics of relevance to social work that could either be strengthened or built into the curriculum; therefore, it would be appropriate to take a fresh look at the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* to ensure it continues to meet the needs of students and of the profession.

Professional identity

The Review has highlighted key features that students identify as supporting or hindering the development of practitioners with a strong professional social work identity working in inter-disciplinary contexts.

Self care was, also, explored as an aspect of professional identity. It was highlighted as an area of focus in the last review and continues to be an important issue for practitioners, given the emotionally demanding nature of the social work role. This can be bolstered through seeking opportunities to further understand and integrate self-care throughout the curriculum, but also needs to be balanced against reasonable workloads and the context in which learning occurs.

A shared understanding of the learning journey and expectations at different stages of that journey, is useful in ensuring a more consistent assessment of professional identity at each of those different stages. Revisiting and implementing the areas for consolidation from the last Review, where appropriate given the changing context of social work practice, will provide a starting point going forward.

Post-pandemic learning

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had a major impact worldwide on people's lives. Based on the findings from this Review, it is evident that learning from the coronavirus pandemic has informed the curriculum and practice learning to ensure students are equipped for evidence-informed practice in a post-pandemic environment. However, it is also clear that there is still ongoing learning to be gleaned about what constitutes best practice in terms of effective hybrid learning, practice and agile working.

Section 2

Introduction

2.1 The Social Care Council is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department of Health (DoH). The Social Care Council was established on 1 October 2001 by the *Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001*.[1] The Act requires the Social Care Council to promote high standards for social workers in their conduct, practice and training.

2.2 As the regulator of social work education and training in Northern Ireland, the Social Care Council is responsible for setting standards of social work education, ensuring these standards are being met by course providers, and that social workers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver quality services that meet the needs of users of services and their carers. These standards are set out in the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)*.[2]

2.3 The Social Care Council is responsible for the approval, annual monitoring, review and inspection of the Degree. The *Social Care Council Quality Assurance Framework*[3] sets out the arrangements for the approval, monitoring, review and inspection of the Degree. Reviews are conducted at least every five years after approval and enable an in depth consideration of the strengths of the courses, areas for development, and whether requirements continue to be met. This is the fourth Review of the Degree in Social Work since its introduction in 2004.

2.4 The implementation of the last review was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic accelerated ways of working, including digital solutions, which had not been anticipated. Consequently, both academic programme delivery and practice learning changed considerably from the point of completion of the Review.

The *Report on the Implementation of the Degree 2018-19 (March 2023)*[4] identified the work completed under each strategic action plus it suggested the following areas of consolidation to be progressed within the next review period:

- Social Care Council will agree a process with Further and Higher Education Institutions (FHEIs) to enable standardisation and consistency and sharing of programme content.

- As social work practice continues to develop in line with digital progress and innovations, consideration of how this is reflected in the Degree and the accompanying opportunities, risks and ethical challenges shall be imperative.

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1   *Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001*, see: **Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 (legislation.gov.uk)**.
2   *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work* (NISCC, 2015).
3   *Quality Assurance Framework for Education and Training Regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council* (NISCC, Revised January 2017).
4   *Report on the Implementation of the Degree 2018-19* (NISCC, March 2023).

- Sharing of approaches, strategies and content in relation to self-care across FHEIS would be beneficial.
- Continued focus on supporting the transition from student social worker to newly qualified social worker undertaking the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE).

2.5 In carrying out its function of regulating social work education and training, the Social Care Council works to the following principles:

Continuous improvement

The Social Care Council seeks to ensure that continuous improvement underpins both its regulation of provision and the processes by which regulation is carried out. It focusses on the continuous improvement of social work education and training and the consequent outcomes for services. The Social Care Council ensures that the delivery of education and training meets its standards.

Efficiency and effectiveness

The Social Care Council works in partnership with providers and other key stakeholders as appropriate to implement the arrangements for regulation and to avoid duplication of effort where possible. Constructive dialogue between the Social Care Council and providers is encouraged so that any on-going or developmental issues can be dealt with as they arise. The Social Care Council ensures that its standards for education and training are appropriate, comprehensive and reflect up to date professional practice and that its regulatory activity and requirements are proportionate, reasonable and fit for purpose.

Consistency

The Social Care Council is consistent in its approach to all providers and in the interpretation of the rules, standards and requirements.

Transparency

The Social Care Council will have in place a transparent and proportionate system of quality assurance for education and training providers and processes that are responsive to both internal and external scrutiny. A summary of quality assurance reports will be made available to key stakeholders and the public.

Section 3

The Degree

The Degree and career long learning

3.1   The Degree in Social Work was first delivered in 2004 and is a generic qualification which qualifies social workers to practise across a range of sectors and settings, including the health and social care sector, justice sector, education sector and the community and voluntary sector.

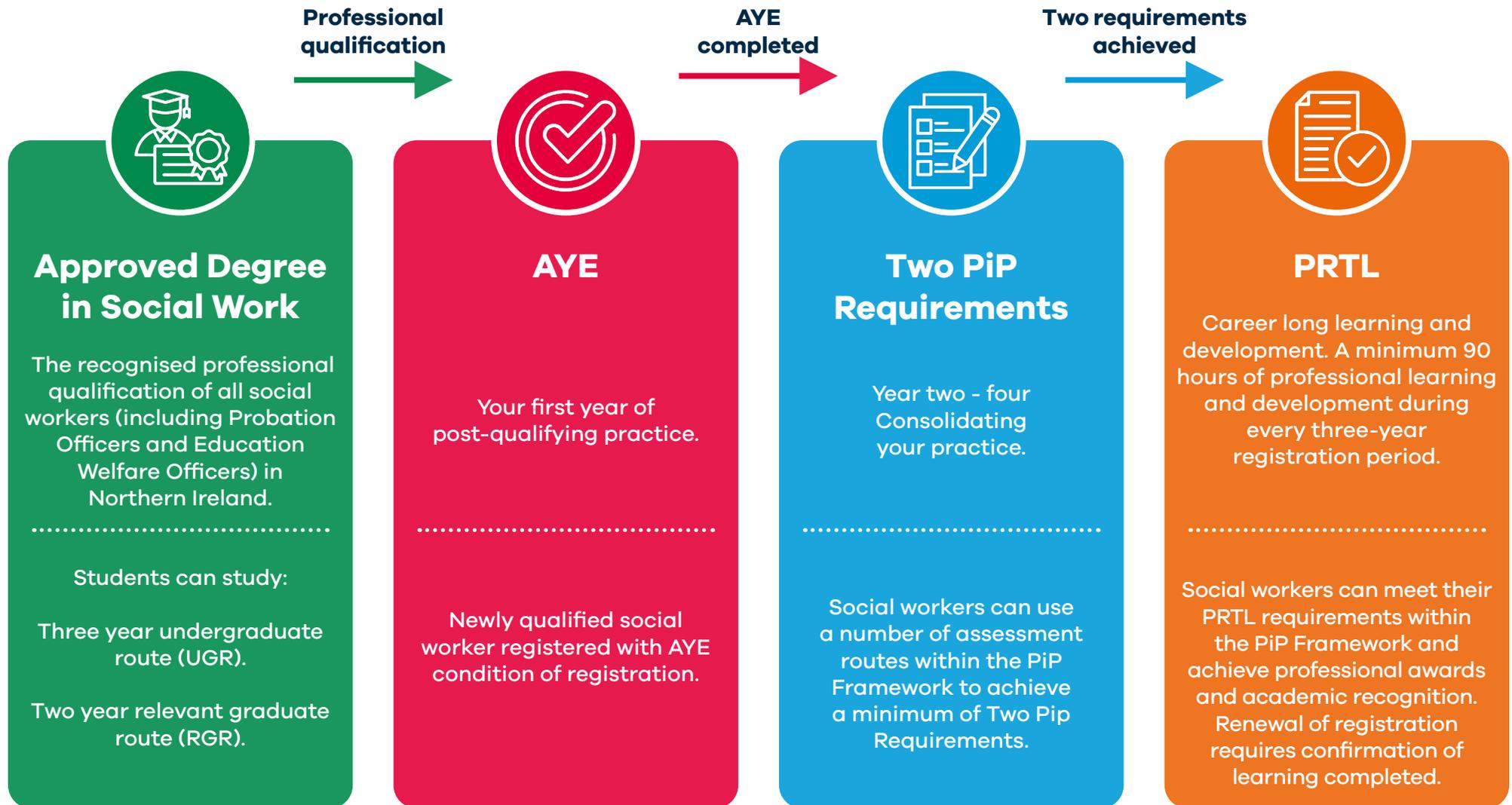The Degree is designed to help students gain the core knowledge and skills that are transferable across a range of settings and service user groups.

3.2   Completion of the Degree represents the first stage in a journey of continuous professional development (CPD) (see: **Figure 1** on page 14) that spans a social worker's career.

Figure 1 - Journey of continuous professional development for a social worker in Northern Ireland.

Supporting social workers in career long learning
How continuous professional development is supported through regulation.

Professional qualification → **AYE completed** → **Two requirements achieved** →

Approved Degree in Social Work

The recognised professional qualification of all social workers (including Probation Officers and Education Welfare Officers) in Northern Ireland.

....

Students can study:

Three year undergraduate route (UGR).

Two year relevant graduate route (RGR).

AYE

Your first year of post-qualifying practice.

....

Newly qualified social worker registered with AYE condition of registration.

Two PiP Requirements

Year two - four Consolidating your practice.

....

Social workers can use a number of assessment routes within the PiP Framework to achieve a minimum of Two Pip Requirements.

PRTL

Career long learning and development. A minimum 90 hours of professional learning and development during every three-year registration period.

....

Social workers can meet their PRTL requirements within the PiP Framework and achieve professional awards and academic recognition. Renewal of registration requires confirmation of learning completed.

> **Clearly an initial qualification as a social worker is just that, an initial qualification in a journey in which continuing professional education is expected to take place throughout a professional's career in practice.**
>
> (Croisdale-Appleby,[5] 2014, p.14)

The structure of social work education in Northern Ireland supports learning across a social worker's career. Following qualifying education (the Degree), which is designed to provide students with the foundations upon which to build their knowledge, skills and values, newly qualified social workers are required to develop these to practise competently and safely. This begins with the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE).[6]

The AYE is intended to ensure that newly qualified social workers have made the transition from student to employee and have demonstrated sustained, continuous and effective competence in the workplace. Employers must confirm to the Social Care Council that a NQSW is fit to practise as a fully accountable social worker before the AYE condition is removed.

After successful completion of the AYE, a further condition is placed on social workers' registration requiring them to complete a minimum of two Professional in Practice Requirements[7] through the Professional in Practice Framework within three years. Thereafter, social workers are required to be able to evidence 90 hours post registration training and learning (PRTL) every three years in order to maintain their registration either through activities aligned to the PiP Framework or other continuing professional development activities.

This structure exists in recognition of the fact that there is a need to consolidate, develop and expand learning on a continuum in order to continually build competence and confidence.

3.3 Social work undergraduate education in Northern Ireland is supported by strong partnership arrangements that ensure the Degree meets the needs of service users and carers, employers, and communities. The *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)*[8] incorporates a statement of expectations from service users and carers and they are involved in elements of the design, delivery and evaluation of Degree programmes.

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5   *Re-visioning social work education: An Independent Review*, Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, Available online at: **assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/ uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285788/DCA_Accessible.pdf.**

6   *Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW):* Circular HSS (OSS) AYE 2/2015. See: **learningzone.niscc.info/file/assessed- year-in-employment-8/course/en/assets/5ef8eb400d955f585ae92886.pdf.**

7   *Mandatory Two Requirements*, NISCC, (2022) see: **learningzone.niscc.info/app/uploads/2022/10/Mandatory-Two-Requirements.pdf.**

8   *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work*, NISCC , (2015), see: **learningzone.niscc.info/app/uploads/2022/08/The-Northern- Ireland-Framework-Specification-for-the-Degree-2015.pdf**.

Structure of the Degree delivery in Northern Ireland

3.4 In Northern Ireland, a policy decision was taken by the Department of Health and Personal Social Services in 2001 to establish the Degree in Social Work as the threshold level for qualification for social work practice. The first Degree courses in Northern Ireland were validated and commenced in 2004. The *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* and associated Social Care Council requirements and standards specify what should be taught and assessed as part of the Degree in order to promote consistency across courses and ensure the relevance of content to the needs of service users, carers and employers.

Skills for Health, as a Sector Skills Council developed National Occupational Standards (NOS) for all health and social care occupations. NOS describe the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to do a particular job to a nationally recognised level of competence. These form the basis of all qualifications and training programmes. The *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* is predicated on the *National Occupational Standards for Social Work (2011)*[9] agreed in partnership with England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

3.5 The Degree is provided as a three-year undergraduate course (UGR) and a two-year relevant graduate course (RGR). A part time route was available from 2010 but was discontinued, with its last intake starting study in September 2015.

3.6 In 2020, the Open University (OU) was approved to provide the three-year UGR programme. This is a work-based, distance learning route and, in addition to meeting the entry requirements, students must be 'sponsored' by an approved employing organisation and must be working in social care. This means that the organisation has agreed to support the person undertaking the programme and has capacity to provide the required practice learning opportunities.

3.7 Three course providers are currently approved to deliver the Degree in Northern Ireland, including:

- Collaborative Partnership at Queen's University Belfast (CPAQ).
- Ulster University/Further Education Collaborative Management Board (UU/FECMB).
- The Open University (OU).

The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP) was established to co-ordinate a consistent regional approach to delivery of the Degree including admissions and practice learning. It is a partnership of education institutions that deliver the Degree and social work employer organisations - both statutory and voluntary.

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9   *National Occupational Standards for Social Work(2011)* see: **niscc.info/app/uploads/2023/11/Social-Work-Occupational-Standards.pdf.**

3.8 To discharge its functions effectively, the Social Care Council has established a number of partnerships and advisory groups to engage its key stakeholders in the development and delivery of its business. The Strategic Advisory Group for Social Work Education and Training (SAG) was established in 2010 to advise on the strategic direction for the Degree in Social Work. In 2015, its remit was extended to include the full spectrum of social work education and training at qualifying and post qualifying levels.

3.9 A collaborative approach by course providers and employers is essential to the delivery of social work education in Northern Ireland. Approximately 50 percent of the Degree is delivered through practice learning, therefore, a partnership approach between academic and workplace staff is essential to support the integration of theory with practice, to promote the implementation of evidence-based practice and to ensure that there is coherence and progression between the academic and practice components of the course. In this context, Practice Teachers, along with their academic colleagues, have a key role in the education and training of social work students.

Changing context of social work since the third Periodic Review

3.10 The social work profession has a lead role in improving and safeguarding the social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Social work practice, therefore, takes place in a societal context influenced by a wide range of socio-economic and political factors. The duality of the social work role as both enabler and protector means that social workers often occupy a contested space where they are required to balance, what are sometimes, competing rights and needs while empowering those they work with.

3.11 Since the last Review, the social work landscape has evolved and, in the course of the Review, there were a number of themes raised by stakeholders. Whilst themes such as workforce pressures and student funding may not fall within the remit of the Review of the Degree, given that a NQSW's readiness to practice is interconnected to the wider environment, they provide insight into pressing issues for social work education.

3.12 The Covid-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on students' experiences of qualifying social work education and training - students were recruited and selected, and then taught, online rather than in person, and practice learning experiences varied significantly from their predecessors in that opportunities to engage with service users and carers in person were restricted. During the periods of lockdown, course providers adapted quickly and were innovative in using digital platforms and methods to provide teaching, while practice learning providers responded in an equally agile way to ensure that practice learning reflected the new ways in which practitioners were working.

Given this pivot to hybrid teaching and learning, and that social work is a relational profession, dependent on building and sustaining relationships to bring about positive outcomes for people, it was agreed that it was important to explore how these changes in course delivery helped prepare students to work in a post pandemic world.

3.13 The challenge of the cost of living for students was widely reported. The most frequent comments from students, when asked about improvements in the Degree, related to finance. The DoH currently provide financial support via a Student Social Worker Incentive Scheme to those domiciled in Northern Ireland and studying at either Queens University Belfast (QUB) or Ulster University (UU) (including the Further Education (FE) colleges). The level of support provided has not increased in over ten years and is not available to students of the OU programme. University and college staff, and practice teachers, also, voiced concern about the impact of financial hardship on students' capacity to engage with learning.

The cost of living clearly impacts, too, on service users and carers and poverty was highlighted as an issue about which social workers need to be equipped to respond to.

3.14 Workforce pressures were, also, highlighted by all stakeholder groups as having an impact on the student experience. The challenges of staff shortages and turnover are being addressed by the Social Work Workforce Implementation Board (SWWIB). The Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) agreed that it would be important for the Review to revisit self-care and resilience, as explored in the last Review, for social work students in light of the current landscape.

3.15 The policy context for both social work and social work education and the way in which services are delivered continues to change since the introduction of the Degree in 2004. Devolved government in Northern Ireland was restored in January 2024 after a 24-month hiatus and much of the field work for the Review took place during that period.

3.16 *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together (DoH, October 2016)*[10] focuses on the transformation of how health and social care services will be designed, structured and delivered into the medium and long term. This agenda was designed to provide an opportunity for social workers to work innovatively with related professions in community contexts where the emphasis is on prevention, early intervention and better targeting for specialised and statutory services.

3.17 Transformation of services across all sectors requires leadership and co-production with service users and carers, communities and other professionals. Social work training must therefore prepare students to be leaders at all levels and work effectively with service users, carers, communities, and other professions in integrated teams and services. This aligns with the *Social Work Leadership Framework*[11] introduced in April 2022, to support a collective leadership approach and demonstrate how leadership is an important aspect of effective social work at all levels regardless of role. The Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) agreed that the Review was an opportunity to explore the extent of students' understanding of leadership in the context of social work.

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10   *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together* (DoH, October 2016).
11   *Social Work Leadership Framework* (DoH, April 2022), see: **niscc.info/app/uploads/2022/09/Social-Work-Leadership-Framework-final-version-15-April-22.pdf**.

3.18 The *Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services (Jones, 2023)*[12] was also completed during this period and the outworking of that review will influence the future of services for children and families.

The *Adoption and Children Bill (NI) 2022* amending the law relating to adoption and further amending related child care legislation commenced a phased implementation in April 2024 thus bringing further changes to practice.

The implementation of the *Mental Capacity Act (2016)* has been a significant change in the last five years, and affects the role of social workers in assessing need and risk, and in participation in multi-disciplinary teamwork. Equally the forthcoming adult protection legislation, recommended following failures identified in the Dunmurray Manor Care Home Review and the Muckamore Abbey Inquiry shall influence future social work provision.

Social work training must be agile, therefore, in order to build and maintain core social work foundations while simultaneously being responsive to policy and evidence-informed developments that set the context for social work practice.

3.19 While the implementation period for the first strategy for social work, *Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing - A Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland, 2012-2022 (DHSSPS, April 2012)*[13] has now concluded, the *Framework for Social Work Practice and the Social Work Practice Continuum* (see: **Figure 2**), as set out in the strategy, continues to support the delivery of the vision for social work and is outlined in the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)*.

The Department of Health (DoH) subsequently published, *The Purpose of Social Work; Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing (DoH, June 2017)*[14] which articulates the purpose of social work, the key characteristics of effective social work practice and the role of social work in improving people's social wellbeing.
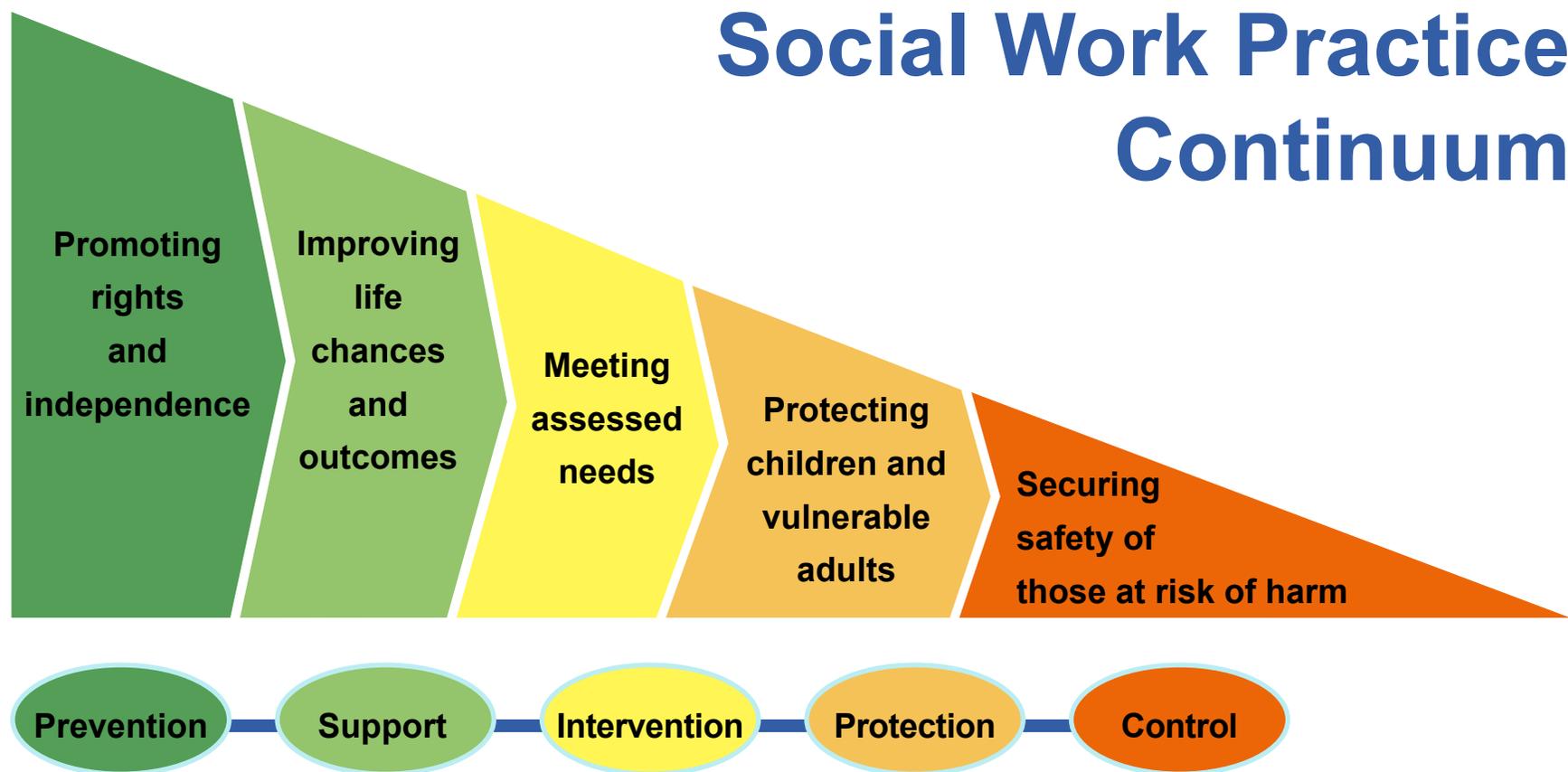
These publications are applicable for all social work sectors and settings and are therefore of value in the planning and delivery of education and training at both qualifying and post qualifying levels.

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12 Report of The Independent Review Of Northern Ireland's Children's Social Care Services, Professor Ray Jones (June 2023), see: **cscsreviewni.net/files/cscsreviewni/2023-06/The%20NI%20Review%20of%20Children%27s%20Social%20Care%20Services.pdf**.
13 *Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing - A Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland, 2012-2022* (DHSSPS, April 2012).
14 *The Purpose of Social Work; Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing* (DoH, June 2017).

Figure 2 - Social Work Practice Continuum (DHSSPS, April 2012).

Social Work Practice Continuum

Promoting rights and independence

Improving life chances and outcomes

Meeting assessed needs

Protecting children and vulnerable adults

Securing safety of those at risk of harm

Prevention — Support — Intervention — Protection — Control

3.20 Ensuring that social work students have the knowledge and skills required to safely use digital technology to safeguard and improve the wellbeing of service users, carers and communities was an action arising from the third periodic review of the Degree. The use of digital technology has been significantly accelerated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as such, now needs to be a core consideration in social work training. Digital competence was, therefore, revisited as part of the Review.

Section 4

Aims and objectives of the Periodic Review

Aims of the Review

- The purpose of the *Review of the Degree in Social Work* is to examine the quality of provision measured against the Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015) and the *Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work (2012)*.

- Professional social work needs to be responsive and anticipatory to meet the challenges of changing need, growing demand and new ways of working. This Review will therefore, test the extent to which the Degree is forward looking and agile.

Objectives of the Review

To ascertain that:

> ### Objective 1:

The Degree in social work programmes meet the requirements of the *NISCC Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, January 2012*.

> ### Objective 2:

The curriculum as set out in the Framework Specification and delivered through Further and Higher Education Institute (FEI) teaching and practice learning, prepares students to respond to current and emerging needs of individuals, groups and communities.

> ### Objective 3:

The Degree in social work programmes support the development of practitioners with a strong professional social work identity working in inter-disciplinary contexts.

> ### Objective 4:

Learning from the coronavirus pandemic has informed the curriculum and practice learning to ensure students are equipped for evidence-informed practice in a post-pandemic environment.

Section 5

Review methodology

5.1 This is the fourth periodic Review of the Degree - previous Reviews were completed in 2009, 2014 and 2019. Implementation of the strategic actions resulting from the previous review were paused due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the pandemic also changed the landscape in which the previous Review was completed and areas for further consolidation were identified as part of the implementation and are referenced in relevant sections of this report.

5.2 The scope of the Review was agreed by the Social Care Council in collaboration with the Strategic Advisory Group for Social Work Education (SAG) including the DoH, the sponsoring body, and was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the *Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, January 2012*.[15]

A Review Team was established by the Social Care Council ensuring the work was conducted within the terms of reference, the objectives for the Review and in accordance with the *Social Care Council Quality Assurance Framework*. The Review Team included a member of the Social Care Council Participation Partnership for Service Users and Carers, and a social work academic from outside Northern Ireland (see: **Appendix 1**).

5.3 The key themes guiding the Review are set out in Section 4. In approaching these areas, the Review team employed a mixed methods approach, involving focus groups, digital surveys and Review planning meetings. A total of 19 focus groups were facilitated with key stakeholders, including:

- Academic staff.
- NQSWs (those currently on the Assessed Year in Employment [AYE]).
- Practice Teachers.
- Service users and carers.
- Social work managers.
- Social work students.

In addition to the focus groups noted above, the Review Team also consulted with:

- Representatives from the Department of Health.
- Executive Directors of Social Work Group (representing the Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland).
- Health and Social Care Trust Assistant Directors of Social Work, Social Care Governance, and
- Community and voluntary sector leaders.

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15   *Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work*, January 2012, see: **learningzone.niscc.info/app/uploads/2022/09/Rules-for-Approval-of-Degree.pdf**.

5.4 Three digital surveys were also completed, targeting:

- Social work students.
- Social work managers.
- Practice Teachers.

Given that the DoH, in collaboration with Degree Providers, is engaging NQSWs in a series of annual surveys in relation to their experience (Evaluating the motivation, well-being, resilience and employment preferences of social work graduates over time: Time 1 (2022)),[16] the team agreed that, in addition to focus groups with AYE staff, the information from these surveys would address the key areas identified and another survey was not required.

5.5 Following approval of the Degree in Social Work, providers are then required to provide an annual monitoring report. The Social Care Council annual quality assurance report is the mechanism for the Course Provider to make use of information already collected by their own quality assurance system, including the annual subject review report. The Review also analysed the quality assurance data provided by social work education providers.

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16   *Evaluating the motivation, well-being, resilience and employment preferences of social work graduates over time: Time 1* (Roulston et al, September 2022).

Section 6

Review findings

6.1 Purpose of the Review of the Degree in Social Work

To examine the quality of provision measured against the *Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work* and the *Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work*.

Objective 1: The Degree in social work programmes meet the requirements of the Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, January 2012.

6.1.1 *The Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001* Section 10(3) gives the Social Care Council the authority to make rules on the provision of social work education and training that can include the content of courses. In accordance with Section 18(3), no Rules shall be made without the consent of the Department of Health. The Social Care Council will approve a course only when it is satisfied that the course meets the *Standards for Approval* which cover the following areas:

    i.   Regional consistency.

    ii.   Collaborative arrangements.

    iii.   Management and organisation.

    iv.   Policy and planning.

    v.   Resources and staffing.

    vi.   Student participation.

    vii.   Public participation.

    viii.   Selection and registration.

    ix.   Teaching, practice learning and assessment.

    x.   Governance and continuous improvement.

6.1.2 Course providers were asked to provide evidence about each of the areas above. The outcome of this Review demonstrates that the Degree, as delivered by the course providers continues to meet the requirements of the *Social Care Council Rules for Approval*.

6.1.3 During the last five-year period, the annual monitoring reports and associated documentation submitted to the Social Care Council by course providers, Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLPs) and the NIDSWP have consistently evidenced that the provision of the Degree is meeting Social Care Council standards. Feedback from students to Further and Higher Education Institutions (FHEIs) has evidenced that there is a high level of satisfaction with the course and Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO) provision. Within this period, contingency arrangements for FHEIs and practice learning providers during the Covid-19 pandemic were agreed through the NIDSWP partnership arrangements and were supported by the Social Care Council.

6.1.4 The Degree curriculum has been developed around the six key roles as set out in the *Northern Ireland Framework for the Degree in Social Work* and the Social Care Council Practice Learning Requirements. The curriculum covers the key areas of social work theory and practice and is designed to support a generic training course. As part of this review, the module outlines taught on the UGR and RGR routes at QUB, UU/FE and OU were examined. The Social Care Council is satisfied that the modules address the six key roles of the *National Occupational Standards for social work,* as outlined in the *Framework Specification*.

6.1.5 The Social Care Council periodically reviews its standards and arrangements for regulation and quality assurance of education and training to ensure that the model used is fit for purpose and reflects best practice. The outcome of this work will be reflected in future quality assurance arrangements for the Degree.

6.2 Framework Specification

Objective 2: The curriculum as set out in the Framework Specification and delivered through HEI teaching and practice learning, prepares students to respond to current and emerging needs of individuals, groups and communities.

6.2.1 For the purposes of this Review, the Social Care Council understands curriculum to include the totality of social work students' experience in university and/or college, and on practice learning opportunities. The *Framework*

Specification for the Degree in Social Work is a joint publication by the DoH and the Social Care Council. It sets out a single comprehensive set of learning outcomes in the form of performance criteria, core skills and knowledge and statements of understanding for the Degree.

It includes an expectation that course providers maintain a curriculum that incorporates academic and practice learning and fosters the integration of knowledge, skills and values in teaching, learning and assessment to meet the performance criteria. Practice learning provides the opportunity to contextualise and expand academic learning and to apply it to social work practice.

Figure 3 - Student survey responses about which elements of the Degree course are useful in preparing them for social work practice.
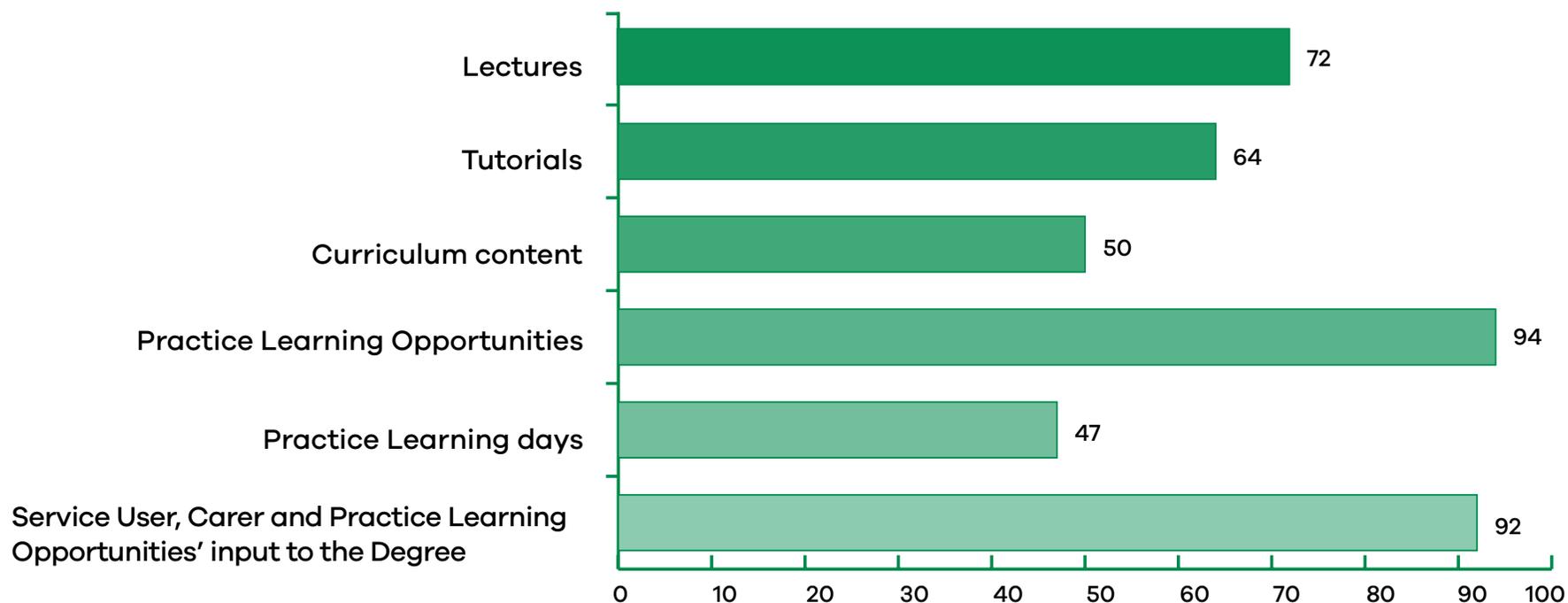
Option	Total	Percent
Lectures	72	65.45%
Tutorials	64	58.18%
Curriculum content	50	45.45%
Practice Learning Opportunities	94	85.45%
Practice Learning Opportunities	47	42.73%
Service User, Carer and Practice Learning	92	83.64%
Not answered	0	0.00%

6.2.2 In the survey administered as part of this review, social work students were asked a series of questions about their experience of the Degree in social work. Of the students who responded, approximately 11% had not yet had experience of a Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO) and approximately 42% had experience of two PLOs.

Students clearly noted that the PLO was the aspect of the programme which was most useful in preparing them for social work practice (See: Figure 3), closely followed by inputs from service users and carers. Taught aspects of the programme, were also viewed as useful in preparing for practice with practice development days (PDDs) being viewed as the least useful. These results are consistent with the views expressed in the previous review.

Students told us that:

> **PLO was invaluable with experience and many of the skills and values required could not possibly be taught within a classroom setting. It grew my confidence and professional development.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

> **Being on placement really made me realise that I do want to be a social worker it was only on placement that all of elements clicked together and I enjoyed the variation and human element of PLO.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

"Evaluating the motivation, well-being, resilience and employment preferences of social work graduates over time: Time 1" (2022) reports that students just about to graduate also rated practice learning highly with 88.1% rating it as the most useful aspect of their training. In focus groups, the value of practice learning was also highlighted by NQSWs in their assessed year in employment (AYE).

6.2.3 Feedback from the focus groups and surveys highlighted that the student experience of practice learning was, for the most part, extremely positive. This was echoed by NQSWs.

Student comments included:

> **My practice teacher was fantastic throughout my placement at ensuring I was reflecting and using the relevant theories to inform my interventions.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

> **...the practice teacher is extremely supportive in ensuring my own personal development is developed through encouragement and opportunities to visit other placement sites and to avail of training opportunities.**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)

However, on occasion, the feedback indicated some dissatisfaction with inconsistent expectations- inconsistencies were most apparent in relation to the amount of written work expected of students while on PLO, as highlighted in focus group feedback and survey comments.

One student noted:

> **All practice teachers need to have the same views and expectations of students.... too much variation in the work expected of students especially on first placements.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

It is important to acknowledge, however, that, not only is each setting different, each student will come to PLO with their own unique set of learning needs which means that it would not be possible for practice teachers to be entirely uniform in their approach. It was noted, by both line managers and NQSWs, that the two PLOs were fundamental to developing a NQSW's capacity and competence and that not all prepared them for practice in the same way.

Some line managers remarked:

> **...newly qualified social workers coming to this workplace often are unprepared for the type of work they will be doing, unless they have completed a PLO within this setting. The emotional intensity and the different pace of this workplace can be surprising for some newly qualified workers.**
>
> (Line manager)

> **My experience is that if the NQSW has had a placement in that area previously, they are very well prepared.**
>
> (Line manager)

Social work is practised across many sectors and settings; hence, the importance of acknowledging the continuum of learning with the Degree providing a foundation. One consultation participant likened completing the Degree to being akin to "passing your driving test" which acknowledges the time needed to consolidate and develop learning as a NQSW and onwards.

Some students suggested alternative practice learning experiences such as a short practice learning experience in the first year of the three-year programme or shorter PLOs across the course. However, shorter PLOs could limit opportunities to build positive working relationships with service users.

6.2.4 After practice learning, service user and carer involvement in the Degree was identified as the most useful aspect of the programme. The feedback received was wholly positive with developmental responses simply reflecting a desire for this to be increased. In focus groups, NQSWs also emphasised the value of service user and carer input to the Degree, and expressed the opinion that it was one of the areas from which they learnt most.

One student observed:

Workshops from service users are incredibly insightful and the learning around these particularly in the context of how services users experienced social workers in their treatment is vital learning in my professional identity- don't underestimate the small things such as a smile or asking permission to engage.

(Level 2 student UGR)
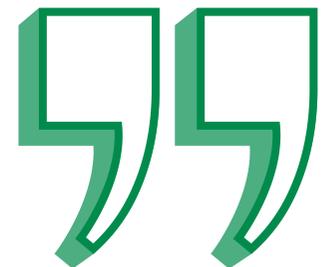
6.2.5 Furthermore, the Review team heard directly from service user focus groups about the supports in place to enable them to input to the Degree which were positive. Each institution approaches service user involvement slightly differently and practice sharing may enhance involvement. Service users were involved in different ways such as delivering lectures, being involved in preparation for practice, attending module reviews or contributing to the "Living library" project and further consideration of how to involve service users further in programme design would be useful.

6.2.6 The Review team found that the FHEI lectures and tutorials were, also, deemed by students to be useful preparation for practice with students referencing the importance of academic staff in helping them form both their professional identity and critical thinking capacity, in particular. The importance of understanding theory, research and evidence to inform practice is pivotal and practice learning provides students with an opportunity to apply this learning.

Sir Martin Narey asserted:

> **Before being allowed to enter a profession, students need to acquire a basic professional understanding sufficient to allow them to begin practice safely and competently**
>
> (Narey, 2014, p.4)

This is supported by the 79.5 percent of graduating students surveyed for "Evaluating the motivation, well-being, resilience and employment preferences of social work graduates over time: Time 1" (2022) who reported satisfaction with the quality of academic teaching.

6.2.7 The "Evaluating the motivation, well-being, resilience and employment preferences of social work graduates over time: Time 1" (2022) responses indicate that the Preparation for Practice Learning (PfPL) module, in particular, was viewed as a strength of the curriculum.

However, while students were not asked specifically about this module in the Review survey, general qualitative comments and feedback in focus groups indicated that while some found it useful, others were of the opinion that the teaching did not always accurately reflect the reality of practice that they experienced when they undertook practice learning. This view was echoed in focus groups with NQSWs. There were suggestions that the PfPL module could be reviewed to ensure it reflects current practice. There was also a comment that the module should be revisited prior to PLO, particularly if there was a gap between the module and the PLO.

Student comments included:

> **I feel that the Prep for Practice module could be reviewed as the role plays in class did not provide an accurate reflection of the 'real world' …**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

> **Uni teaching and practice settings are somewhat aligned, but it is like stepping from one world to another. Uni is idealistic...**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)

> **The module however was very beneficial to prepare for PLO1**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

As outlined in Section 3, the landscape in which social work education and practice is delivered has experienced significant change during the pandemic. This change can be seen at a societal, organisational and individual needs level. Workforce pressures have, also, been cited in terms of shortfalls in staff numbers in social work teams.

Respondent feedback revealed that these undoubtedly affect the practice learning experience, and where possible students should be prepared for such transitions and pressures. The *Standards for Practice Learning (revised 2020)*[17] state that course providers should provide students with appropriate guidance and support in preparation for practice learning. While the feedback comments reinforce the importance of teaching staff having practice experience or knowledge to relay the realities, it is, also, fundamental that students are taught to challenge imperfect systems and to strive for practice which underpins and emphasises social justice.

6.2.8 While lectures and tutorials were viewed as valuable, the survey indicated that only 46% of student respondents were of the opinion that the curriculum content is useful in preparing them for social work practice. The taught content of the curriculum was explored as part of the Review with the aim of clarifying whether students were adequately prepared to respond to emerging need.

The most referenced areas of emerging need highlighted by stakeholders are highlighted in 6.2.10. The review team heard from some students that they did not always feel prepared for the use of particular assessment tools when they engaged in practice learning. It is important to note that different services use different assessment tools and it would not be possible to adequately cover all of these within the academic setting - the FHEIs are required

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17   *Standards for Practice Learning* (revised 2020), see: **learningzone.niscc.info/app/uploads/2022/08/Standards-of-Practice-Learning-for-the-D-in-SW-Dec-2020.pdf**.

to teach the principles of assessment to help students understand its purpose and best practice, rather than the mechanics of a particular tool. Given the level of practice learning built into the Degree programme, it is expected that particular tools to be used during a PLO should be explored at that stage.

Feedback on the Preparation for Practice Learning (PfPL) module, as relayed in 6.2.7, may also contribute to the low rating afforded to the curriculum content. Furthermore, on the basis of focus groups and qualitative responses to surveys, there was a perception among students and some practice teachers that teaching relating to children and families dominated the curriculum. The Degree is a generic qualification and the course content needs to achieve a balance across the life course.

6.2.9 Overall, Practice Development Days (PDDs) were deemed the least useful aspect of the Degree by students. The *Social Care Council Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree in Social Work (Revised May 2024)* specify that there are 15 days to be used for individual practice development. The aim is to encourage students to take personal responsibility for their own professional development through participation in a range of individual practice development opportunities. These are designed to enable students to address gaps in learning and meet personal development needs not covered within course modules; to develop knowledge, skills and values in areas they feel less confident in and provides opportunities for students to be creative and innovative in their learning. PDDS were evaluated similarly in the previous review. Feedback indicated that that there were mixed viewpoints

with some students finding them useful, others considering them unnecessary and laborious, and some students noted inconsistencies in how they were asked to evidence them.

6.2.10 The Review revealed that 63 percent of practice teachers were satisfied that students were coming to practice learning with relevant knowledge, while 37 percent believed students had insufficient knowledge. There was, however, significant variation in understanding among practice teachers about the content of the curriculum which reflects the findings of the previous review. It is essential that all practice teachers have access to relevant information about what students are taught at different stages of the course so that they can manage expectations, tailor the practice learning experience accordingly and ensure fair assessment.

In order to gain a shared understanding of what the emerging needs are, all stakeholders were asked their views on this in the focus groups. Among other issues, the residual impact of the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, workforce pressures and the changing and, increasingly diverse, demography of Northern Ireland, dominated the conversation. A number of emerging needs were identified, but the responses encountered by the review team most often indicated a need for students to understand:

- social work practice in a diverse society
- digital competence
- poverty and the impact of the cost of living (for both service users, carers and students)

- gender identity and related issues, and
- mental health including post pandemic anxiety and isolation, and trauma Informed approaches.

Some of these areas are already covered, to varying extents, within the teaching element of the Degree course. The review, also, heard from students and NQSWs that they would find further inputs from practitioners useful as part of the taught aspect of the programme, as this helped them conceptualise how the teaching could be applied in practice. These inputs are reliant on available resources from employing organisations.

6.2.11 The OU was first approved to deliver the Degree in Social Work in 2020 and recruited the first cohort of students in the same year. The delivery of the programme differs from the other FHEIs in that it is an employer sponsored route and it is facilitated as a distance learning programme with the majority of the academic curriculum delivered online. The *Standards for the Degree*[18] and the *Standards for Practice Learning*[19], however, are the same as for other routes, and all modules relating to practice learning are delivered on a face to face basis following the pandemic, in keeping with regional agreements.

Focus groups with students from the OU highlighted additional areas to be considered, such as:

- sponsoring employers understanding of study days to ensure some students are not unfairly disadvantaged by having fewer study days, and
- timeframes for completing modules while still working, and when undertaking their final PLO.

Engagement between employers, the OU and the DoH has taken place as part of the Social Work Workforce Review Implementation Board (SWWIB), Pathways into Social Work workstream, to address these issues.

6.2.12 The Review Team considered the importance of a curriculum which can adapt to changing needs. However, in light of an already packed curriculum, such changes require careful consideration in terms of how additional topics can be added or whether some topics are more appropriate for post qualifying education and training.

What's working well?

- Degree providers are continuing to deliver the Degree programme which meets the requirements of the Social Care Council *Rules for Approval*.
- Practice learning and teaching are evaluated positively by students and NQSWs.
- Service user input to the Degree is deemed by students and NQSWs to be a strength of the Degree.
- A majority of practice teachers believe students are arriving on PLO with sufficient knowledge.

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18 *Rules for the Approval of the Degree* (NISCC, 2012).
19 *Standards for Practice Learning* (NISCC, revised 2020).

Areas for development

- The *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* sets out learning outcomes in the form of performance criteria, core skills and knowledge and understanding statements. It also specifies the value base as an integral part of the knowledge and practice requirements. The Review has demonstrated that, broadly speaking, programmes meet those requirements. However, there is a need to strengthen connections between the curriculum content, and students' ability to link teaching input to practice learning. To enable this, and given the changing landscape in which social workers, educators and students operate, the Review Team were of the view that the Framework Specification should be reviewed to ensure that areas of emerging need, and skills suitable for current social work practice are catered for within the curriculum.

- Low satisfaction rates with PDDs has continued since the second periodic review completed in 2017. At that stage, it was concluded that there was not a strong rationale for removing the requirement in the absence of a viable alternative to extending PLO days. Students, therefore, need to understand that PDDs are a mandatory part of the programme designed to bridge gaps in their learning. Given the mixed reception to PDDs by students in this review, a fresh look by partners at how these could be structured or encouraged to best effect is important.

- While the regionally agreed PfPL module is viewed positively for the most part, and while it was recently reviewed specifically in terms of learning from research on students who fail, feedback across all stakeholders has pointed to a significantly changed landscape for social work and a more holistic scoping of the module could identify if it continues to fulfil its purpose and any areas where updates would be helpful. However, it is important to frame the module as a foundation upon which students can build and consolidate skills.

- The Review has shown the value of PLOs and their centrality to social work education. Social work is carried out across a range of different settings with different service user groups and therefore cannot conform to a 'one size fits all' format for practice learning. Equally, students all present with a unique set of skills and learning needs which may progress at various paces through the PLO. Therefore, practice teachers require the skills and support to help them maintain and develop in their role, encompassing the roles of educator, supervisor and assessor. Practice teachers' knowledge of what is currently taught as part of the curriculum varies considerably and this reinforces the need for developing more effective mechanisms for transference of information between stakeholders. Practice teachers are required to know the curriculum in order to design and deliver appropriate PLOs and to undertake relevant assessment. The strong commitment of practice teachers was evident and it is important to preserve and future proof this as an integral aspect of the Degree. Balancing an understanding of the nuances of assessment and the feedback from some students about inconsistencies of the practice teaching experience, it is timely to consider how practice teachers are supported on a continuous learning basis.

6.3   Professional identity

Objective 3: The Degree in social work programmes support the development of practitioners with a strong professional social work identity working in inter-disciplinary contexts.

6.3.1   Through surveys and focus groups, stakeholders were asked to comment on the extent to which they perceived Degree programmes support the development of practitioners with a strong professional social work identity and who can demonstrate that while working in the inter disciplinary contexts in which social workers operate.

6.3.2   Students were asked a series of questions to determine their understanding of social work professional identity and their experience of this. Given that some students had not undertaken a PLO at the time the survey was completed, and that an agreed definition of professional identity was not provided, qualitative analysis of the data is more useful. Most students reported that both teaching on the course and the PLO experience helped develop their professional identity and understanding of their role as a social worker. What students told us helped to develop their own sense of professional identity included:

- Support from lecturers and tutors.
- Supervision, and the support and influence of the practice teacher on student practice.

- Interactions with, and feedback from, service users and carers both in academic and practice learning settings.
- Observing and working alongside social workers in practice.
- Working collaboratively with professionals from other disciplines.
- Taught components of the programme which were helpful in building knowledge and inputs from practising social workers.
- Role plays.
- Hearing what motivated social workers and what they enjoyed most about being a social worker.
- Having their perceptions challenged.
- Membership of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW NI).
- A focus on ethics and values.
- The Social Care Council *Standards of Conduct for Students* (2016).
- Being recognised as a professional in relation to assigned tasks and contributions to meetings/fora.
- Having the opportunity to make connections between theories taught and application in practice.

Students highlighted:

> "
>
> **The overall learning during my course has so far opened the door for me to develop my own sense of ethics and personal integrity something I hope to build on when I begin my practical education.**
>
> (First year student, UGR)
>
> "

> "
>
> **I feel on placement I got the true meaning of social work.**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)
>
> "

"My practice teacher on placement has had the biggest effect on who I am as a social worker so far. As a manager, colleague and support system she allowed me to build on my confidence, make sure my work was up to standard and offer a helping hand all in one. By allowing me to be myself in a professional way she allowed my confidence to grow as a person and a social work student. In conclusion, she helped me develop my professional identity."

(Level 2 student UGR)
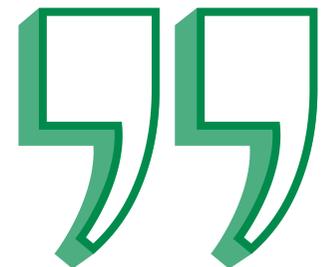
Obstacles to the development of professional identity noted by students included:

- observing social workers exhibiting signs of burn out.
- being allocated a setting which did not employ other social workers for their first experience of PLO, and
- feeling that, even as a student, they were not supernumerary to the team staffing complement.

One student commented that:

> **Within the first PLO the social work role was not identified as the placement did not have social workers within the organisation although I was able to see external social workers visiting the service users.**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)

While another observed:

> **...social workers...burdened by burnout, reduced team sizes, and overwhelming workloads.**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)

Table 1 - Survey results: Practice Teacher and Line Manager responses.

Strongly Agree/Agree that students/NQSWs:	Practice Teacher 2023-24	Line Manager 2023-24
Can practice competently within their remit	56%	68%
Can work autonomously with appropriate supervision	51%	77%
Can establish positive working relationships with service users	98%	82%
Are resilient and equipped with skills to manage the challenges of the social work role	23%	41%

51 percent of practice teachers agreed that students were capable of working autonomously and 77 percent of managers believed NQSWs were capable of working autonomously. Such results would accord with progression in this area through the course of the Degree programme.
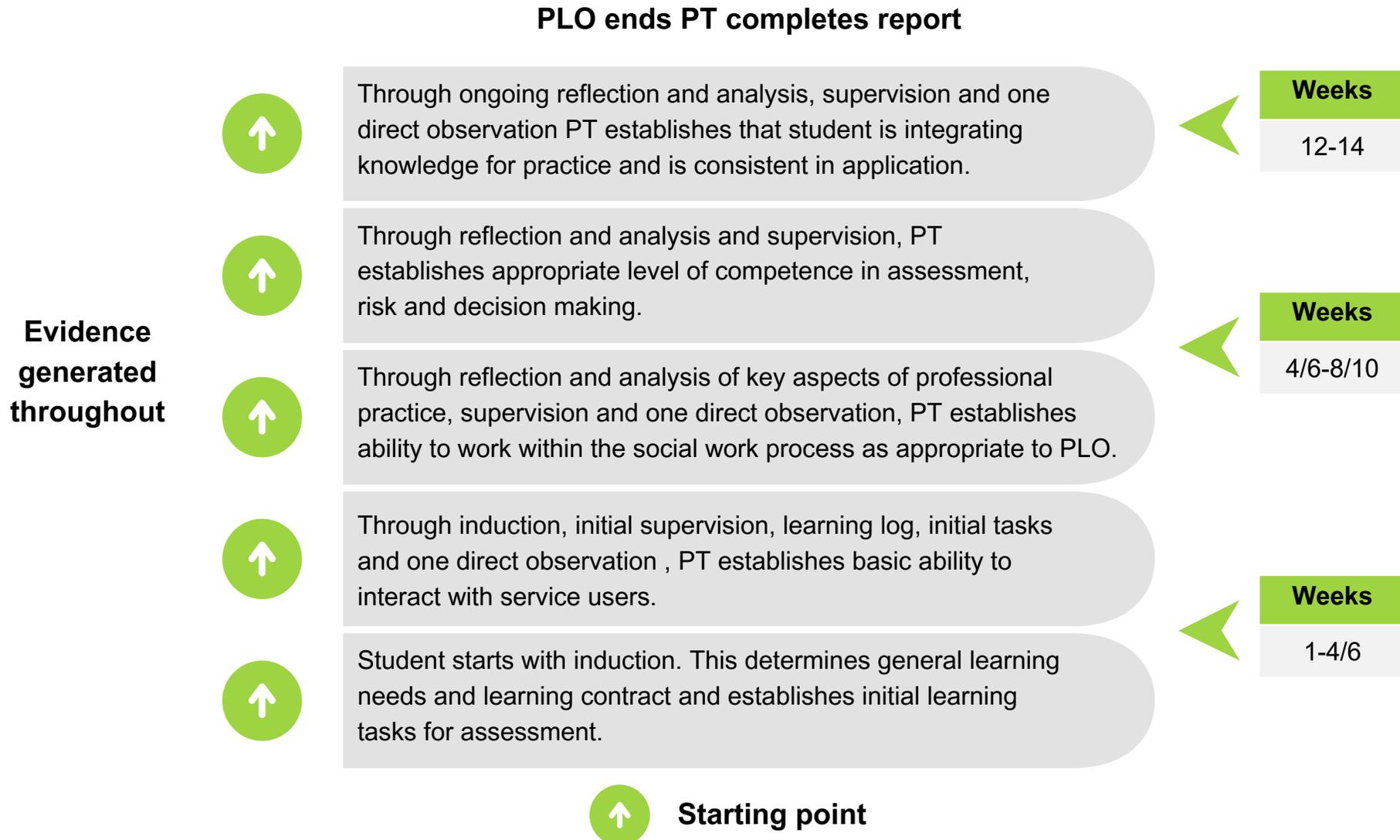
Both the *Statement of Differentials for Levels of Practice Learning*[20] and the *Ladder of Learning*[21] (see: **Figure 4**) provide practice teachers with a guideline to help assess progress in these areas.

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20 Appendix 13: Progression to Competence and Differential Statements (April 2020). Downloadable from: **nidswp.net**.

21 August 2024 - May 2025 PL Handbook Part 2 (June 2024). Downloadable from: **nidswp.net**.

Figure 4 - The Ladder of Learning.

The ladder of learning – an incremental approach to evidence of confident and competent practice

PLO ends PT completes report

Through ongoing reflection and analysis, supervision and one direct observation PT establishes that student is integrating knowledge for practice and is consistent in application.

Weeks

12-14

Through reflection and analysis and supervision, PT establishes appropriate level of competence in assessment, risk and decision making.

Evidence generated throughout

Weeks

4/6-8/10

Through reflection and analysis of key aspects of professional practice, supervision and one direct observation, PT establishes ability to work within the social work process as appropriate to PLO.

Through induction, initial supervision, learning log, initial tasks and one direct observation , PT establishes basic ability to interact with service users.

Weeks

1-4/6

Student starts with induction. This determines general learning needs and learning contract and establishes initial learning tasks for assessment.

Starting point

6.3.4 Service users and carers who participated in focus groups for the Review highlighted the importance of empathy and listening as core social work skills. Practice teachers and line managers were largely in agreement that students were able to demonstrate empathy and that they were able to establish positive working relationships with service users. This was, however, the only area in which line managers scored students lower than practice teachers did.

A clue to the reasons for this may be found in some qualitative responses in which a small number of managers and practice teachers reference the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the digital world on face to face or telephone communication skills and a preference for online methods of communication with service users such as email or text.

One practice teacher concluded:

> **Unfortunately, due to covid the move to online learning has had a detrimental impact on the social skills and interpersonal skills/confidence of students.**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)

While a manager observed:

> **Some new workers have found it difficult to communicate with clients face to face. Some of this may be due to the impact of COVID and reduced capacity to engage beyond text/email/online.**
>
> (Line manager)

In all other areas, it was clear that students progressed during the qualifying journey.

The Review team were told:

> **Students aware how to adapt and change practice in challenging times.**
>
> (Practice teacher)

> **...that (NQSW) was remarkably skilled, resilient, and well equipped for the challenges of working within the field of social work. They came with a strong sense of social justice, and knowledge of the evidence base that underpins their practice.**
>
> (Line manager)

Examples of student comments include:

> **...regarding how they can be applied and challenges of applying them taking into consideration my own personal values...**
>
> (Level 3 student, UGR)

6.3.5 The survey indicated that 86 percent of students referred to the Social Care Council's Standards of Conduct regularly (at least once a month), with 91 percent of students agreeing that they are useful in guiding them in their learning. In the qualitative comments, students refer to using them in assignments and discussing them in lectures and in supervisions.

I always refer to the NISCC standards if at times I feel unsure about things or feel I need some guidance.

(Level 1 student UGR)
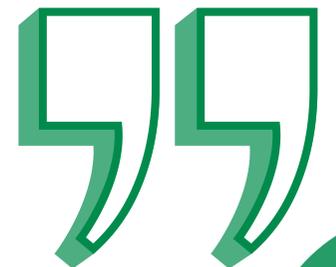
6.3.6 The Review team found that there was disparity between students views and those of Practice Teachers and line managers about resilience and positive selfcare. When asked if students were resilient and equipped with the skills to manage the challenges of the social work role, 42 percent of practice teachers and 36 percent of line managers believed that they were not. However, 73 percent of line managers responded that NQSWs do have the ability to take steps to take care of their wellbeing.

The review team have reflected upon whether it is a reasonable expectation that a Degree programme can teach resilience given that it is not a fixed state. Resilience can evolve over time with constructive support and nurturing; equally it can be eroded over time if such conditions are absent. A majority of students reported that the Degree course (63 percent) and their practice learning experiences (58 percent) helped them understand how to develop supports to enable resilience and self-care, and that social workers they encountered on PLO modelled positive self-care strategies (65 percent). Wellbeing and self-care, rather than resilience, may be relevant areas for continued development for the Degree programme.

In focus groups, students relayed that, for the most part, they felt well supported by Degree providers.

6.3.7 The "Evaluating the motivation, well-being, resilience and employment preferences of social work graduates over time: Time 1 Report (2022)" reported that 57% of students at qualifying stage felt ready for practice and 23% were neutral (p.9).

In focus groups and survey feedback, some practice teachers and line managers expressed concern that graduates were not prepared for, what respondents described as, the 'changing nature of social work.' However, a number of qualitative responses provided context about what can reasonably be expected of a NQSW, with a recognition of the Assessed Year in Practice as a period of consolidation and continuous improvement (see 3.2):

One line manager noted:
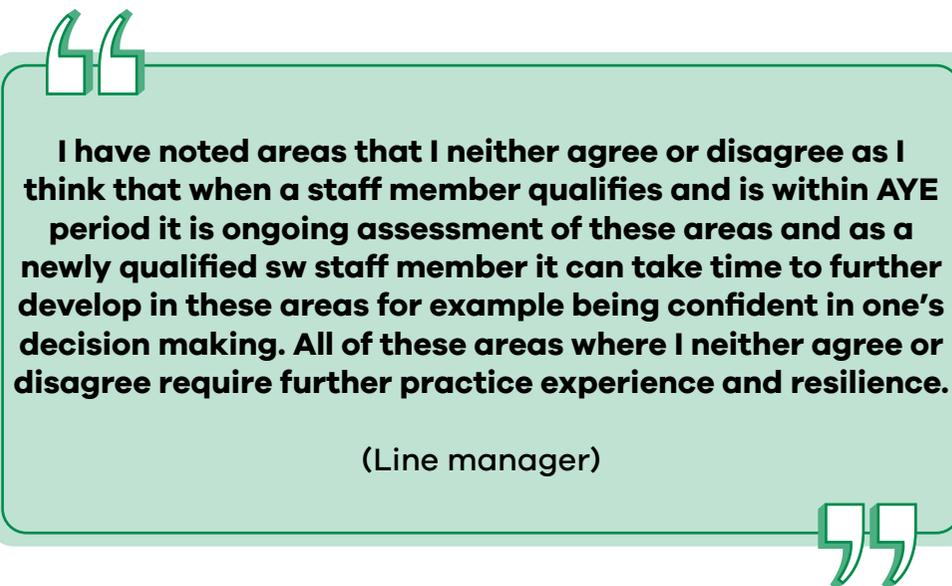
> **I have noted areas that I neither agree or disagree as I think that when a staff member qualifies and is within AYE period it is ongoing assessment of these areas and as a newly qualified sw staff member it can take time to further develop in these areas for example being confident in one's decision making. All of these areas where I neither agree or disagree require further practice experience and resilience.**
>
> (Line manager)

Most NQSWs come to the role with eagerness and enthusiasm. As with all new staff coming to the team there is a lot to learn about day to day team operations which understandably isn't covering within SW training. Confidence building, nurturing and building capacity is required especially around decision making.

(Line manager)
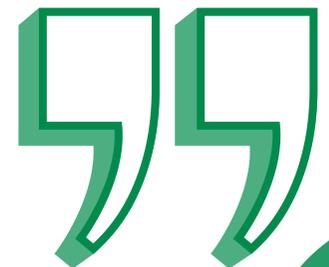
As noted in 6.3.3, there is recognition that the Degree programme is limited in time and space and that resources need to be applied to the early years of practice to support consolidation and development of self care strategies.

The *Health and Social Care Workforce Study*[22] emphasises the importance of line managers as "wellbeing gate-openers" and of the need to ensure appropriate workforce planning - other than empowering students to articulate concerns and expectations appropriately, this sits outside the remit of qualifying social work education. In qualitative responses, and in focus groups, students have observed a system under pressure, and practice teacher and line managers have acknowledged this.

Calls for increased resilience in students emerging from the Degree programme need to be balanced against the issues with resilience within the system. It is important to consider resilience and self-care in the context of where the learning and practice takes place, and take cognisance of the workforce pressures that students and NQSWs have experienced. While students need to be prepared by programme providers for the reality of practice, the onus is on employing organisations to facilitate positive learning environments.

6.3.8 The Review found that practice teachers and managers were mainly in agreement that students and NQSWs demonstrated digital competence commensurate with their role, with no practice teachers disagreeing and only 5% of line managers in disagreement. The need to be cognisant of the ethical use of digital technology was acknowledged by both students and practice teachers.

One line manager affirmed that:

> **Most AYE social workers come to the team with new skills of value including IT skills and have been so valuable as we move towards more technology-based assessment and care. including developing databases and how we can make best use of informatics and data presentation.**
>
> **(Line manager)**

6.3.9 The findings demonstrate that while 61 percent of practice teachers believe that the practice of the students they worked with was underpinned by principles of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), 91 percent of line managers were of the opinion that

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22 *The Health and Social Care Workforce Study: A HR/OD Perspective for Translating Workforce Wellbeing Policies to Practice, Executive Summary* (McFadden et al, February 2024). See: **hscworkforcestudy.co.uk/_files/ugd/2749ea_7ad3080475e548edbb13b245e289746b.pdf**.

EDI underpinned practice for NQSWs. This suggests progression in this area throughout the course of the Degree programme.

6.3.10 In a similar way, the Review demonstrated that students progressed in their ability to practice in an evidence-based way through the programme. While only 37 percent of Practice Teachers reported observing evidence-based practice, 61 percent of managers deemed graduates to be working in an evidence-based way. Again, Practice Teacher responses may be dependent upon the stage of PLO.

6.3.11 Findings from the surveys show that while 90 percent of students agreed that the Degree provided opportunities to develop skills in critical reflection, these skills were rated more highly by line managers (68 percent) at qualification stage than by practice teachers (33 percent) supporting students in PLO. While this is very low, 42 percent of practice teachers were neutral which may reflect the expectation that students will still be developing the ability to critically reflect during the course of the programme, and the response of line managers may demonstrate the effectiveness of the programme.

6.3.12 In focus groups, students noted the learning from working in multi disciplinary contexts when on practice learning. Course providers, also, provided some

examples of how multi-disciplinary learning was being developed in institutions. One, for example, outlined police and nursing inputs to the programme in relation to the different professional roles within the context of working together.

Student feedback included the following comments:

> **My tutors and lecturers place great focus on developing my professional identity. Throughout placement my Practice teachers and other professionals encouraged me to be confident in practice especially in multi-disciplinary meetings.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

My PLO has provided hands-on experience on the ground of the social work profession. Under the supervision of experienced social workers, I have been afforded the opportunity to apply my academic knowledge in applying theory and skills obtained. I have been given the opportunity to work as a part of a multi-professional team providing input to the decision-making process.

(Level 3 student UGR)
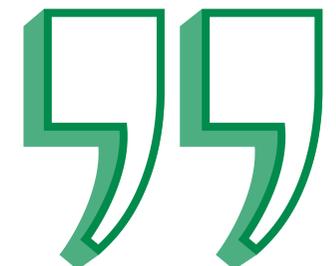
6.3.12 Although, to date, there has been no requirement for the Degree to explicitly reference leadership in teaching, the Review team found that students conveyed a clear understanding of leadership concepts in relation to social work. 69 percent of students asserted that their learning experience on the Degree has helped them to develop an understanding of the leadership skills required for social work and qualitative responses, for the most part, reinforced this understanding. Most students who felt able to comment indicated that they were able to give positive examples of leadership - a very small number indicated that, in their opinion, there were settings were leadership was lacking.

Examples of students' experiences of leadership included:

Throughout my student social work Degree, I have observed and learned from the exemplary leadership skills demonstrated by social work tutors, social workers, and practice teachers. These leaders have showcased a blend of professional competence, emotional intelligence, and ethical commitment, serving as guiding beacons in both educational and practical settings.

(UGR student)
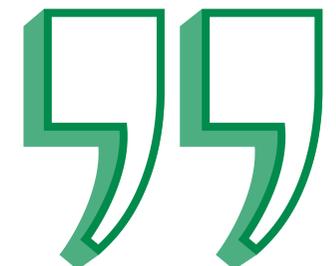
> **Practice teacher was a great leader and led by example. She showed what it meant to stand up for what you believe in. Some tutors were great at challenging personal biases and addressing these during classes. The social workers I worked with showed great leadership in getting the job done and placing the service user at the forefront of everything they done.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

> **Unfortunately, my experience on placement showed leadership skills that were not ideal or beneficial to the service.**
>
> (Level 2 student, UGR)

Further to this, 52 percent of line managers reported observing leadership skills in the NQSWs with whom they have worked.

What's working well?

- For the most part, students believe that teaching and practice learning imbue them with a sense of professional identity.

- In most areas, students demonstrated progress between the practice learning stage and qualifying.

- A majority of students report that the Degree has helped them understand how to develop supports to enable selfcare.

- Students and NQSWs are digitally competent.

- In the main, students had a clear understanding of leadership in social work.

- Most students indicated that the Social Care Council's Standards of conduct were useful in guiding them in their learning.

Areas for development

- The evidence collated by the Review has highlighted factors that support or obstruct the development of practitioners with a strong professional social work identity working in inter-disciplinary contexts.

- In a similar vein to the last Review, ideas of resilience and self-care have continued to engender debate in relation to how prepared students are for the realities of the workplace and in managing themselves within those realities. As previously noted, increased workforce pressures, the cost of living and the impact of the pandemic loomed large in the background of this review and it is the view of the Review Team that further work is required to strengthen self-care for social work as an individual, team and organisational responsibility that is modelled in both academia and practice learning.

- Feedback from students on leadership suggests that there is already an initial understanding which could be further developed by introducing the Social Work Leadership Framework (the Leadership Framework) more explicitly into the Degree.

- The Review Team found that, on occasion, expectations of learning before starting on PLO did not always recognise the role of practice learning itself as part of the educational experience which contributes to the development of knowledge, skills and values. Furthermore, the Review Team note that the Ladder of Learning and Statement of Differentials for Levels of Practice Learning in Appendix 13 of the Practice Learning Handbook, and the journey of continuous professional development for a social worker in Northern Ireland (Figure 1) outlined in the report can support professionals to understand what can be reasonably expected at qualifying level and built upon as part of that continuing journey through AYE and onwards.

6.4 Post pandemic practice

Objective 4: Learning from the coronavirus pandemic has informed the curriculum and practice learning to ensure students are equipped for evidence-informed practice in a post-pandemic environment.

6.4.1 Despite returning to a level of pre-pandemic normality, the Review Team has heard that the environment in which social workers now operate has changed - the pandemic has affected the needs that social workers respond to, the ways in which they engage with service users and colleagues and the way in which they experience qualifying training. McFadden et al[23] note that there are increasing pressures on care services as a result of the pandemic due to staff mental health, sickness absences, vacancies and retention problems.

Through focus groups and surveys, stakeholders were asked to consider how learning from the pandemic has equipped students to work in a post-pandemic environment. The Review Team recognises that the theme of the pandemic has influenced responses to all of the areas considered by the review, such as the emerging needs identified in section 6.2, and therefore some of the learning will have been captured in other parts of the report.

6.4.2 The majority (64 percent) of students felt that the Degree had prepared them for practice in a post pandemic environment, and 9 percent disagreed. In focus groups, OU students highlighted that the online, distance learning nature of the programme enabled increased experience of working digitally which has been useful in the post-pandemic context. As OU students in Northern Ireland need to be sponsored by a social care employer, and skills tutorials are in person, they felt their experience of face to face engagement and development of communication skills was not adversely affected by the distance learning.

6.4.3 The Review learnt through focus groups and surveys that all stakeholder groups recognised the benefit of having had exposure to, and being able to use, digital platforms to engage with other stakeholders, and that this was a positive to emerge from the pandemic.

A practice teacher remarked that:

> **The move to on line supervision blended with face to face learning as a result of COVID 19 has meant in some cases supervision has become more agile...**
>
> (Practice teacher)

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23 *Main Findings for the Occupation of Social Work: Results from the UK and Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Study* (McFadden et al, April 2023).

6.4.4 The Review Team heard an acknowledgement from stakeholders that there is ongoing learning about what works in the post pandemic environment. While students valued the accessibility benefits of using digital technology, they were clear that service user needs should be prioritised rather than organisational needs in decisions about its use. Service users and carers, also, highlighted this in focus groups. Service user and carer, and student focus groups also recognised the need to be conscious of digital poverty in addition to digital skills variations in the population.

6.4.5 The Review Team found that stakeholders had mixed thoughts about hybrid working and the benefits for students and NQSWs. Some students expressed positives of working in a post pandemic environment as being blended working patterns incorporating elements of working from home, shared calendars to ensure contact with the team and 'agile' working. However, others noted that it was more difficult to benefit from other team members' experience as there were fewer staff available to them on site. On PLO, students experienced varied practices, with some able to avail of team hybrid working and others not. In focus groups, line managers noted the importance of NQSWs being office based so they could learn from experienced staff.

Comments about the hybrid experience included:

A practice teacher remarked that:

> **The sense of connection to other NQSWs was missing during the pandemic...**
>
> (Line manager)

> **Students could be more tuned into how connections can be made meaningfully when unable to be present in a room with someone. Online connections can become perfunctory and process led, and it is important not to lose the human touch.**
>
> (Practice teacher)

6.4.6 As previously noted (6.3.4), a small number of comments suggested that some students and NQSWs may be more comfortable with digital technology communications which can affect their ability to engage in person and build relationships in practice settings.

6.4.7 The Review found that qualitative comments from practice teachers supported the idea that most interactions, both in teaching and on PLO, should be face to face to enable relationship building skills.

One practice teacher expressed the opinion that:

> **The quality of practice learning during the pandemic was compromised significantly and the importance of face to face communication/interactions in our profession cannot be overstated.**
>
> (Practice teacher)

6.4.8 Course providers noted that for students who experienced the taught elements of the programme either wholly, or partly, online, adjusting to face to face teaching can be challenging.

6.4.9 Following the pandemic, academic teaching, other than the OU programme, has now returned to in-person delivery, supported in some modules by online resources. The Review heard that some students felt a blended

delivery of course teaching (as had been experienced by the students during the pandemic) would help in relation to travel and financial difficulties experienced by students. Equally, NQSWs told the review that online teaching as experienced during the pandemic could be challenging, however keeping recorded lectures to revisit had benefits.

6.4.10 Practice teachers were asked to provide examples of positive changes made to practice learning during the pandemic. The two changes cited most frequently were the ability to access digital platforms to facilitate meetings and supervision sessions where appropriate, and the adapted requirements for direct observations which enabled observations to progress despite public health restrictions and which, in some cases, were deemed to be more suitable for service users, particularly children and young people.

This is reflected in the following assertion from a practice teacher:

> **Online direct observations of practice worked really well with some clients, for example with children.**
>
> (Practice teacher)

Improvement in digital skills and the use of blended or hybrid learning, with the availability of online resources, were also highlighted as positives.

6.4.11 When asked what aspects of practice learning could be improved to support students in post pandemic practice, more in-person engagement and less reliance on digital platforms was mentioned most often. Some comments indicated that students may be missing the relationship-based aspect of social work that they would otherwise gain by being in the same room as service users and other professionals.

A line manger reinforced this by explaining:

There is so much learning from being around other practitioners in an office and having informal peer supervision/ support which you can see more recent students have missed out on.

(Line manager)
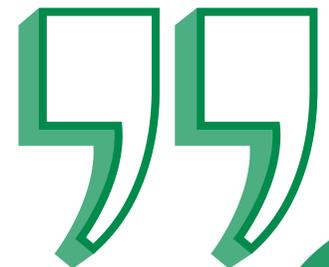
6.4.12 Some Practice Teachers also offered their opinion that virtual interviews, as adopted during the pandemic, did not provide a solid foundation for selection of students as in the same way as in-person interviews. The NIDSWP Admissions Committee has been monitoring and evaluating the use of virtual interviews on an ongoing basis, and interviews shall return to "in-person" in 2025.

What's working well?

- A majority of students believe the Degree has prepared them to practice in a post-pandemic environment.
- Adaptations and new methods of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic were helpful.

Areas for development

- Before the pandemic, digital innovation was already establishing itself in practice along with a new generation of student who has grown up with online forms of communication. Consideration of how this is reflected in the Degree and the accompanying opportunities, risks and ethical challenges shall be imperative. The Review has confirmed that this continues to be a key area for consideration for the Degree, especially given the prevalence of hybrid methods of working, post pandemic.

- Respondents, including students, were able to identify trauma and anxiety post pandemic as an emerging issue for service users and carers. Revisiting the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* may help determine whether further reference to these areas is needed.

- The *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* acknowledges new ways of learning using technology with encouragement to exploit it for the benefit of the learning environment - this could be bolstered to ensure that competence in this area includes consideration of data protection and ethics, areas which were referenced in focus groups with stakeholders.

- The Covid-19 pandemic opened the door to hybrid models of delivery which can be more flexible but the use of these models needs to be rationalised based on evidence of how it benefits the delivery of the Degree and best ways to learn.

Section 7

Conclusion and summary of actions

The extensive data gathered as part of the Review process has been analysed by the Review team and the team have concluded that the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work remains fit for purpose.

As highlighted in the report, student financial support in the face of the cost of living is of significant concern to the students who responded to the survey and engaged in focus groups. It is evident that this impacts on students' capacity for learning. Another area which affected the student experience included observation or experience of workforce pressures. Challenges, also, arose due to the pandemic during this period in terms of public health restrictions and adaptations to practice and learning.

Despite the obstacles posed by these issues, strengths were evident within Degree provision and included the practice learning experience and programme provider teaching. Service user involvement in the Degree was, also, rated highly. Understanding of the importance, and benefits, of co-production has developed significantly in the profession, and it is important that the Degree in Social Work retains momentum, and seeks opportunities to maximise service user involvement where possible.

Going forward, it shall also be essential to future proof the Degree to be able to respond to unforeseen events. Formal partnership arrangements in Northern Ireland were pivotal in being able to achieve an agile response to the pandemic and these arrangements need to be continually cultivated. The Review team have found that while the Covid-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge, it also equipped students for hybrid working.

The Review heard that students demonstrated digital competence, however the digital world continues to develop apace and is increasingly important in practice, therefore social work education needs to keep abreast of developments and consideration of practical and ethical implications. Both hybrid working and hybrid learning will require further consideration as evidence of effectiveness and challenges become apparent.

In relation to areas for development, the team prioritised the following actions to ensure that the Degree continues to build on its achievements and remains forward looking and agile. An implementation plan shall be developed by the Social Care Council in consultation with stakeholders in the NIDSWP and the SAG.

Outcome:

The curriculum for the Degree in Social Work in Northern Ireland, across both teaching and practice learning, is designed to ensure students are equipped to respond to the emerging needs.

Actions:

1. The *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* was last updated in 2015, and given the feedback from stakeholders around new emerging needs and the ongoing learning arising from hybrid learning and practice post pandemic, it would be timely for stakeholders to:

   - *Review the Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)* with a focus on the following:
     - Updating the compendium of knowledge as per the emerging needs identified in focus groups.
     - Inclusion of selfcare, wellbeing and leadership.

2. The regional Preparation for Practice Module was last subject to a full review in 2018 and, given comments about relevance to current practice, and a possible preference for some to engage digitally rather than face to face, following action 1, it would be timely to:

   - Complete a scoping of the regionally agreed Preparation for Practice Module to determine if the content and assessments continue to fulfil the aims and objectives of the module.

3. Feedback on Practice Development Days was varied, and it was deemed the least useful aspect of social work training by students. There were inconsistencies in how students were asked to evidence these and it was not clear that students had a full understanding of their purpose.

   - Stakeholders, therefore, should work together to explore and agree meaningful activities to be undertaken; and review guidance for Practice Development Days to ensure clarity and consistency in how these are undertaken and evidenced.
   - Degree providers should ensure personal tutors are familiar with the guidance and have a clear understanding of expectations of students.

4. The current landscape as described by respondents reflects a highly pressured system and it is important to ensure that those involved in facilitating practice learning are supported to do that, therefore it would be apt that:

   - As part of the Annual Monitoring of Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLPs), the Social Care Council to re-examine how practice teachers are supported on an ongoing basis to maintain their skills and continue to develop in line with the *Standards for Practice Learning (2020)* with a view to ensuring that DPLPs have clear systems in place to support practice teachers.
   - Degree providers develop a consistent method of sharing relevant curriculum information to staff involved in practice learning.

Glossary

BMC - Belfast Metropolitan College

DPLP - Designated Practice Learning Provider

EDI - Equality, Diversion and Inclusion

FHEI - Further and Higher Education Institution

NIDSWP - Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership

NQSW - Newly Qualified Social Worker

OU - Open University

PDD - Practice Development Day

PLO - Practice Learning Opportunity

QUB- Queens University Belfast

SWC - South West College

UU - Ulster University

SAG - Strategic Advisory Group for Social Work Education and Training

SWWIB - Social Work Workforce Implementation Board

Appendices

Appendix 1: The Review Team

Appendix 2: Overview of the Review process

Appendix 3: Report on the Implementation of the Review of the Degree 2018-2019 (March 2023)

Appendix 4: Survey Responses from Practice Teachers (quantitative)

Appendix 5: Survey Responses from line managers (quantitative)

Appendix 6: Survey Responses from Degree students (quantitative)

Appendix 7: Survey questions

Appendix 8: References

Appendix 1:
The Review Team

Introduction to the project team for the Review

Review Team purpose

The purpose of the Review Team is to ensure that the Review objectives are met through the following activities:

- Agree, schedule and contribute to facilitation of focus groups with stakeholders.
- Agree the areas and questions to be considered in each of the focus groups noted above.
- Contribute to review and analysis of data from course providers and others, regional surveys, research evidence, policy and strategy relevant to social work education in Northern Ireland.
- Contribute to the final report.

Review team membership:

Name	Role
Ms Roslyn Dougherty	Council Member, Social Care Council
Dr Gloria Kirwan	Senior Lecturer RCSI. Adjunct Assistant Professor of Social Work, Trinity College Dublin
Joanne Lytle	Professional Officer, NIDSWP
Maureen Browne	Sessional Professional Advisor
Caroline Brogan	Sessional Professional Advisor
Johnny Dillon	Children Services Improvement Lead, Northern Health and Social Care Trust
Joanne Sansome	Member of the Social Care Council Participation Partnership for Service Users and Carers
Tricia Devlin	Professional Advisor, Social Care Council

Appendix 2:
The Review Process

Overview of the approach taken to complete the Review, the people we engaged and the feedback that was gathered.

2.1 Stakeholder Engagement - 19 Focus Groups facilitated with approximately 200 people who represented:

- Academic staff (Course Directors and Tutors) - Queens University, Ulster University, and The Open University. Staff from Belfast Metropolitan College and South West College were unavailable for consultation due to industrial action at that time.

- Health and Social Care Trusts - Assistant Directors for Governance.

- Newly Qualified Social Workers (AYEs) - those in the first year of professional practice.

- Practice Teachers - Social workers who supervise and assess Degree students on practice placements across NI.

- Service users, carers and survivors - People with social work experience who are involved in Degree teaching/ presentations.

- Social Work Managers - Those with management responsibility for newly qualified social workers in HSC Trusts, Education Authority, Probation, Youth Justice and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

- Social Work Students - Those currently studying the Degree at Queens University, Ulster University, Belfast Metropolitan College and South West College (includes students at various levels on both Undergraduate and Relevant Graduate courses), and students studying at the Open University.

2.2 Digital Surveys - 197 people across 3 online surveys

- 110 Social Work Students.
- 44 Social Work Managers.
- 43 Practice Teachers through online survey.

2.3 Social Work Student Respondents

- Degree course.

Online Survey - profile of student respondents
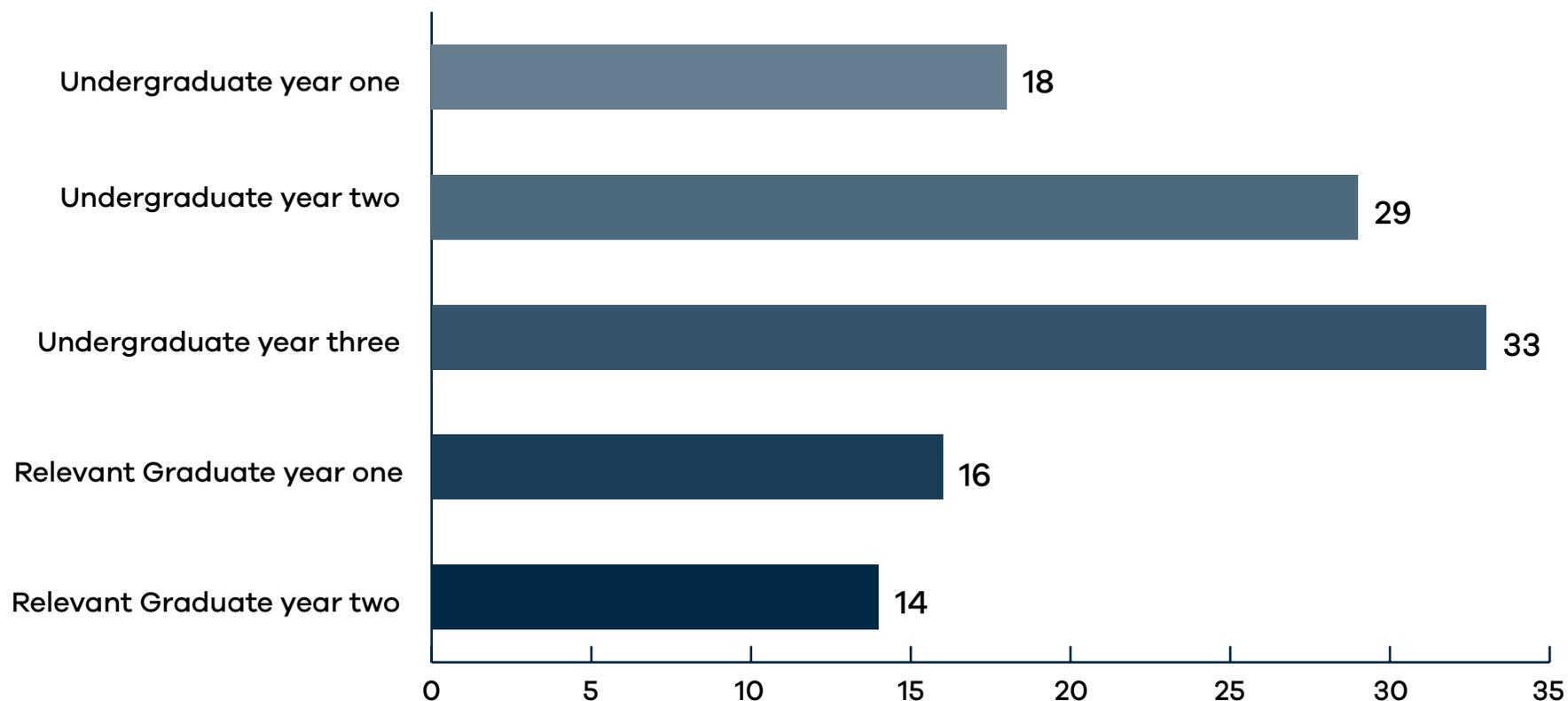
Option	Total	Percent
Undergraduate Year One	18	16.36%
Undergraduate Year Two	29	26.36%
Undergraduate Year Three	33	30.00%
Relevant Graduate Year One	16	14.55%
Relevant Graduate Year Two	14	12.73%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Practice Learning Settings Experienced

Setting	Value
Children's Services (including children with a disability)	57
Older People's Services	25
Physical Disability	4
Learning Disability	18
Sensory Impairment	4
Mental Health/Addictions	19
Education and Training	2
Justice	1
Education/Welfare	1
Homelessmess	4
CAMHS	1
I haven't completed a PLO yet	12

Option	Total	Percent
Children's Services (including children with a disability)	57	51.82%
Older People's Services	25	22.73%
Physical Disability	4	3.64%
Learning Disability	18	16.36%
Sensory Impairment	4	3.64%
Mental Health/Addictions	19	17.27%
Education and Training	2	1.82%
Justice	1	0.91%
Education/Welfare	1	0.91%
Homelessness	4	3.64%
CAMHS	1	0.91%
I haven't completed a PLO yet	12	10.91%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Appendix 3:

Report on the Implementation of the Review of the Degree 2018-2019

March 2023

Contents

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council) is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department of Health (DoH) and was established on 1 October 2001 by the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. The Act requires the Social Care Council to promote high standards for social workers in their conduct, practice and training.

As the regulator of social work education and training in Northern Ireland (NI), the Social Care Council is responsible for setting standards of social work education, ensuring these standards are being met by course providers, and that social workers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver quality services that meet the needs of users of services and their carers. These standards are set out in the Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015).

The Social Care Council is responsible for the approval, annual monitoring, review and inspection of the Degree. The Social Care Council Quality Assurance Framework sets out the arrangements for the approval, monitoring, review and inspection of the Degree. Reviews are conducted at least every five years after approval and enable an in-depth consideration of the strengths of the courses, areas for development, and whether requirements continue to be met.

This was the third Review of the Degree in Social Work since its introduction in 2004 and was published in June 2019. The aim of this review was to;

"To test the extent to which the Degree in Social Work is forward looking and agile".

Objectives of the 2018 - 2019 Review of the Degree

To ascertain that:

1. The Degree in Social Work programmes meet the requirements of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, January 2012.

2. Partnership arrangements are efficient, effective and imbedded in the development, delivery and improvement of the Degree in Social Work.

3. The curriculum is innovative and forward looking and takes account of developments in social work research, inquiry, policy and practice.

4. The Degree in Social Work programmes support the development of autonomous, evidence based, critically reflective and resilient practitioners with a strong professional social work identity.

The review concluded that approved degree programmes did meet the requirements of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, January 2012. In keeping with the principle of continuous improvement strategic actions under each of the thematic areas above were identified.

The Strategic Advisory Group for Social Work Education (SAG) agreed to retain oversight of the implementation of the actions and that a steering group would be established to operationalize the implementation of the actions. A steering group was established and implementation plan agreed. The steering group membership consisted of:

- Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council). Head of Workforce Development.
- NIDSWP Chair.
- NIDSWP Professional Officer.
- Social Care Council, Professional Adviser.

Impact of Covid-19

In November 2020 SAG agreed that the implementation plan should be paused due to the impact of Covid 19 and associated pressures across employer and course provider organisations. This decision was reviewed in March 2021, May 2021 and September 2021 when implementation resumed.

The pandemic impacted on progress in terms of managing priorities and executing agreed actions in a timely way. The pandemic, also, accelerated ways of working which would not have been anticipated (e.g. digital solutions). The landscape in which the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work was delivered, in terms of both academic programme delivery and practice learning, changed considerably from the point of completion of the review. This resulted in some delay in implementation and identification of areas for further consolidation.

Strategic Actions from Review of the Degree

Partnership Arrangements

Actions:

- The purpose and function of all Partnerships and Committees at strategic, regional and operational levels will be reviewed to articulate how they support the development, delivery and improvement of the degree.
- Course providers will have mechanisms in place to facilitate reciprocal, symbiotic relationships between social work educators that support improvement of the degree.

Curriculum

Actions:

- The Strategic Advisory Group will take lead responsibility to ensure that the curriculum is agile and innovative to meet the needs of employers, service users and communities into the future.

- Course providers will ensure that social work students have the knowledge and skills required to safely use digital technology to safeguard and improve the wellbeing of service users, carers and communities.

Outcome of the Degree

Actions:

- Self-care will be incorporated into social work education in a structured way.

- Stakeholders will work together to affirm a shared understanding of the expectations placed upon newly qualified social workers, which are measured through agreed requirements linked to the AYE and continuing professional development.

Implementation of Strategic Actions

This report provides an overview of the progress achieved in relation to the three strategic outcomes and each action within the implementation period, and suggested areas of consideration for work to be progressed within the next review period.

Partnership Arrangements

Strategic Action 1: The purpose and function of all Partnerships and Committees at strategic, regional and operational levels will be reviewed to articulate how they support the development, delivery and improvement of the degree.

- The terms of reference for the NIDSWP Board and each NIDSWP committee were reviewed and endorsed in September 2021.

Outcome: Terms of Reference for NIDSWP Board and Committees articulate how they support development, delivery and improvement of the degree.

Strategic Action 2: Course providers will have mechanisms in place to facilitate reciprocal, symbiotic relationships between social work educators that support improvement of the degree.

Outcome: Collaborative fora have reviewed the format of the meetings to be more reciprocal between social work educators.

Designated Practice Learning Providers identified the need for further standardisation and consistency to embed students' understanding and knowledge of issues and topics and opportunities for sharing of content delivered in academic modules so Practice Learning providers can support application of theory and evidence in practice.

Areas for Consolidation: Social Care Council will agree a process with FHEI's to enable them to ensure standardisation and consistency and sharing of programme content.

Curriculum

Strategic Actions 3: The Strategic Advisory Group will take lead responsibility to ensure that the curriculum is agile and innovative to meet the needs of employers, service users and communities into the future.

The Strategic **Advisory Group (SAG)** has clarified its role in relation to curriculum development and agreed priority areas.

Figure 1: Curriculum - Roles and Responsibilities

Degree in Social Work - Curriculum

Curriculum Content

Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2015)

Strategic Oversight

Strategic Advisory Group, OSS, Employers, Participation Partnership, Approved Course Providers, NISCC

Operational Delivery

NIDSWP

5:6 The Degree Partnersip will have an operational role in continuous improvement of course delivery to ensure it remains "fit for purpose". NISCC, Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, 2012

Strategic Action 4: Course providers will ensure that social work students have the knowledge and skills required to safely use digital technology to safeguard and improve the wellbeing of service users, carers and communities.

Outcomes: Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLP), have identified opportunities and risks in using digital technology.

A Digital Advisory Group has been established, has mapped digital content within the Degree and has delivered a workshop with academics and practice learning staff.

Area for consolidation:

As social work practice continues to develop in line with digital progress and innovations, consideration of how this is reflected in the Degree and the accompanying opportunities, risks and ethical challenges shall be imperative.

Outcomes of the Degree

Strategic Action 5: Self-care will be incorporated into social work education in a structured way.

Outcomes: FHEIS all have elements of self-care built into the curriculum and into student support systems.

The NIDSWP Admissions Committee have ensured that self-care is now expressly explored with prospective students during the Admissions process.

Areas for consolidation: Sharing of approaches, strategies and content in relation to self-care across FHEIS would be beneficial.

Continued focus on supporting transition from student social worker to newly qualified social worker undertaking AYE.

Strategic Action 6: Stakeholders will work together to affirm a shared understanding of the expectations placed upon newly qualified social workers, which are measured through agreed requirements linked to the AYE and continuing professional development.

Outcomes: Learning from the pandemic has reinforced the importance of line management, peer and other supports for NQSWs.

DPLPs and the AYE Leadership Group agreed key areas to support NQSWs and their line managers which could help manage expectations.

Areas for consolidation:

The AYE Leadership Group will consolidate learning from the pandemic and agree an implementation plan.

Appendix 4: Practice Teacher Survey (2023-24) Quantitative Responses

The activity ran from 18/12/2023 to 15/03/2024

Responses to this survey: **43**

1. To help give context to your feedback, please indicate which level of social work student you supervise most of the time as a Practice Teacher.

Level of students supervised
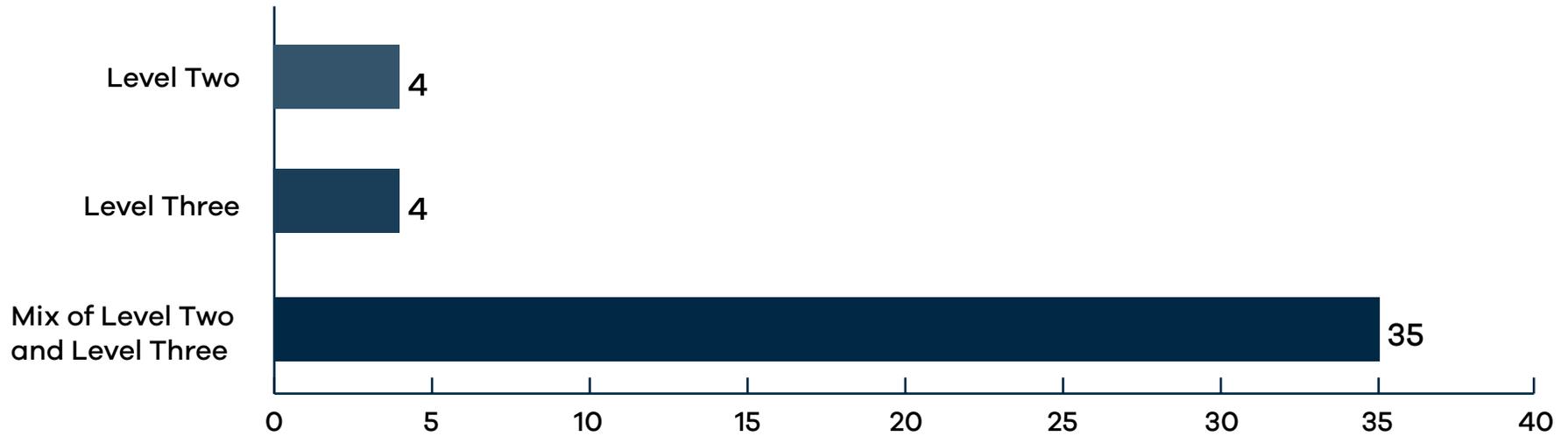
Option	Total	Percent
Level Two	4	9.30%
Level Three	4	9.30%
Mix of Level Two and Level Three	35	81.40%
Not answered	0	0.00%

2. Based on your experience, to what extent do students come to their practice learning opportunity with knowledge that is relevant to their course?

Student level of knowledge
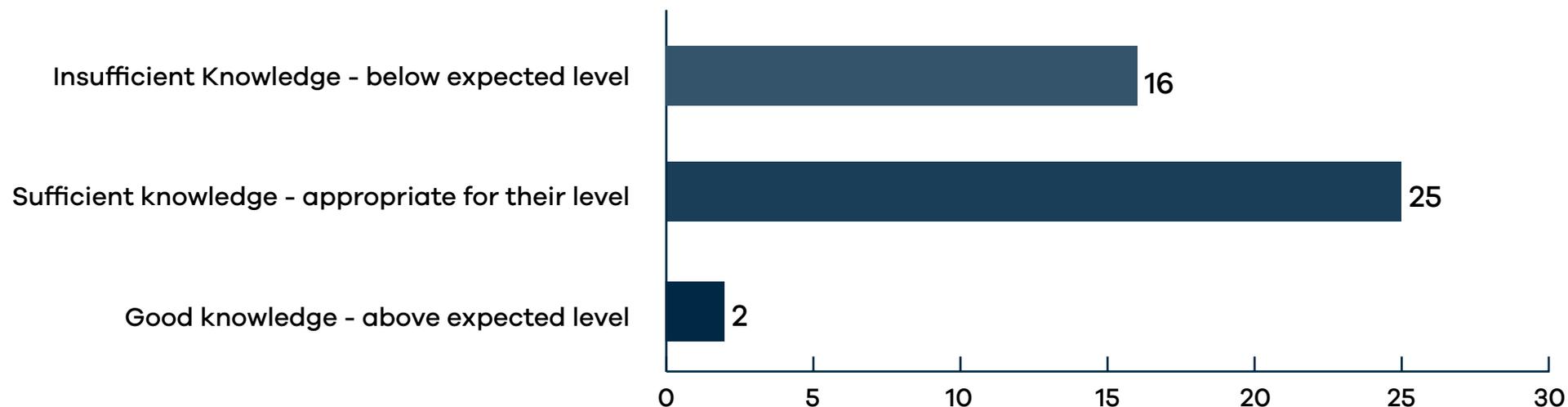
Option	Total	Percent
Insufficient Knowledge - below expected level	16	37.21%
Sufficient knowledge - appropriate for their level	25	58.14%
Good knowledge - above expected level	2	4.65%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

3. To what extent do you agree with, if at all, the following statements about how well the Degree is preparing the students you are supervising?

Preparedness of students - skills - They understand their role as a social worker
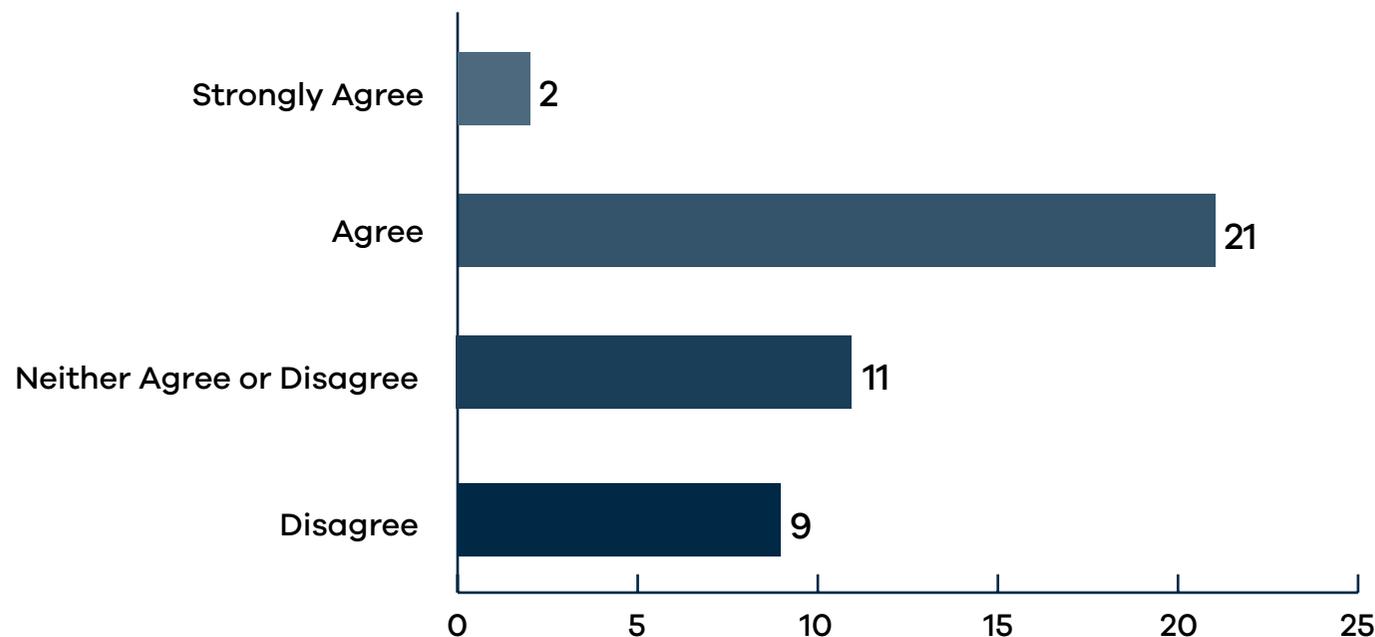
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	2	4.65%
Agree	21	48.84%
Neither Agree or Disagree	11	25.58%
Disagree	9	20.93%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can practice competently within their remit as a newly qualified social worker
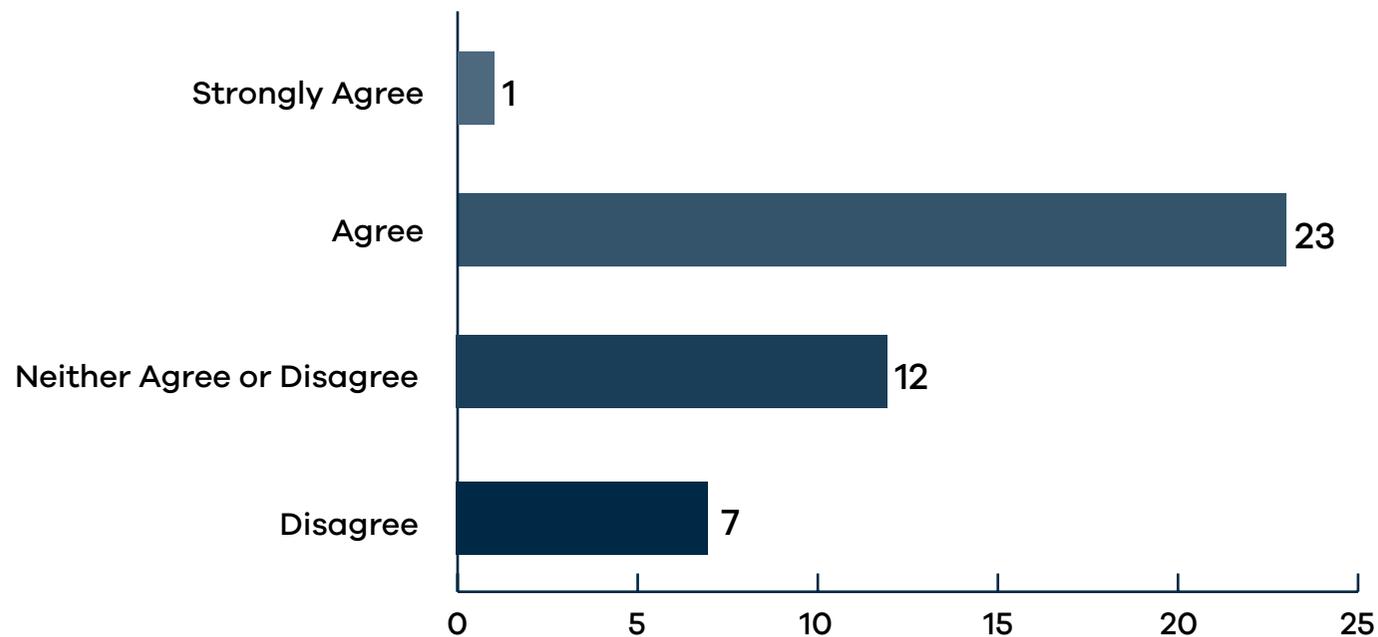
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	2.33%
Agree	23	53.49%
Neither Agree or Disagree	12	27.91%
Disagree	7	16.28%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can work autonomously with appropriate supervision
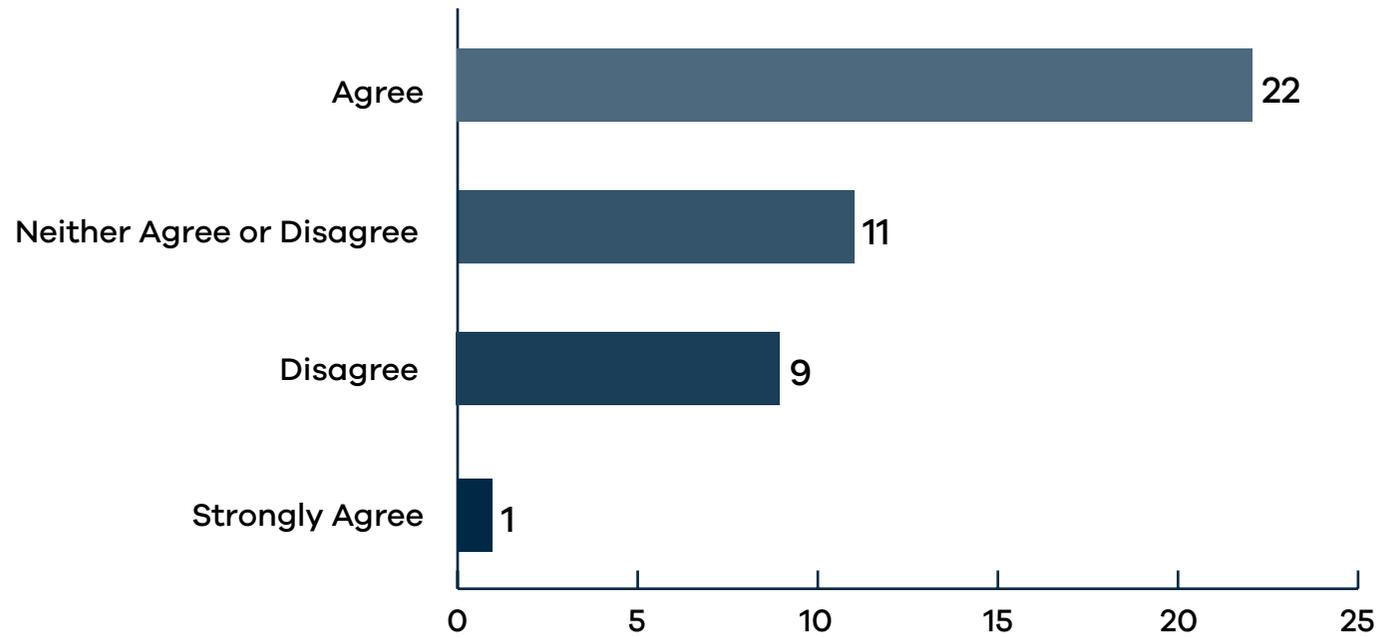
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.00%
Agree	22	51.16%
Neither Agree or Disagree	11	25.58%
Disagree	9	20.93%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.33%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can demonstrate empathy
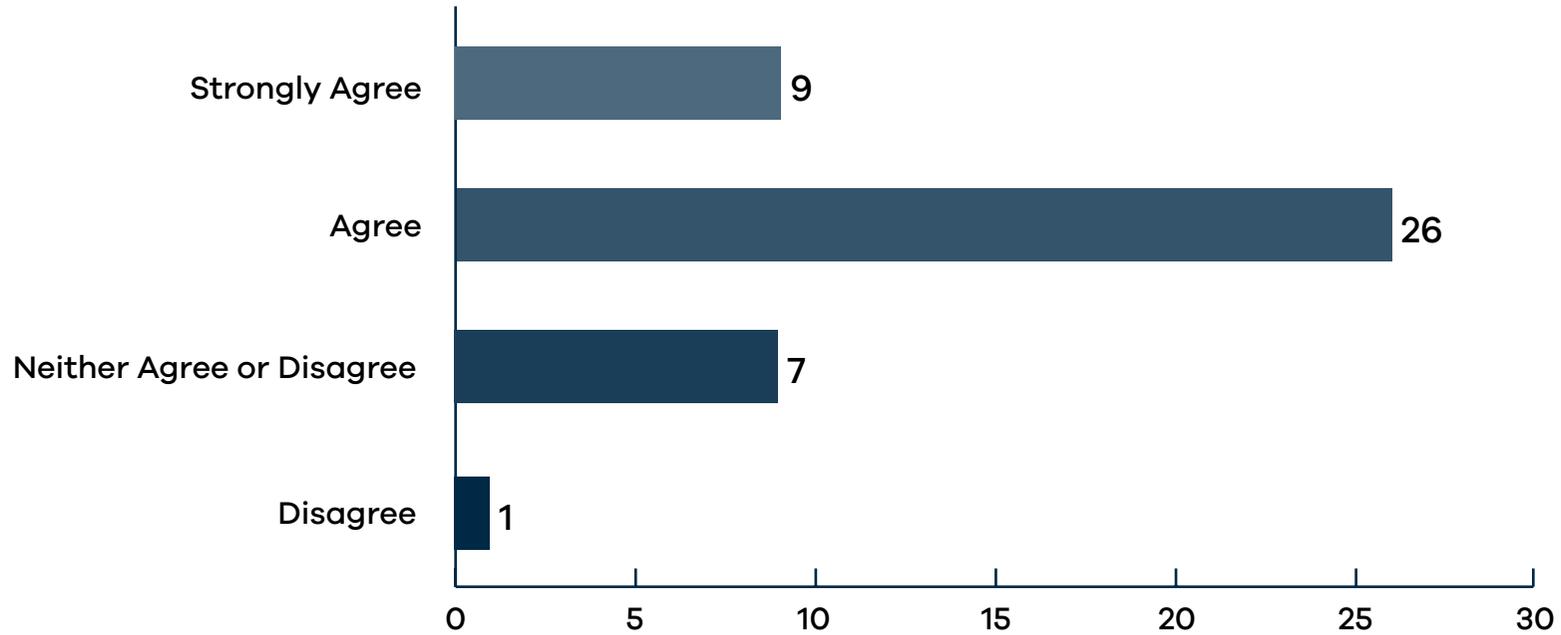
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	9	20.93%
Agree	26	60.47%
Neither Agree or Disagree	7	16.28%
Disagree	1	2.33%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can establish positive working relationships with service users/clients
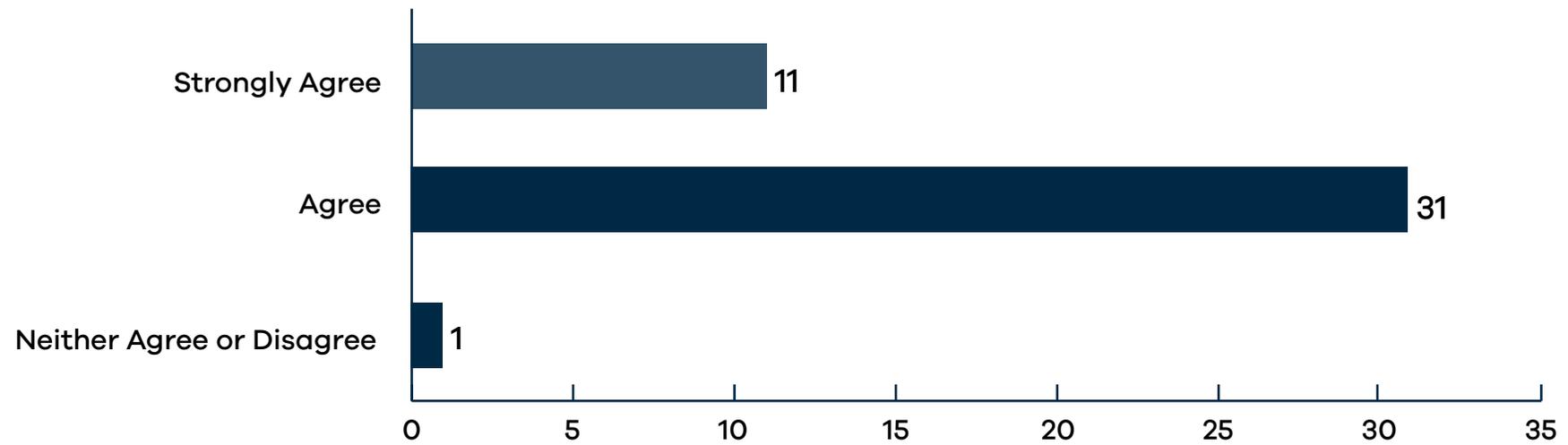
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	11	25.58%
Agree	31	72.09%
Neither Agree or Disagree	1	2.33%
Disagree	0	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They are resilient and equipped with skills to manage the challenges of the social work role
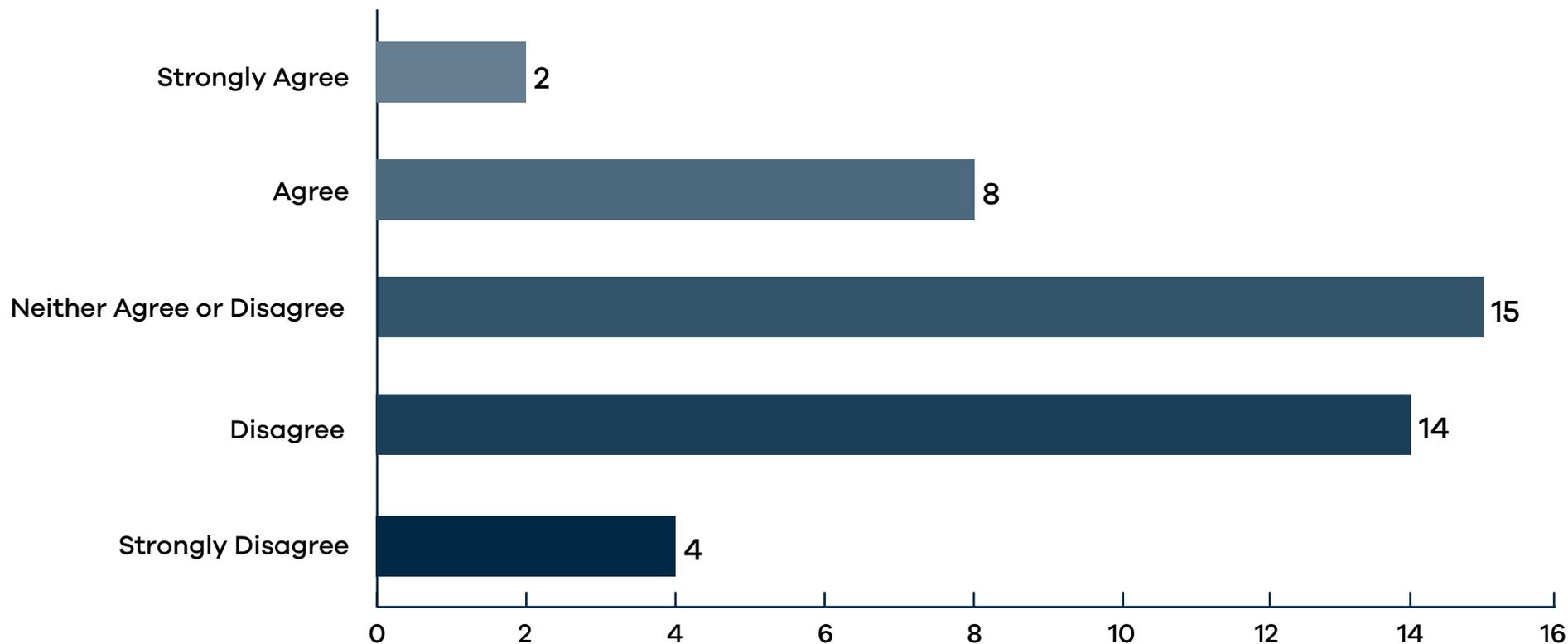
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	2	4.65%
Agree	8	18.60%
Neither Agree or Disagree	15	34.88%
Disagree	14	32.56%
Strongly Disagree	4	9.30%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They demonstrate digital competence commensurate with their role
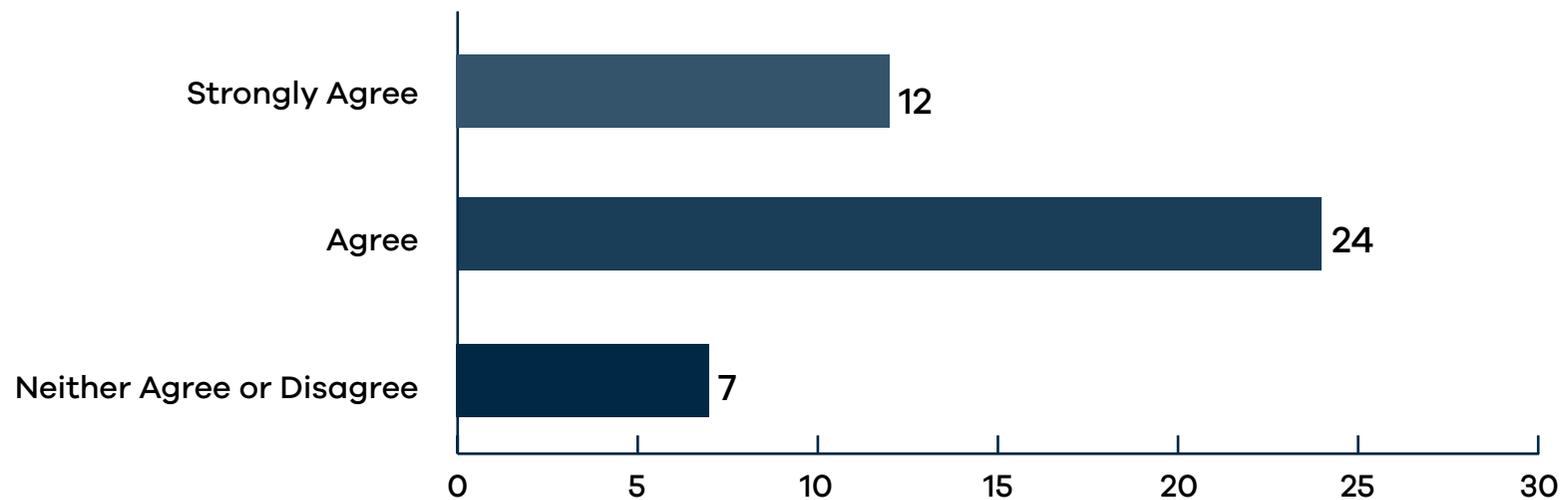
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	12	27.91%
Agree	24	55.81%
Neither Agree or Disagree	7	16.28%
Disagree	0	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - Equality, diversity and inclusion underpins their practice
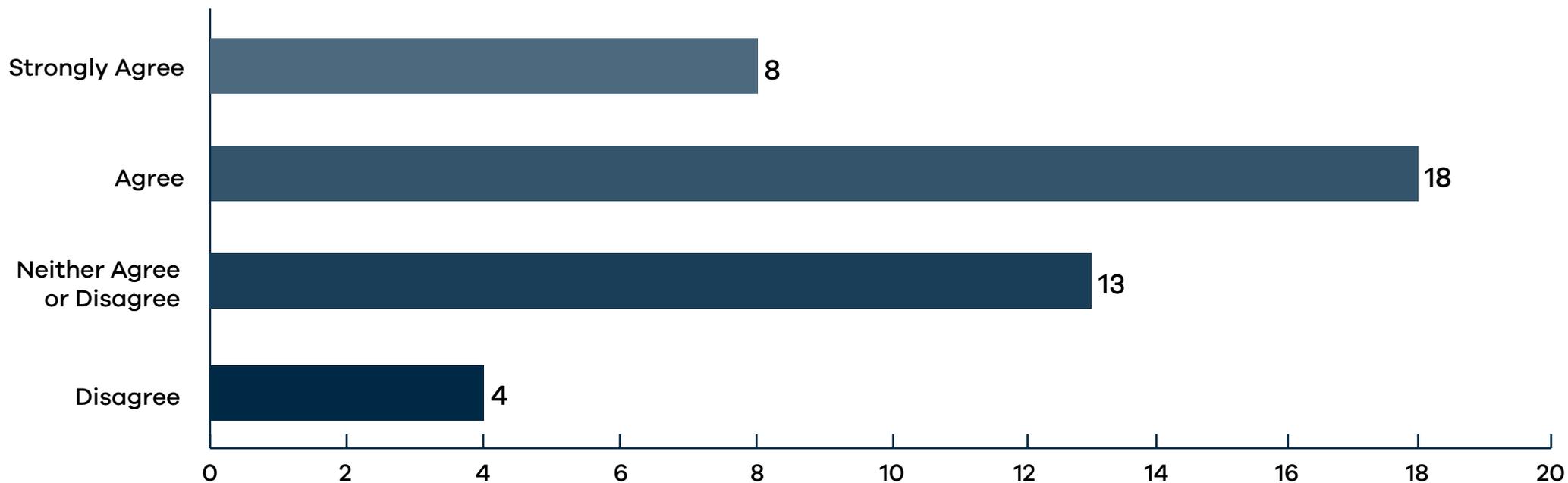
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	8	18.60%
Agree	18	41.86%
Neither Agree or Disagree	13	30.23%
Disagree	4	9.30%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - Their practice is evidence-based
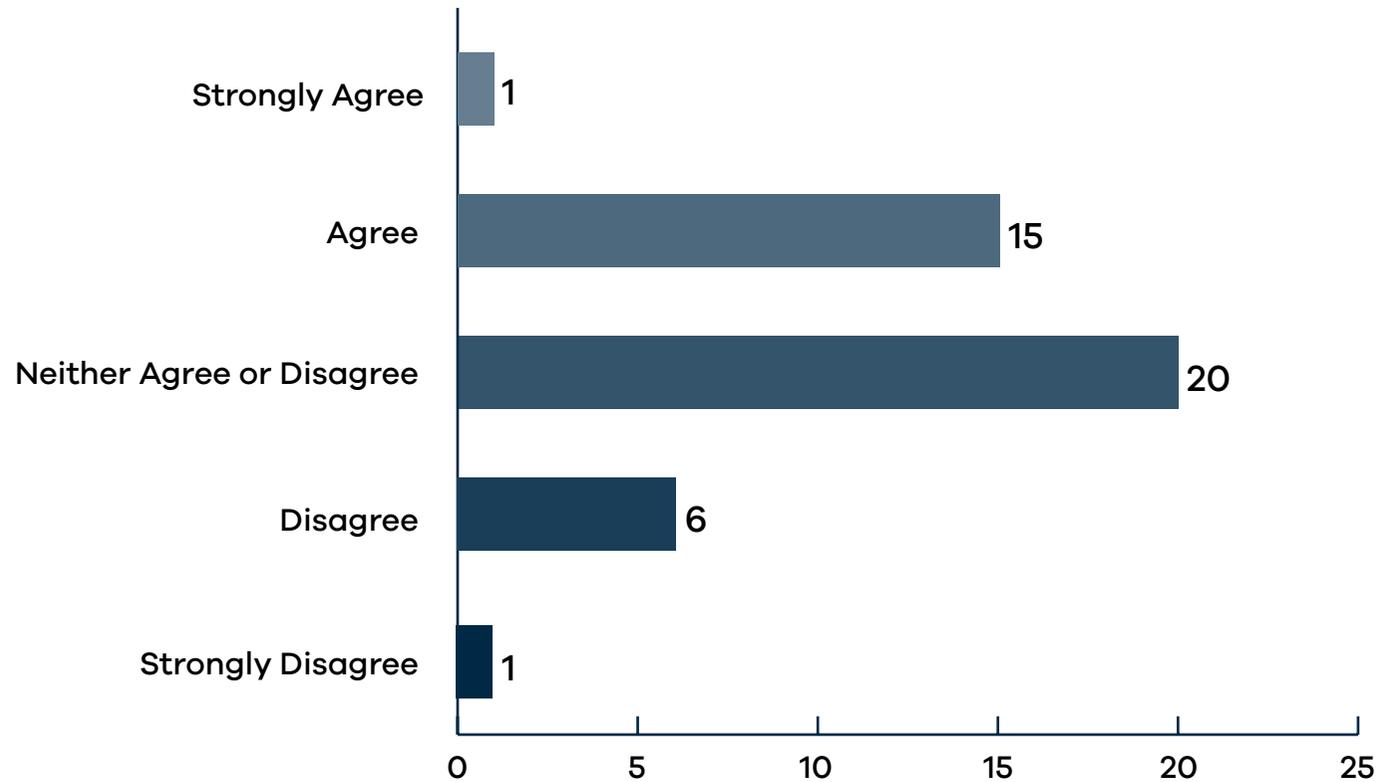
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	2.33%
Agree	15	34.88%
Neither Agree or Disagree	20	46.51%
Disagree	6	13.95%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.33%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They are critically reflective
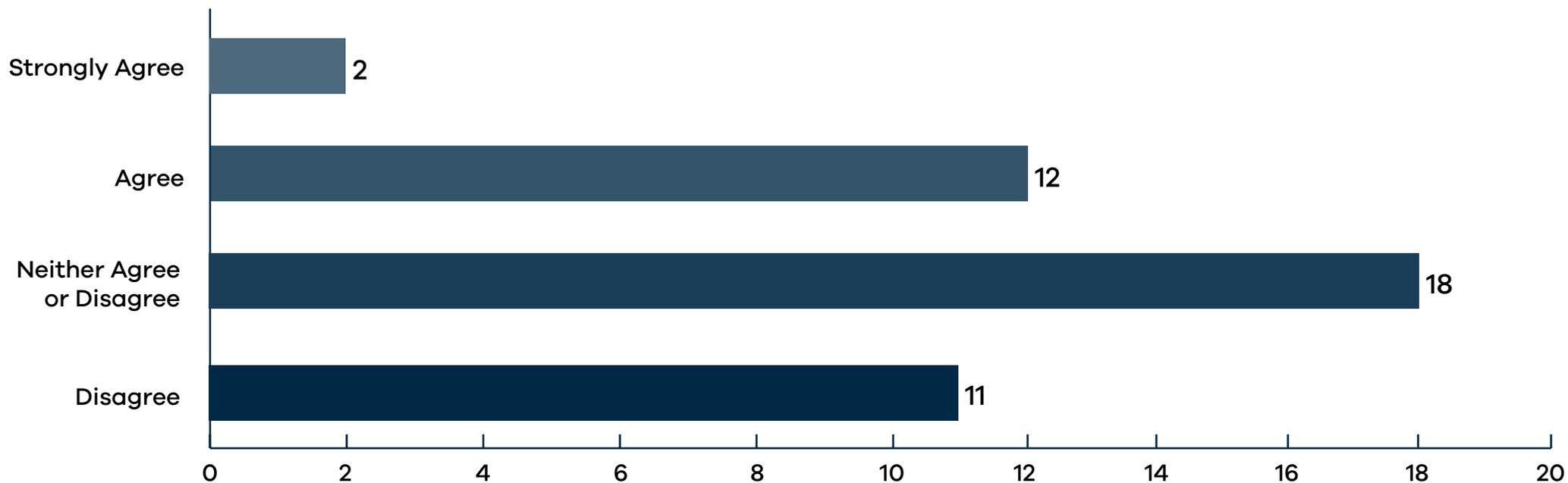
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	2	4.65%
Agree	12	27.91%
Neither Agree or Disagree	18	41.86%
Disagree	11	25.58%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They take responsibility for their own learning and development
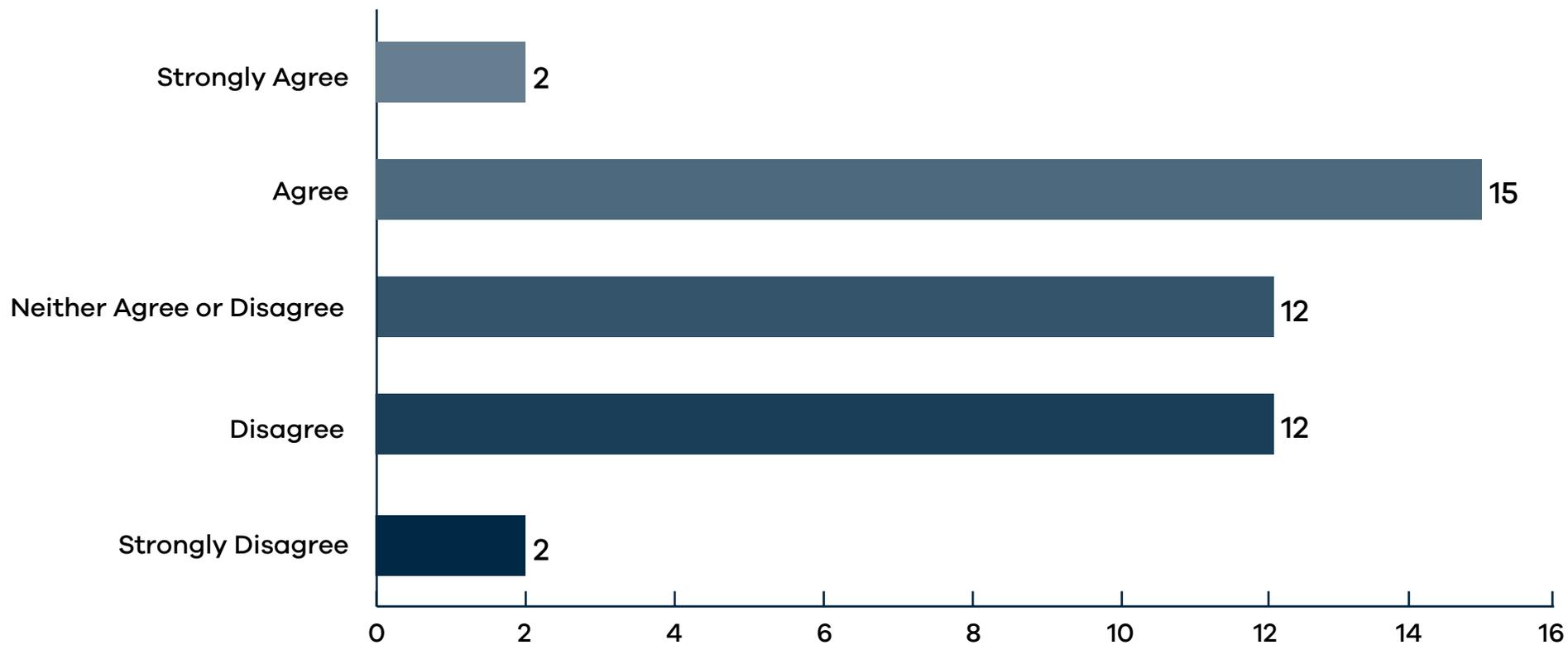
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	2	4.65%
Agree	15	34.88%
Neither Agree or Disagree	12	27.91%
Disagree	12	27.91%
Strongly Disagree	2	4.65%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They show a strong sense of their professional identity as a social worker
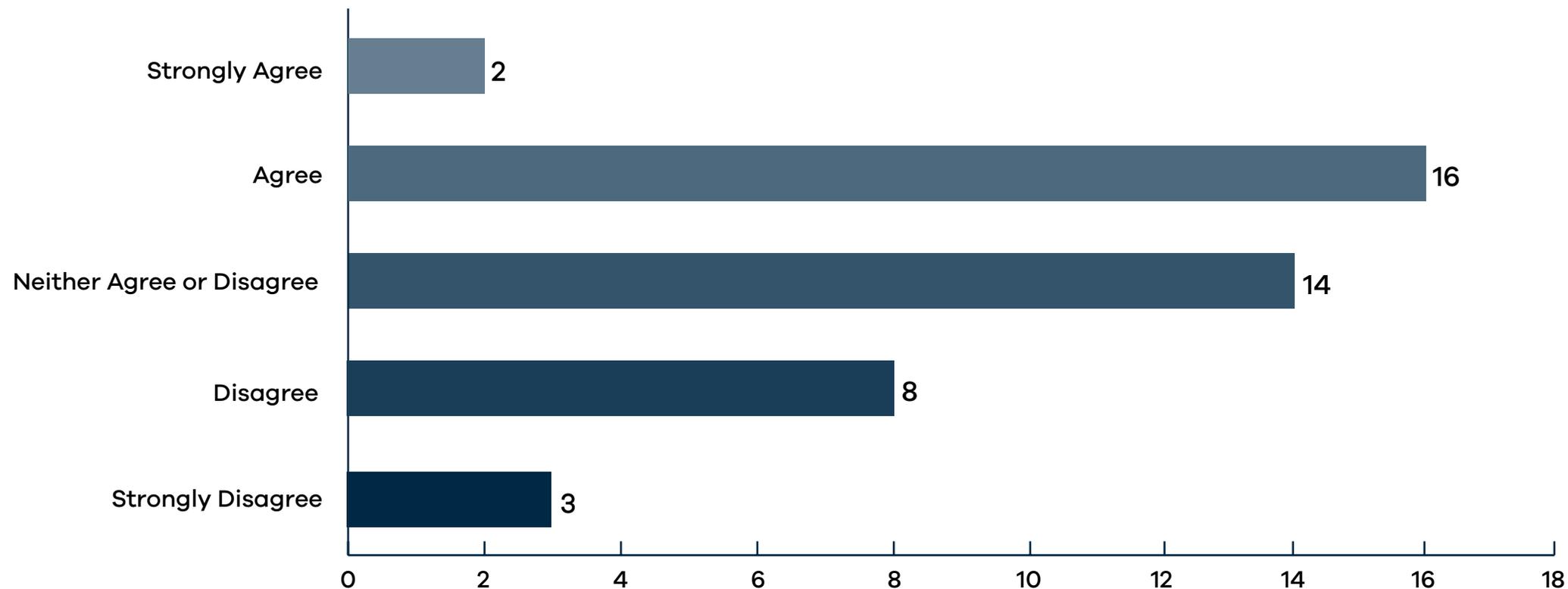
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	2	4.65%
Agree	16	37.21%
Neither Agree or Disagree	14	32.56%
Disagree	8	18.60%
Strongly Disagree	3	6.98%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

7. From your perspective as a practice teacher, does the degree in social work support students to have a strong professional social work identity working in inter-disciplinary contexts?
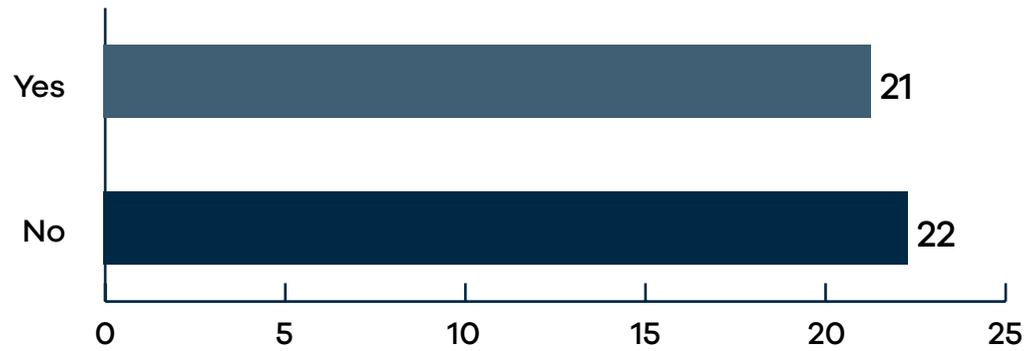
Option	Total	Percent
Yes	21	48.84%
No	22	51.16%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Appendix 5: Line Manager Survey (2023-24) Quantitative Responses

The activity ran from 18/12/2023 to 15/03/2024

Responses to this survey: **44**

1. To what extent do you agree with, if at all, the following statements about how well the Degree has prepared the newly qualified social workers you have managed or worked with?

Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - They understand their role as a social worker
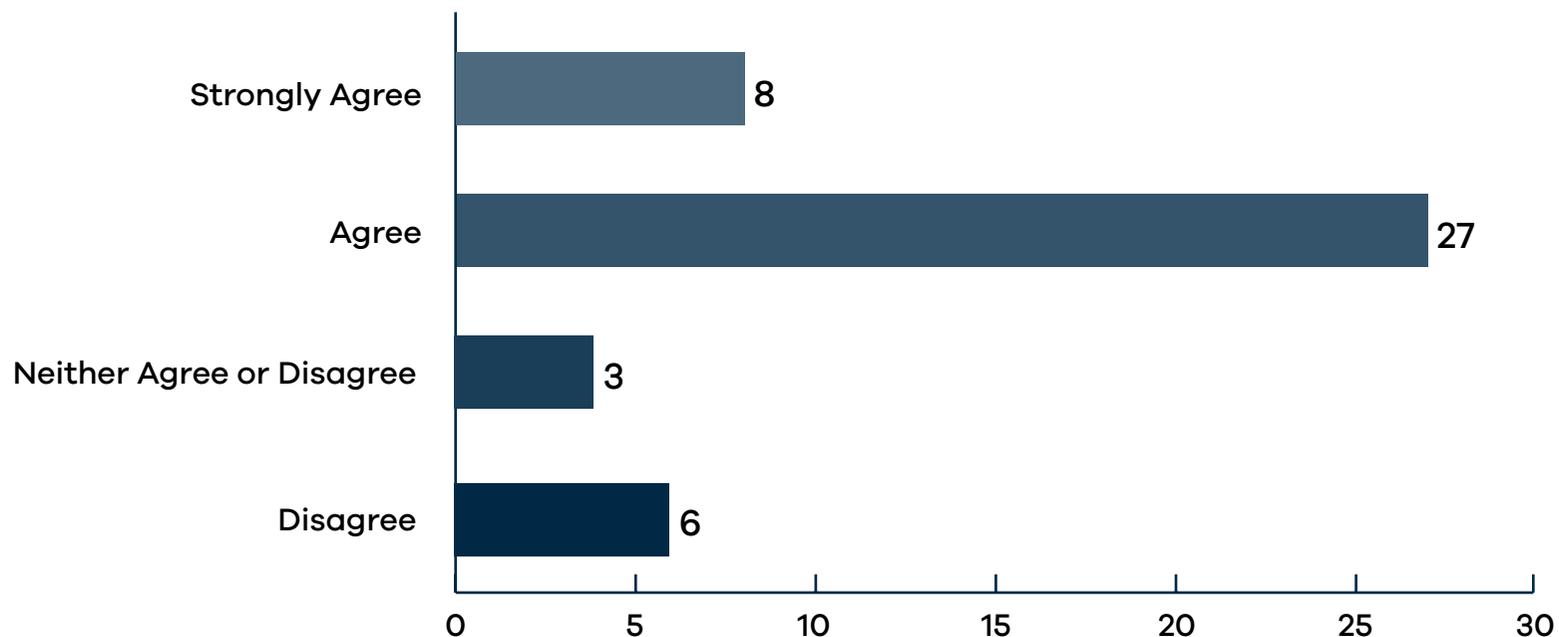
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	8	18.18%
Agree	27	61.36%
Neither Agree or Disagree	3	6.82%
Disagree	6	13.64%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can practice competently within their remit as a newly qualified social worker
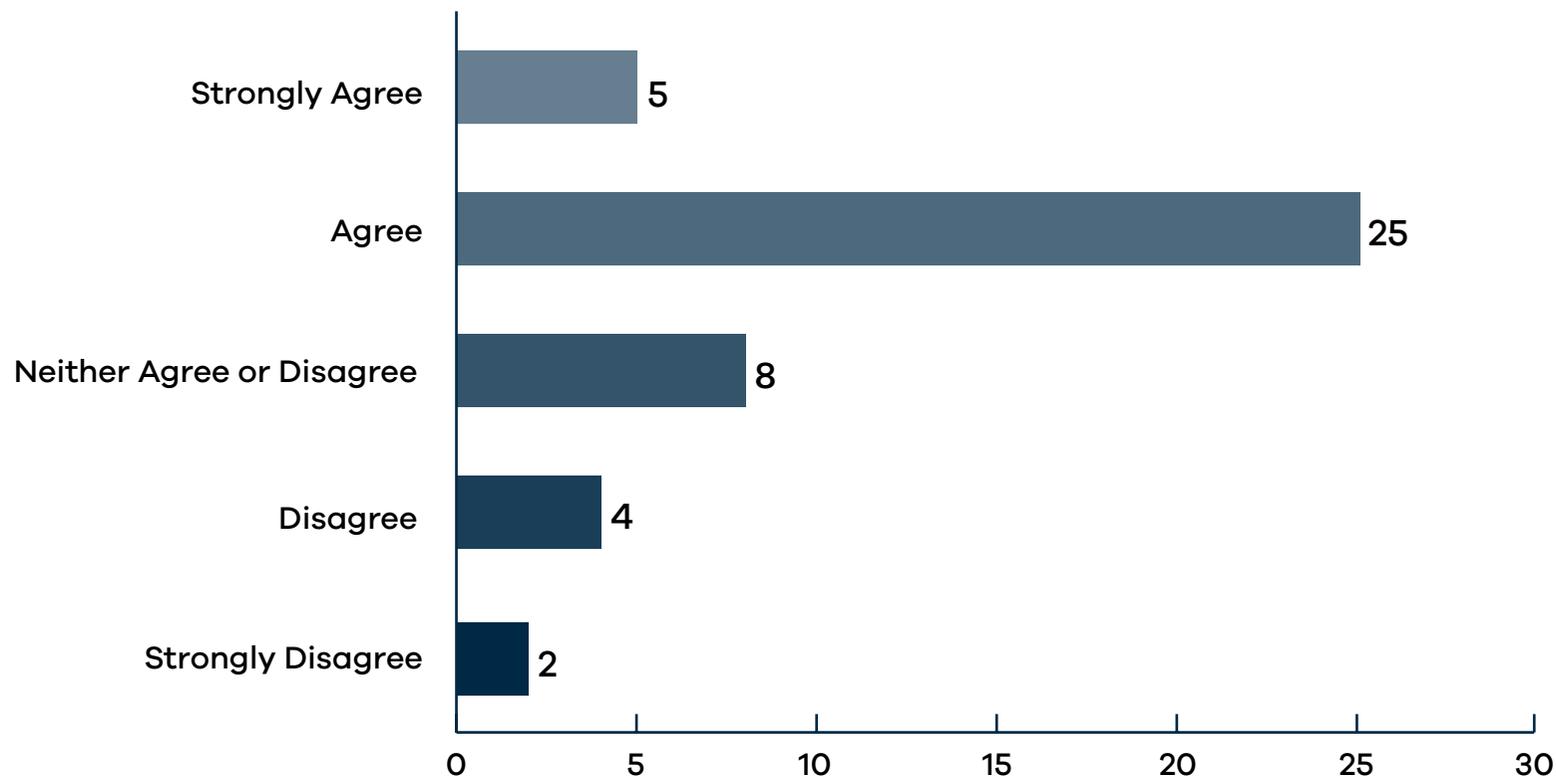
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	5	11.36%
Agree	25	56.82%
Neither Agree or Disagree	8	18.18%
Disagree	4	9.09%
Strongly Disagree	2	4.55%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

**Preparedness of students - skills - They can work autonomously with appropriate supervision**
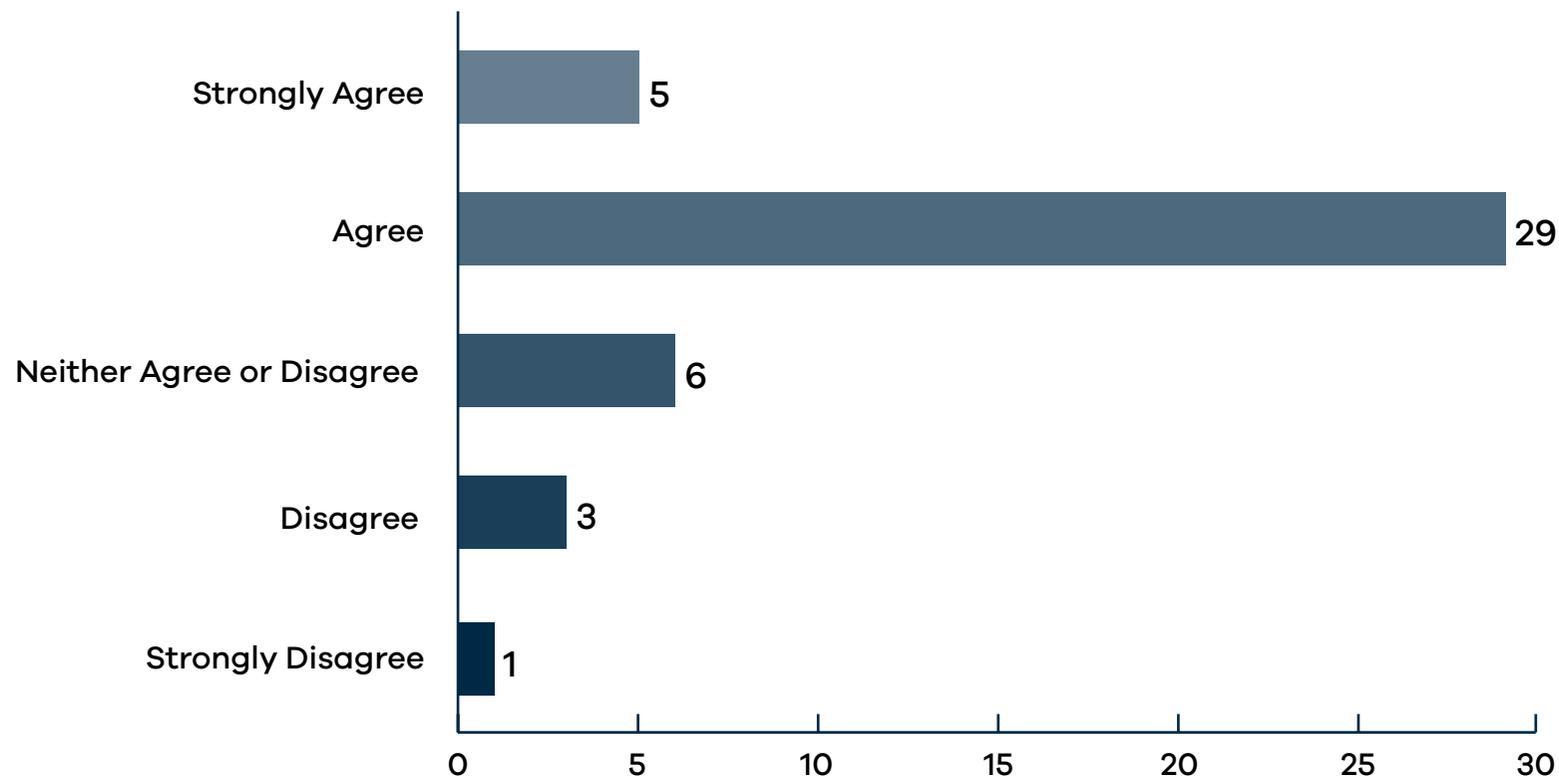
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	5	11.36%
Agree	29	65.91%
Neither Agree or Disagree	6	13.64%
Disagree	3	6.82%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.27%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can demonstrate empathy
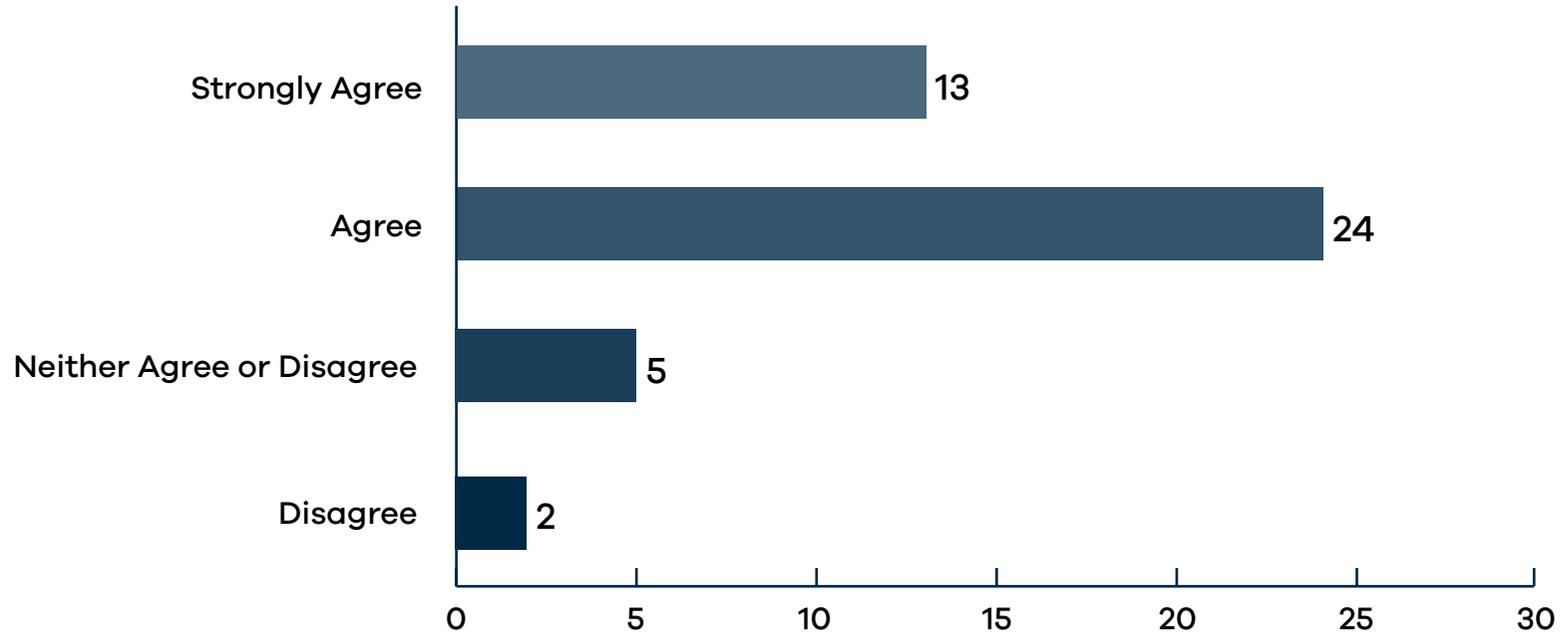
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	13	29.55%
Agree	24	54.55%
Neither Agree or Disagree	5	11.36%
Disagree	2	4.55%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They can establish positive working relationships with service users/clients
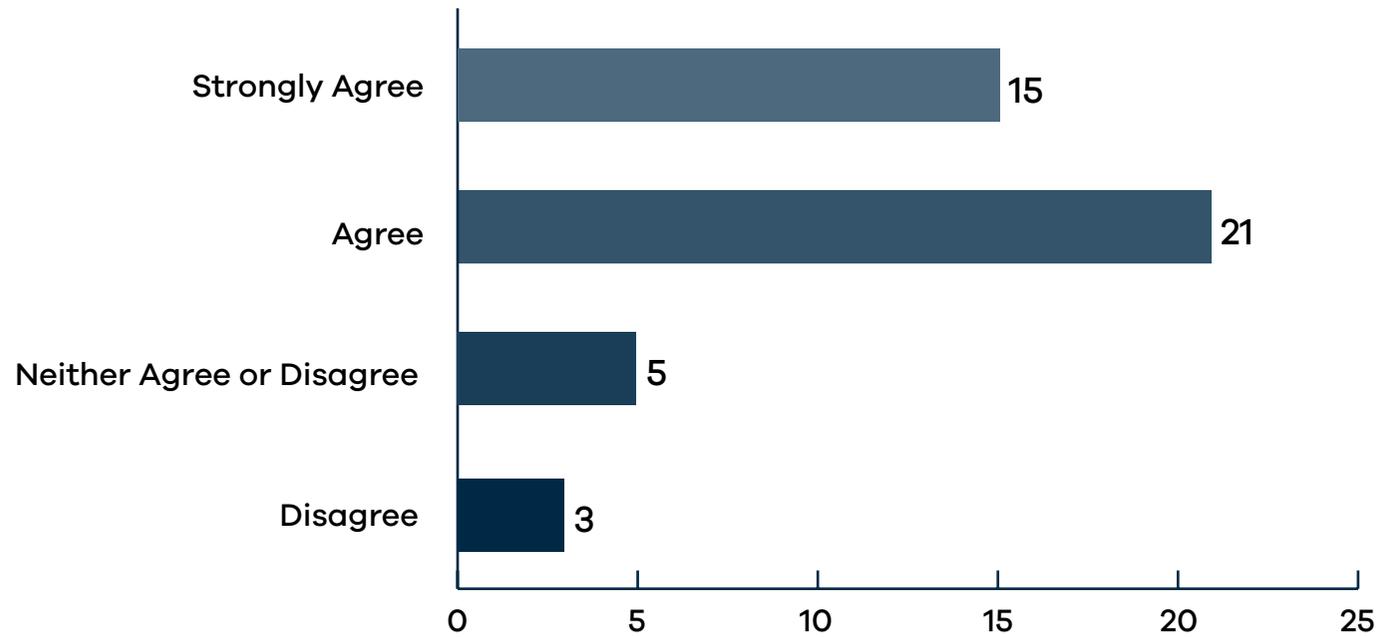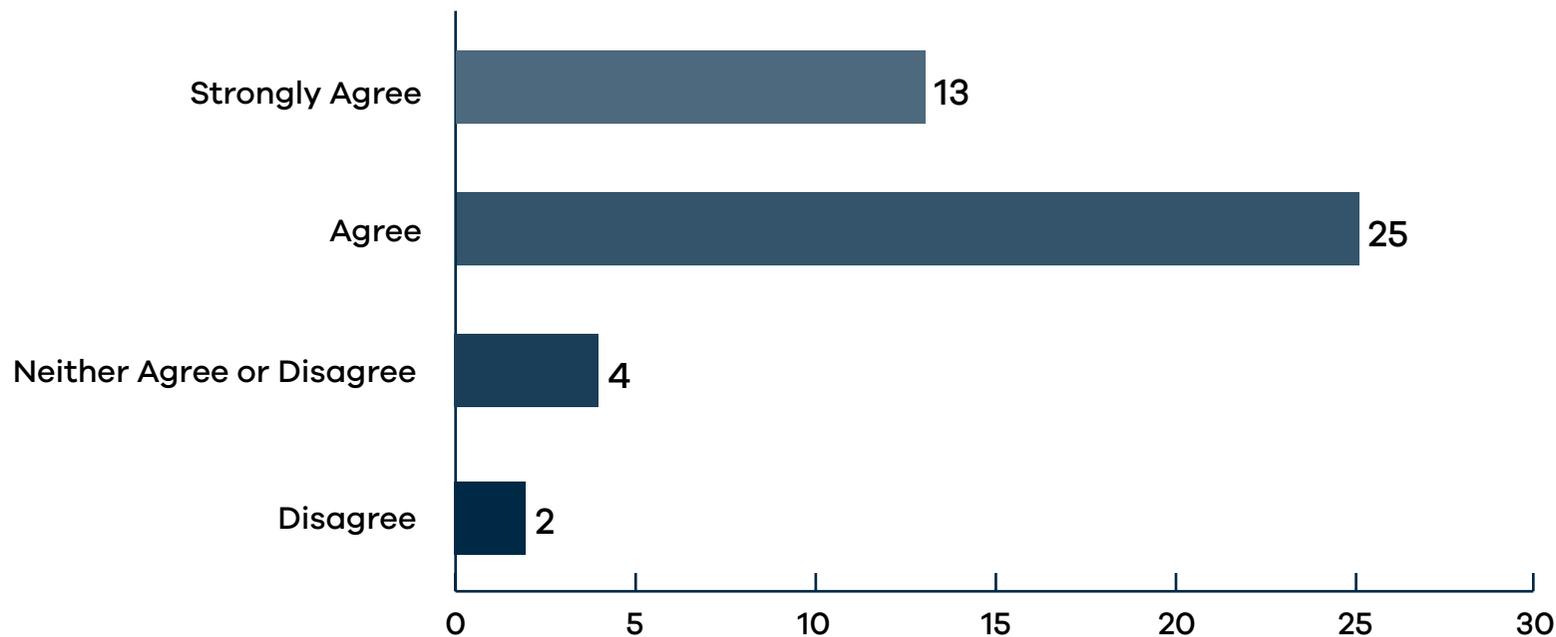

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	15	34.09%
Agree	21	47.73%
Neither Agree or Disagree	5	11.36%
Disagree	3	6.82%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

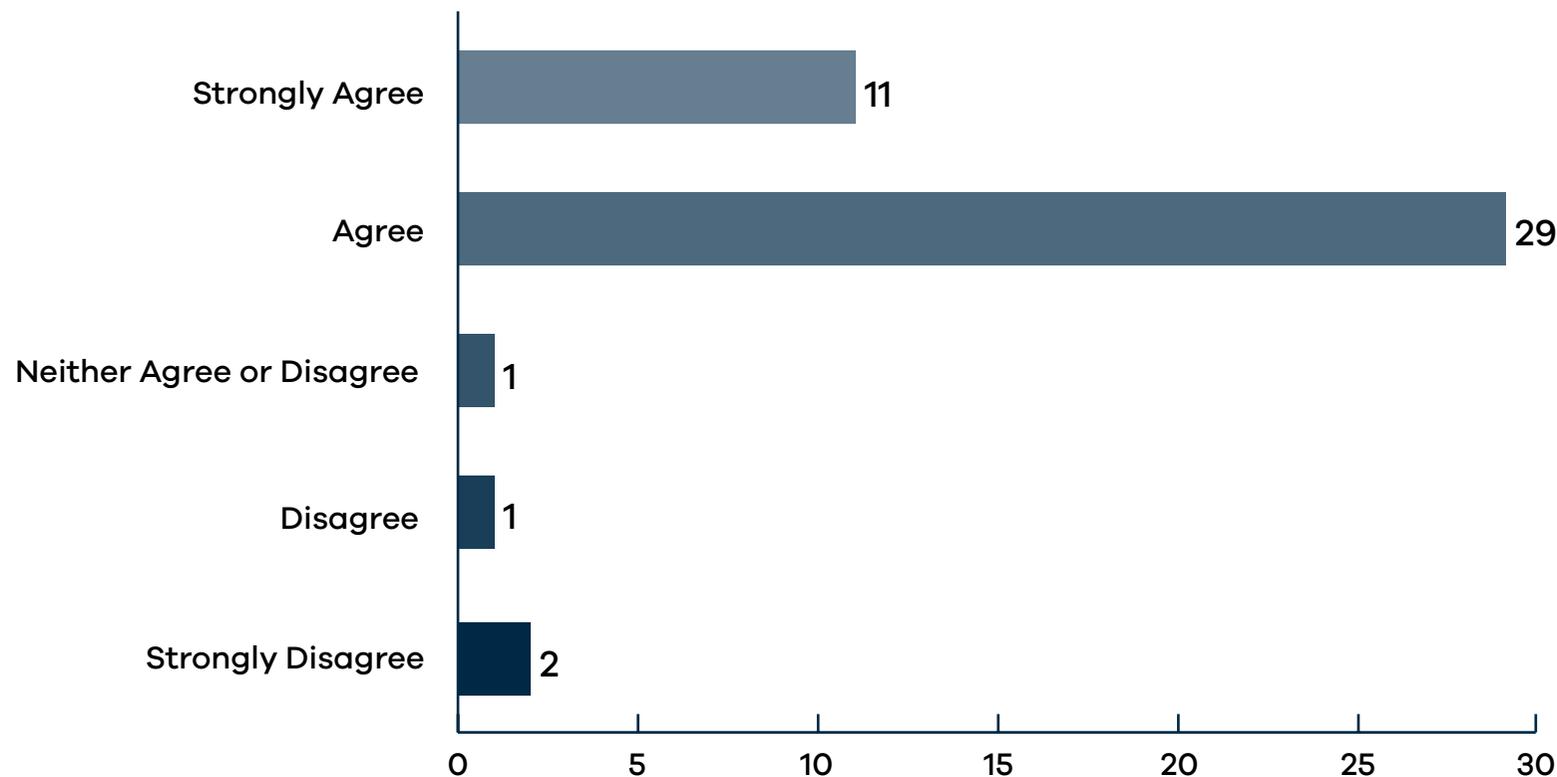**Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - They are resilient and equipped with skills to manage the challenges of the social work role**
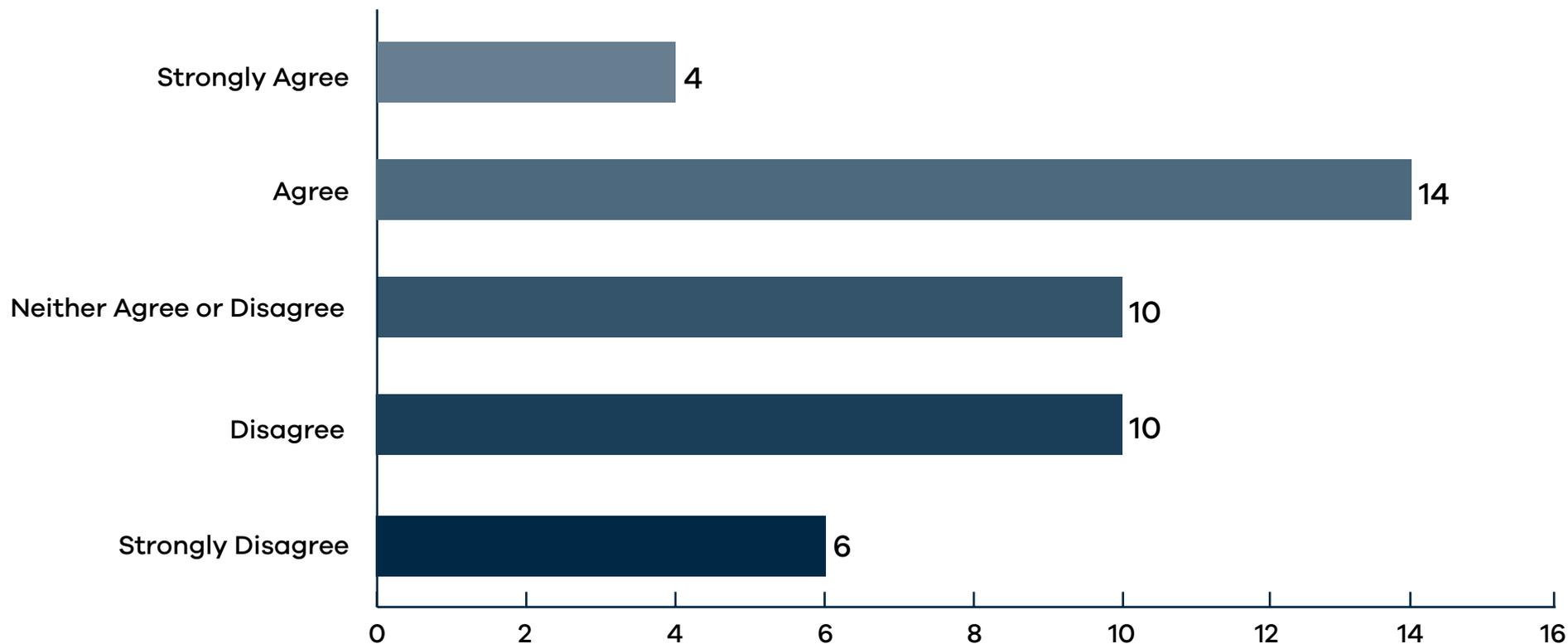
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	4	9.09%
Agree	14	31.82%
Neither Agree or Disagree	10	22.73%
Disagree	10	22.73%
Strongly Disagree	6	13.64%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

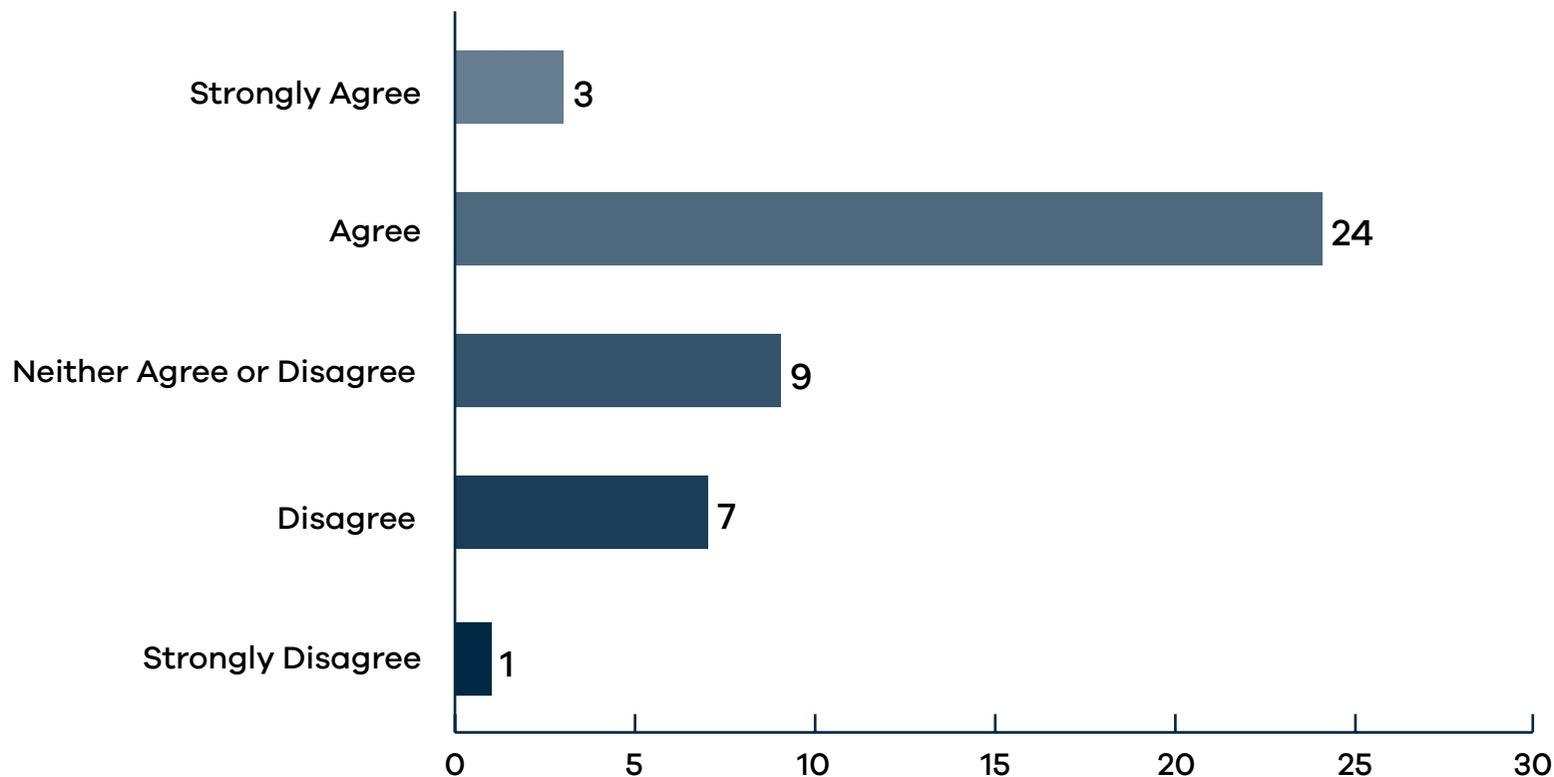**Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - They demonstrate digital competence commensurate with their role**

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	13	29.55%
Agree	25	56.82%
Neither Agree or Disagree	4	9.09%
Disagree	0	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	2	4.55%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

**Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - Equality, diversity and inclusion underpins their practice**

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	11	25.00%
Agree	29	65.91%
Neither Agree or Disagree	1	2.27%
Disagree	1	2.27%
Strongly Disagree	2	4.55%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

**Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - Their practice is evidence-based**

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	3	6.82%
Agree	24	54.55%
Neither Agree or Disagree	9	20.45%
Disagree	7	15.91%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.27%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - They are critically reflective
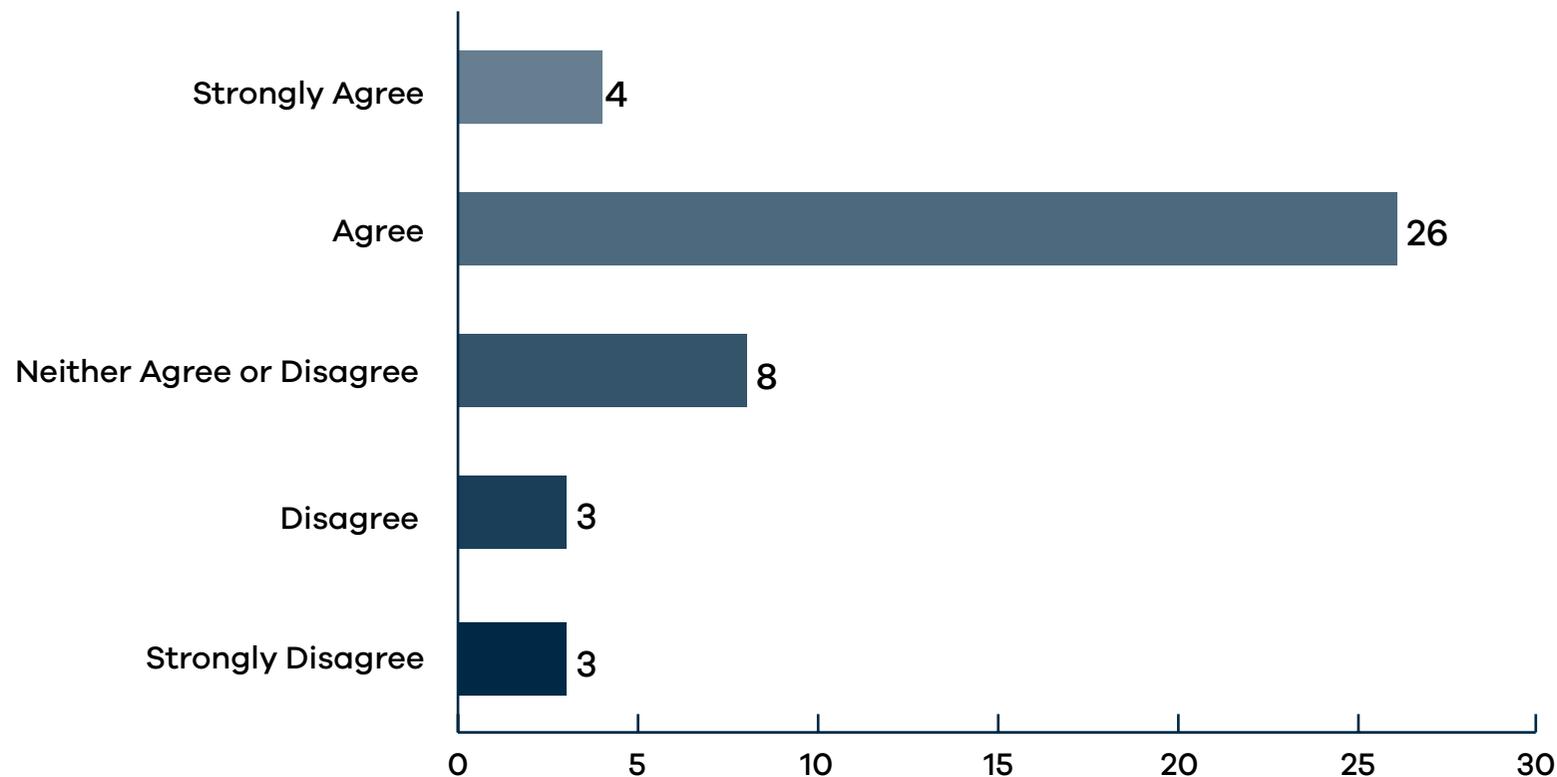
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	4	9.09%
Agree	26	59.09%
Neither Agree or Disagree	8	18.18%
Disagree	3	6.82%
Strongly Disagree	3	6.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They take responsibility for their own learning and development
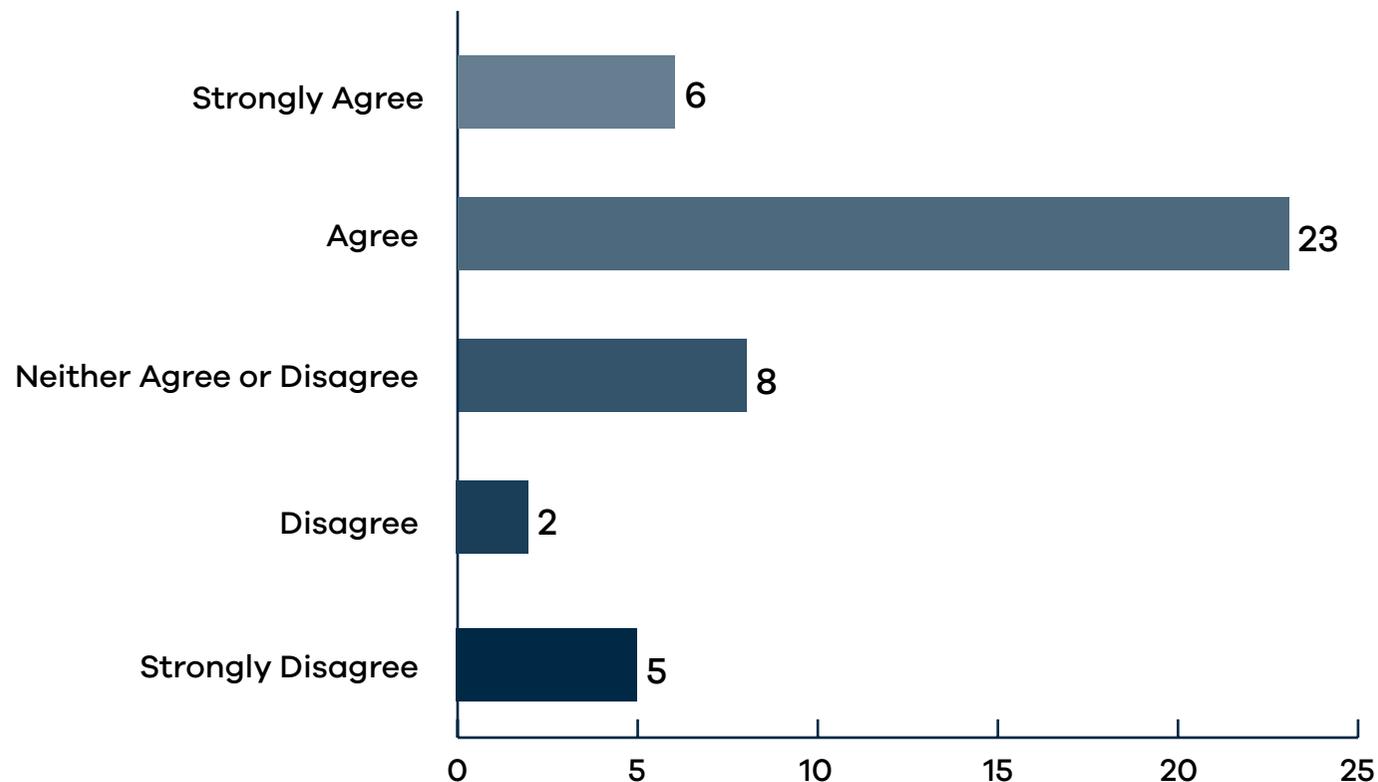
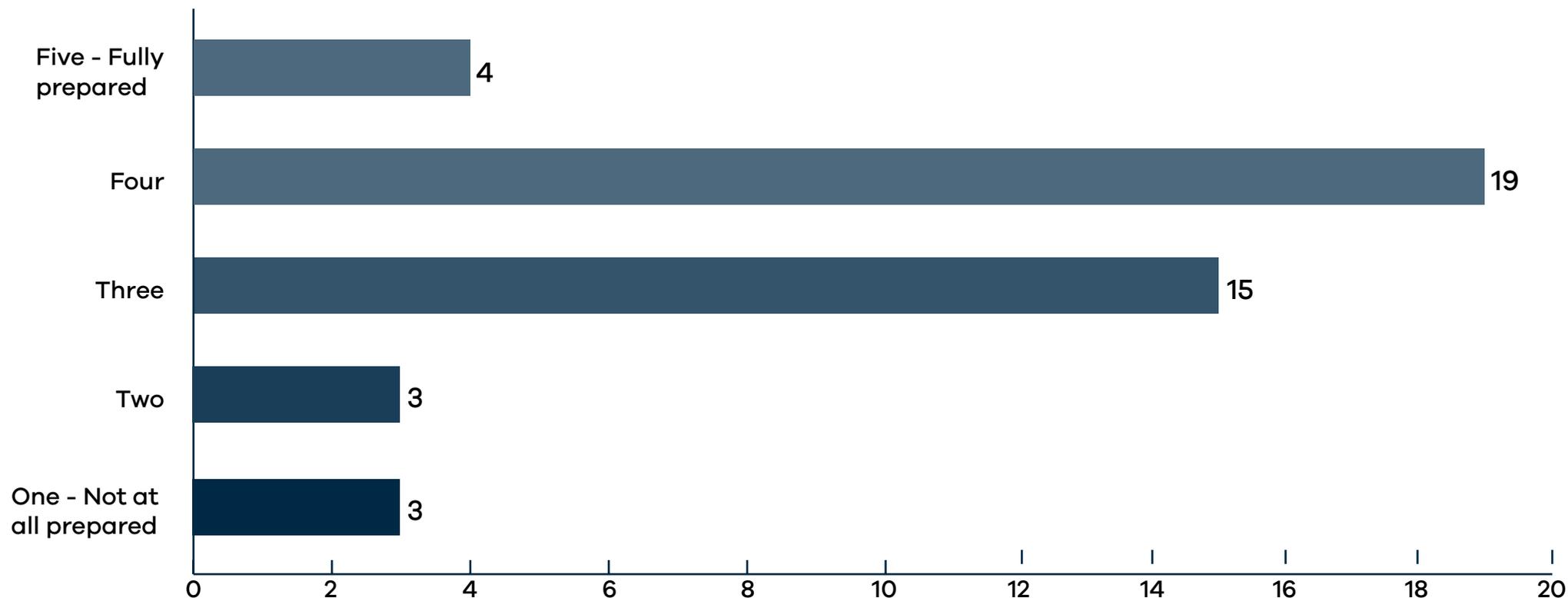| Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	6	13.64%
Agree	23	52.27%
Neither Agree or Disagree	8	18.18%
Disagree	2	4.55%
Strongly Disagree	5	11.36%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Preparedness of students - skills - They show a strong sense of their professional identity as a social worker
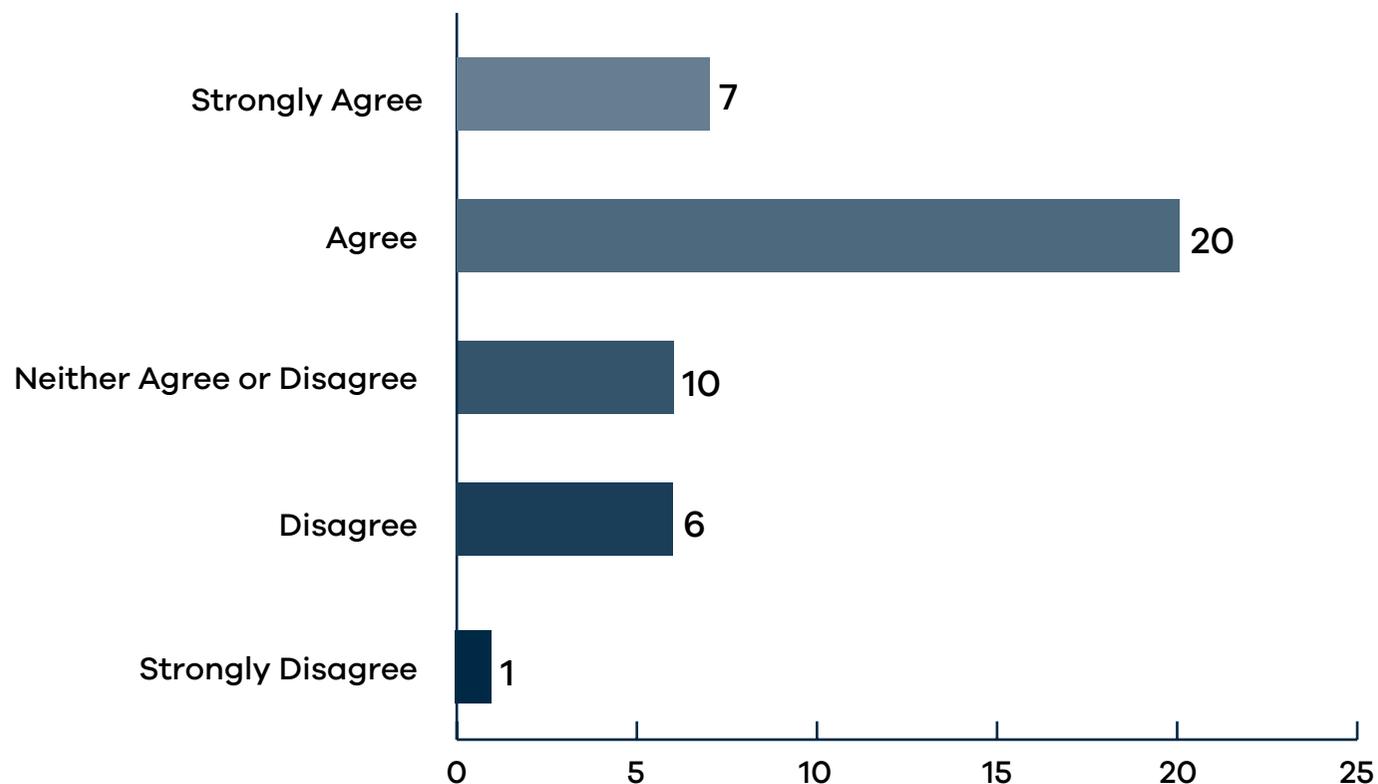
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	7	15.91%
Agree	20	45.45%
Neither Agree or Disagree	10	22.73%
Disagree	6	13.64%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.27%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

3. Using the scale below, please indicate how well you think the Degree in Social Work has prepared NQSW team members to fulfil their role as a new social worker on the Assessed Year in Employment? (Level 5 indicates 'Fully prepared and ready to contribute to the team once they completed workplace induction'. Level 1 indicates not at all prepared and requiring extensive support after completing workplace induction).

Preparedness of students - skills - There were 44 responses to this part of the question
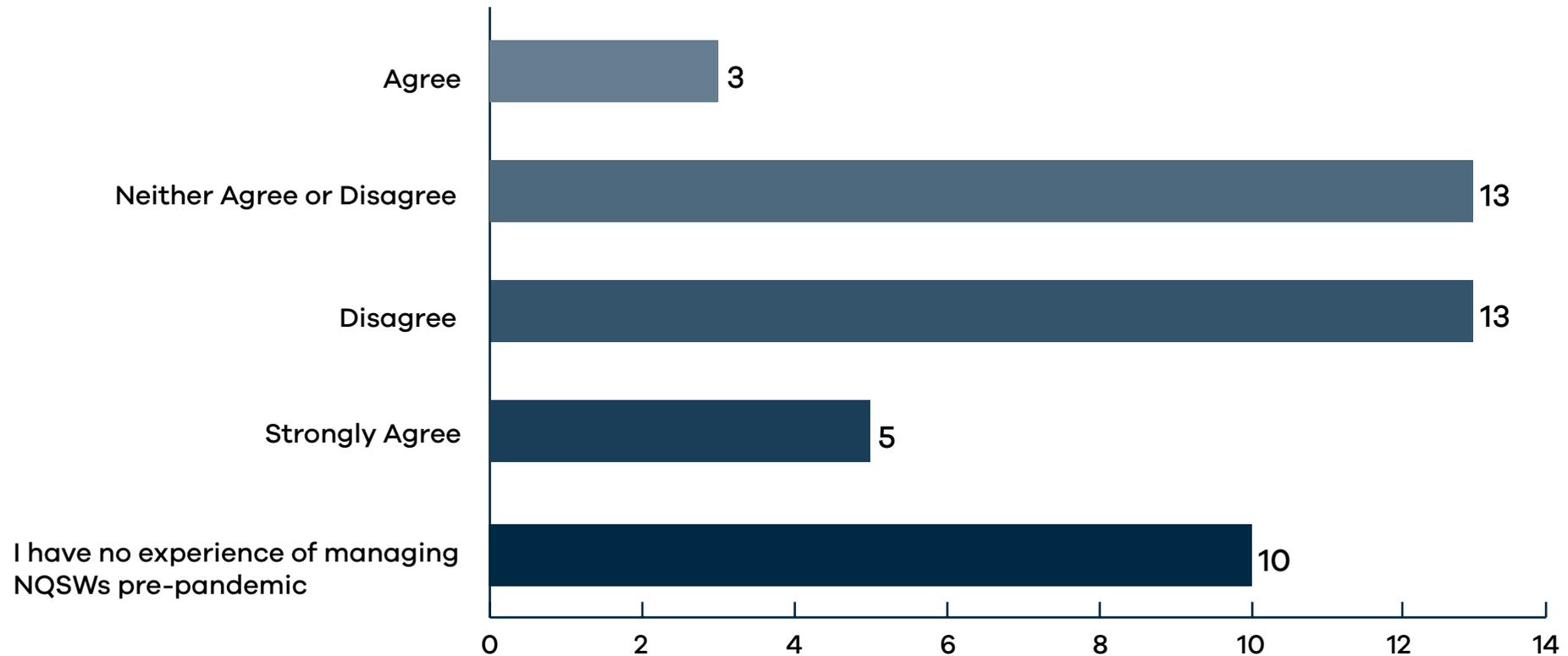
Option	Total	Percent
Five - Fully prepared	4	9.09%
Four	19	43.18%
Three	15	34.09%
Two	3	6.82%
One - Not at all prepared	3	6.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

5. The impact of the pandemic has changed teaching and practice learning delivery. To what extent do you agree with, if at all, the following statements about the effect these changes have made to NQSWs preparedness to practice effectively in their role?

Impact of Pandemic - They are better prepared

Preparedness of NQSWs - skills - They are resilient and equipped with skills to manage the challenges of the social work role
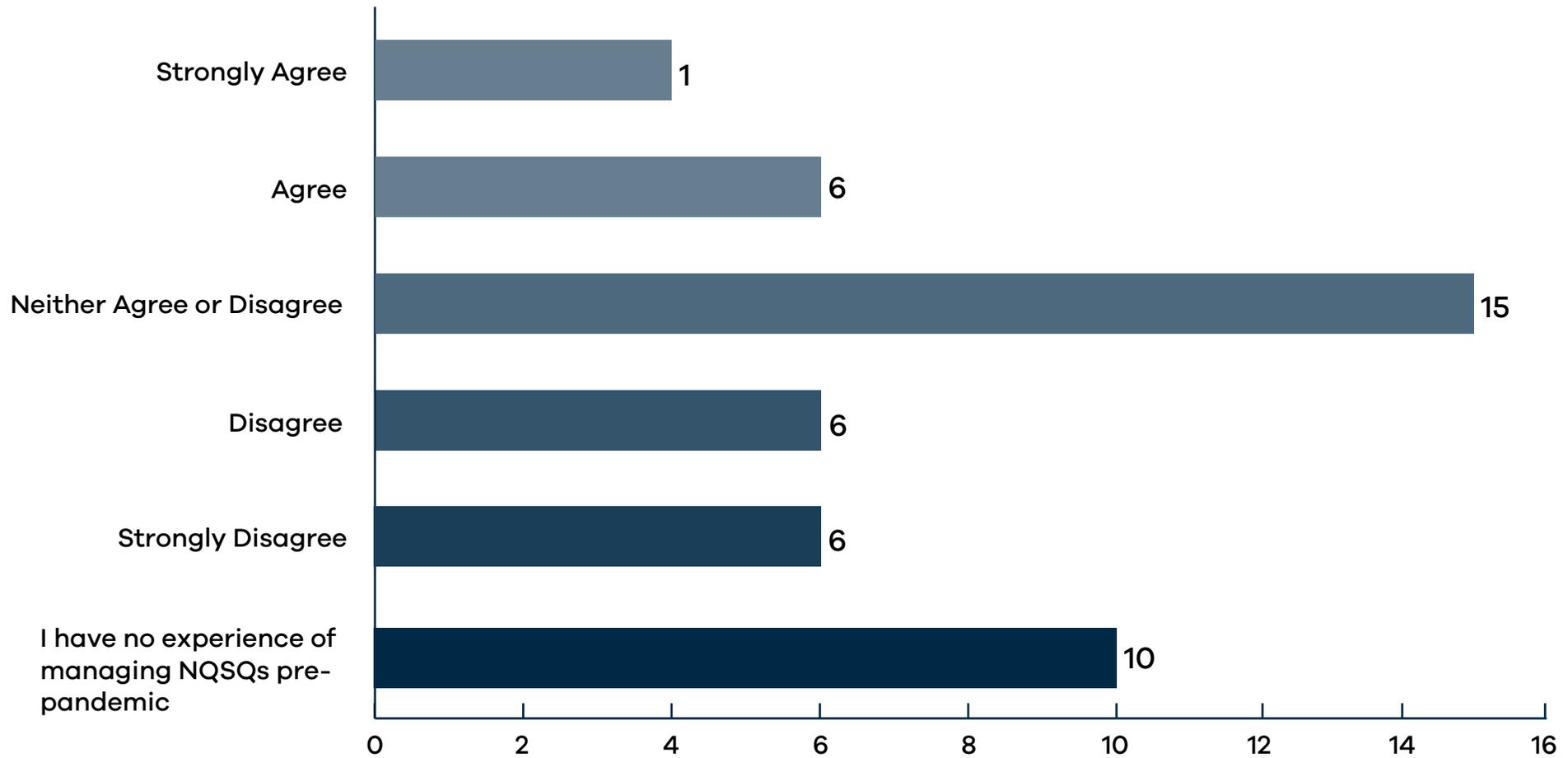
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.00%
Agree	3	6.82%
Neither Agree or Disagree	13	29.55%
Disagree	13	29.55%
Strongly Disagree	5	11.36%
I have no experience of managing NQSWs pre-pandemic	10	22.73%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Impact of Pandemic - They are less well prepared

Response	Count
Strongly Agree	5
Agree	10
Neither Agree or Disagree	16
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	1
I have no experience of managing NQSQs pre-pandemic	10
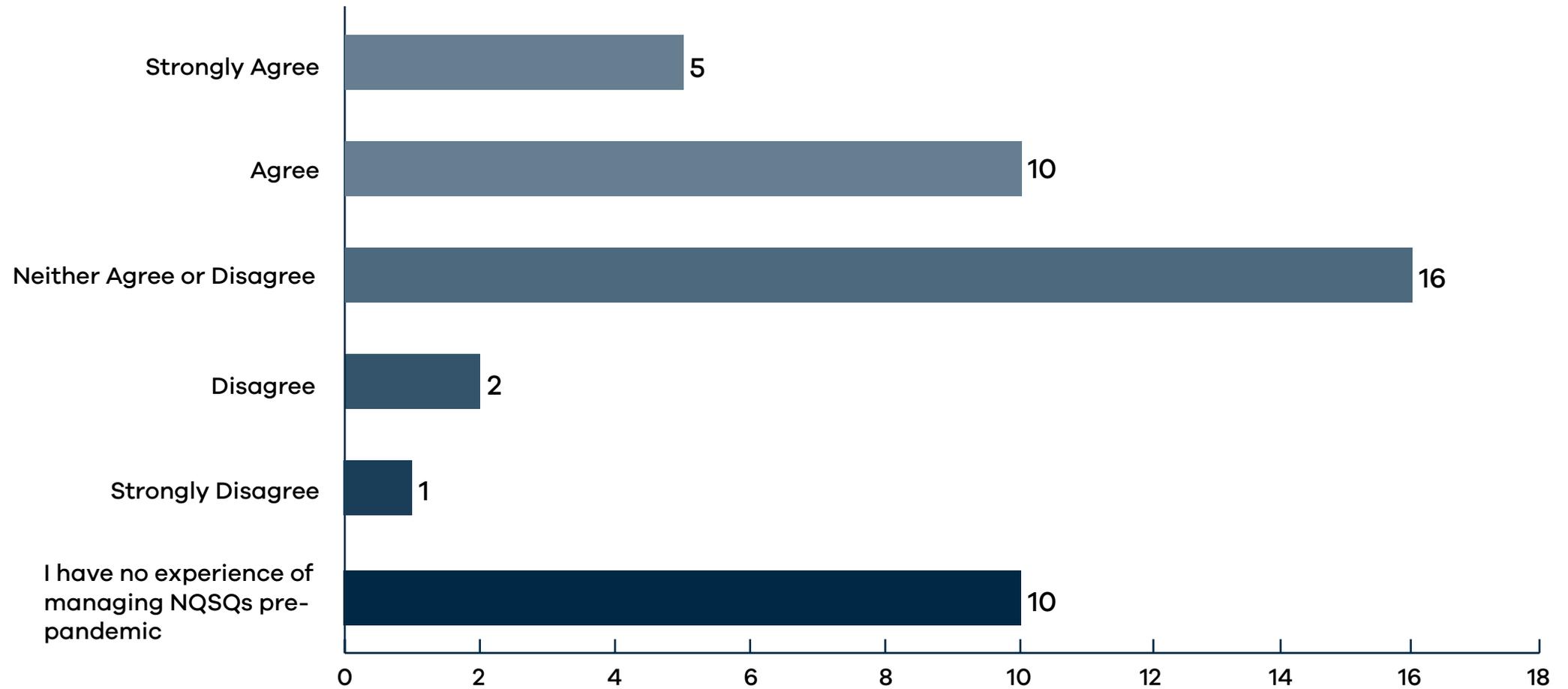
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	5	11.36%
Agree	10	22.73%
Neither Agree or Disagree	16	36.36%
Disagree	2	4.55%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.27%
I have no experience of managing NQSWs pre-pandemic	10	22.73%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Impact of Pandemic - There is no change

Response	Value
Strongly Agree	1
Agree	6
Neither Agree or Disagree	15
Disagree	6
Strongly Disagree	6
I have no experience of managing NQSQs pre-pandemic	10

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	2.27%
Agree	6	13.64%
Neither Agree or Disagree	15	34.09%
Disagree	6	13.64%
Strongly Disagree	6	13.64%
I have no experience of managing NQSWs pre-pandemic	10	22.73%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

9. Self- Care/Wellbeing - Social Work is a challenging job and it is important that all social workers have a set of self- care principles that promote their wellbeing. The challenges of the working environment, however can also contribute to the social worker's wellbeing. Based on your experience, do you think NQSWs have the ability to take steps to take care of their wellbeing?
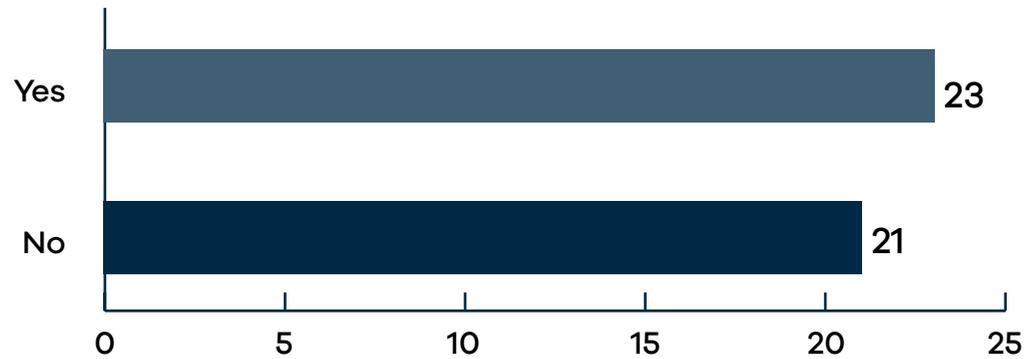
Ability to self-care
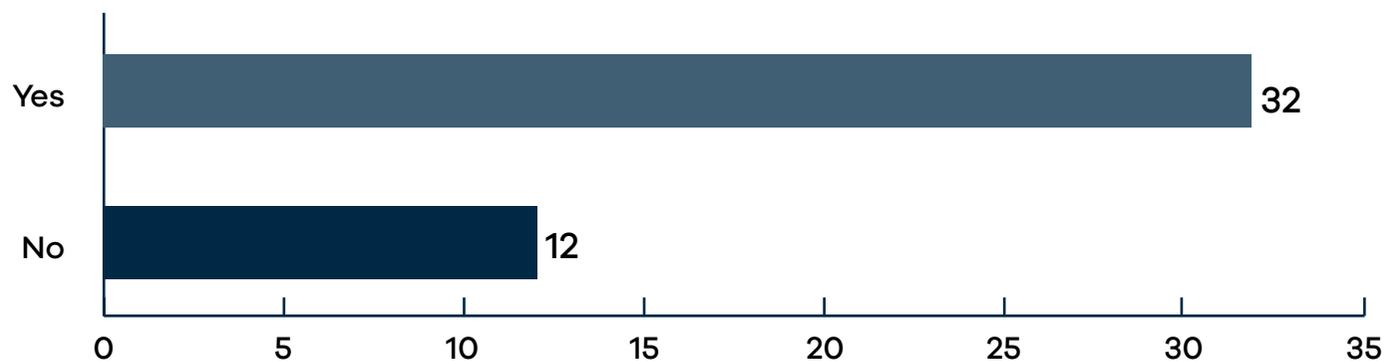
Option	Total	Percent
Yes	32	72.73%
No	12	27.27%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

11. Leadership and Social Work - Leadership within social work is now being recognised as a key aspect of what social workers do. Do you see leadership skills in the NQSWs you have worked with?

Leadership skills evident

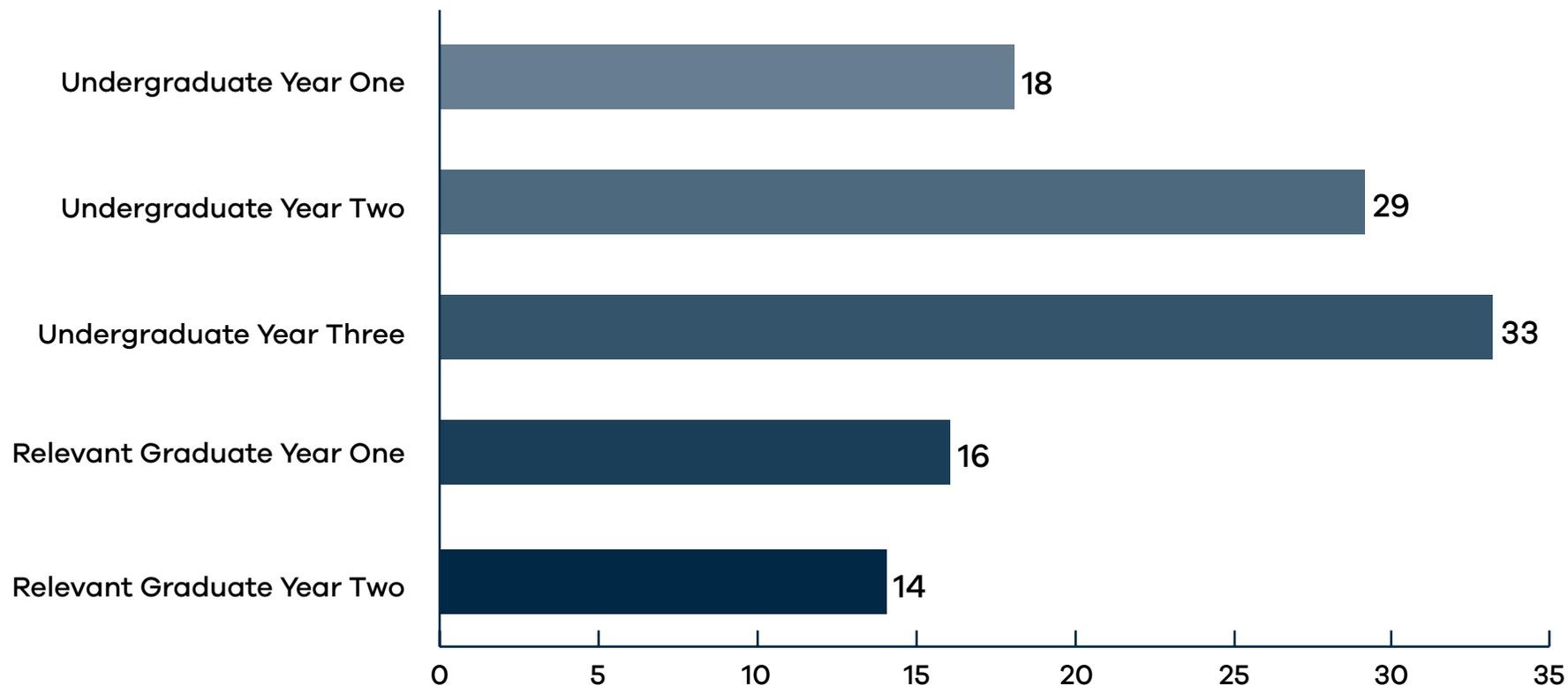| Option	Total	Percent
Yes	23	52.27%
No	21	47.73%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Appendix 6: Student Survey (2023-24) Quantitative Responses
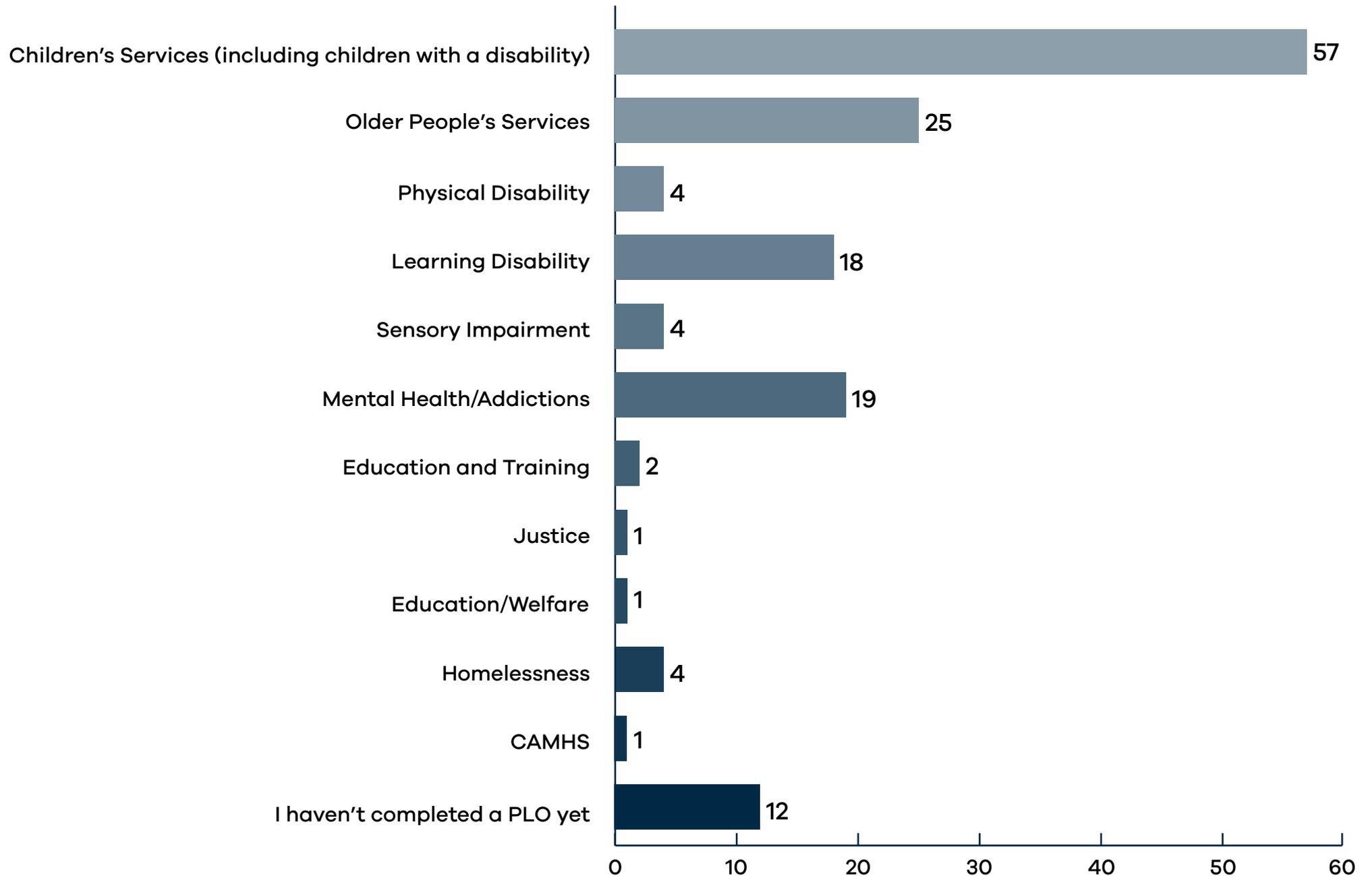
The activity ran from 18/12/2023 to 15/03/2024

Responses to this survey: **110**
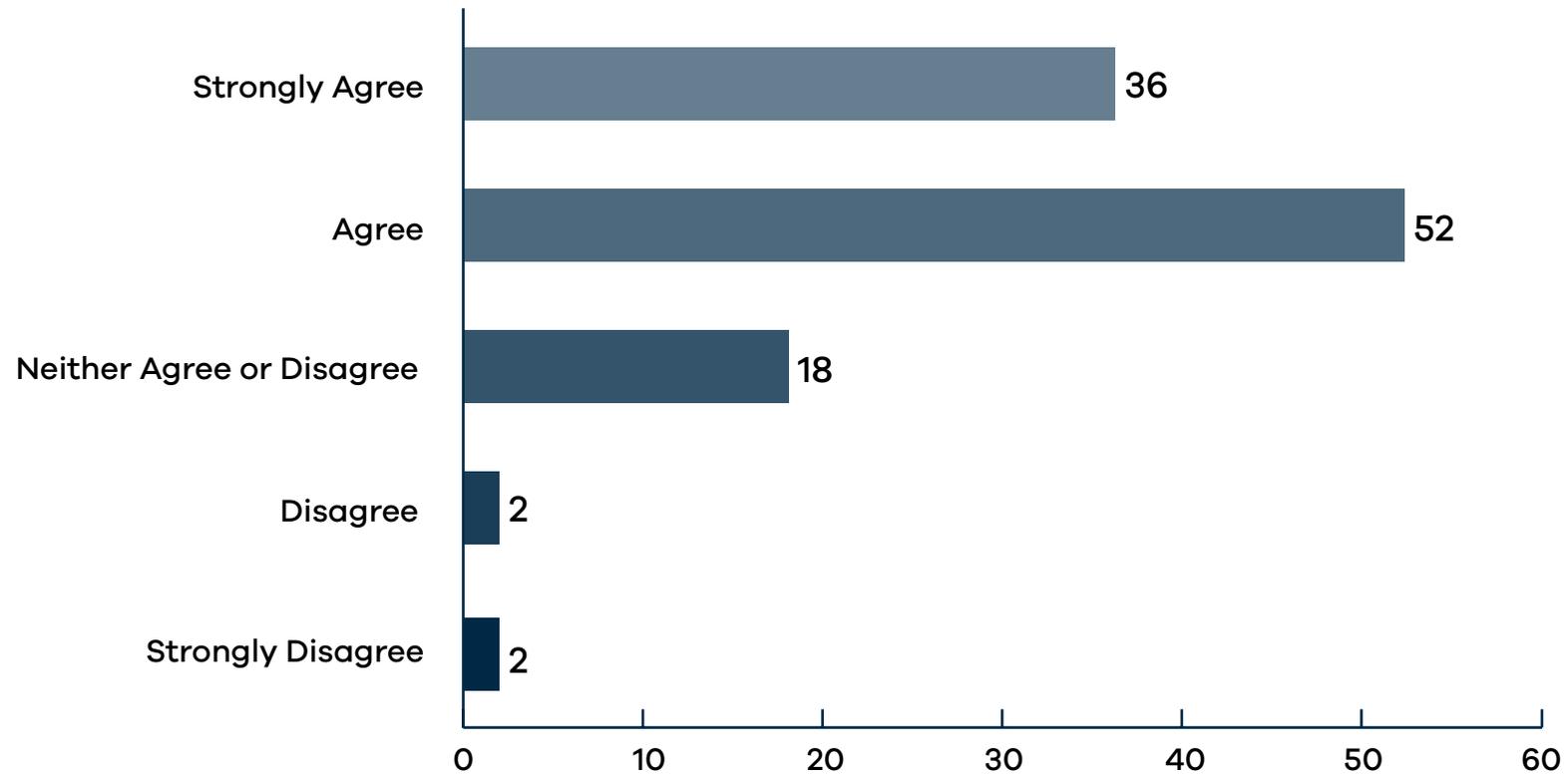
1. Which Degree course are you studying?

Option	Total	Percent
Undergraduate Year One	18	16.36%
Undergraduate Year Two	29	26.36%
Undergraduate Year Three	33	30.00%
Relevant Graduate Year One	16	14.55%
Relevant Graduate Year Two	14	12.73%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

**1. Which areas of social work have you completed a Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO) in during your Degree**

Area	Count
Children's Services (including children with a disability)	57
Older People's Services	25
Physical Disability	4
Learning Disability	18
Sensory Impairment	4
Mental Health/Addictions	19
Education and Training	2
Justice	1
Education/Welfare	1
Homelessness	4
CAMHS	1
I haven't completed a PLO yet	12

Option	Total	Percent
Children's Services (including children with a disability)	57	51.82%
Older People's Services	25	22.73%
Physical Disability	4	3.64%
Learning Disability	18	16.36%
Sensory Impairment	4	3.64%
Mental Health/Addictions	19	17.27%
Education and Training	2	1.82%
Justice	1	0.91%
Education/Welfare	1	0.91%
Homelessness	4	3.64%
CAMHS	1	0.91%
I haven't completed a PLO yet	12	10.91%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

**Professional Identity - The teaching on my Degree course is helping develop my professional identity**

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	36	32.73%
Agree	52	47.27%
Neither Agree or Disagree	18	16.36%
Disagree	2	1.82%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Professional Identity - The Practice Learning placements I have completed are helping me to understand what it means to be a social worker
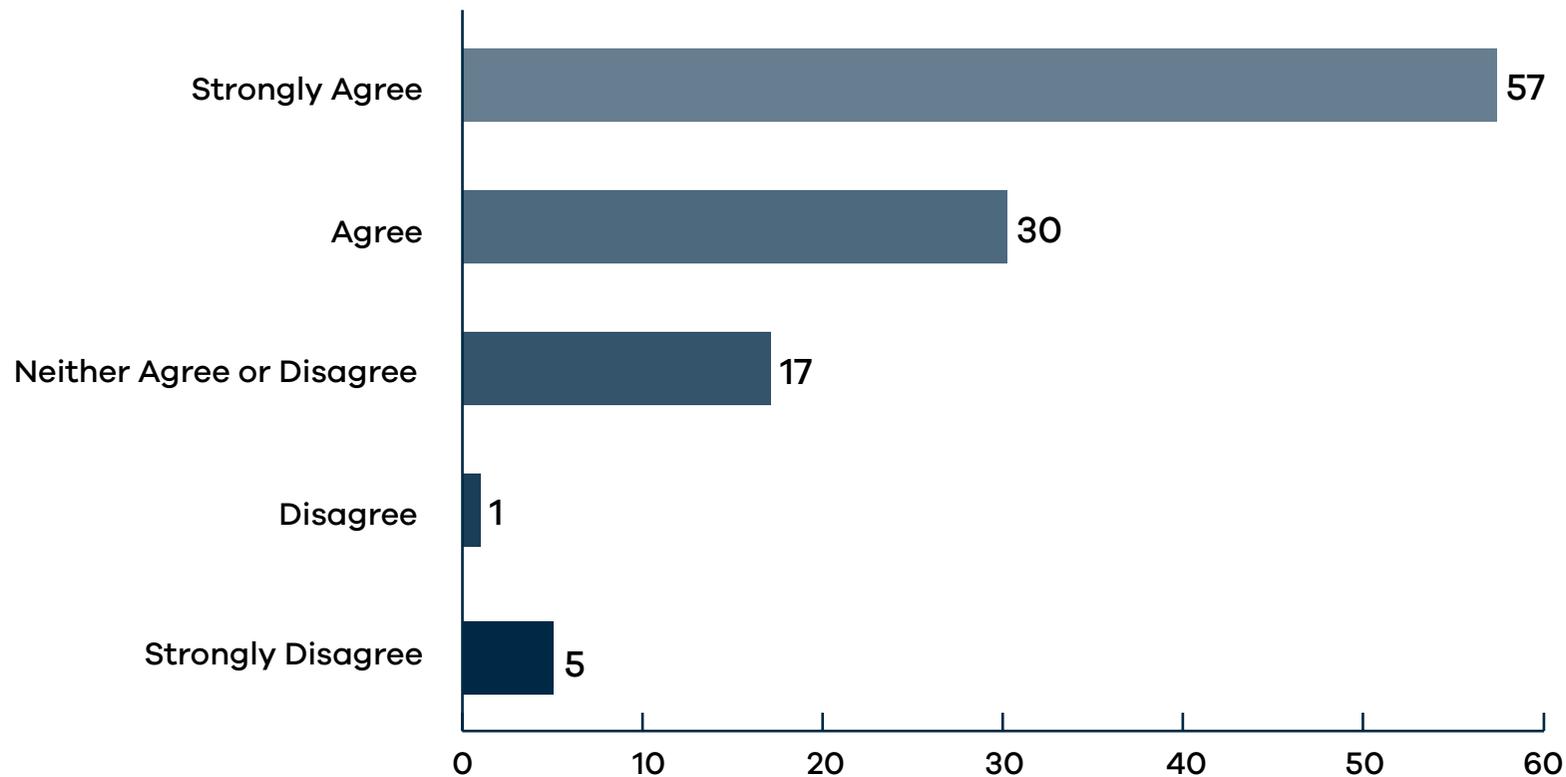
Strongly Agree	57	51.82%
Strongly Agree	57	51.82%
Agree	30	27.27%
Neither Agree or Disagree	17	15.45%
Disagree	1	0.91%
Strongly Disagree	5	4.55%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

**Professional Identity - It is important to me to be part of the social work profession when I graduate**
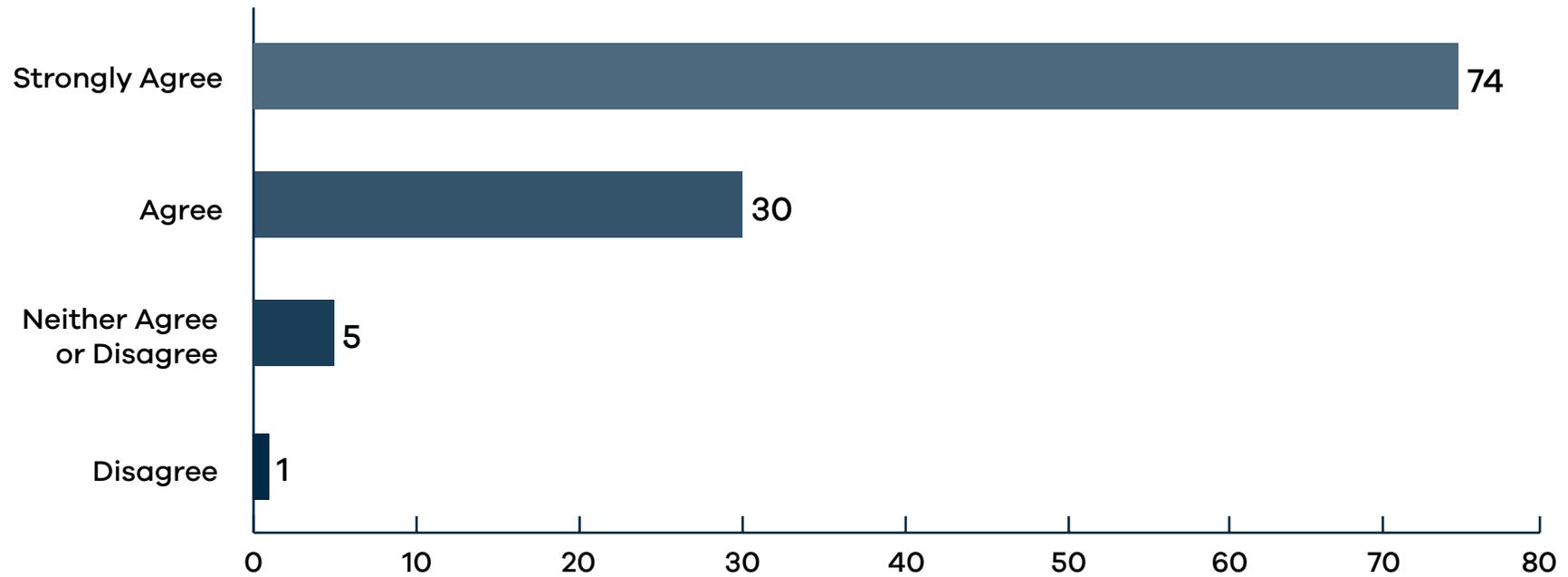
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	74	67.27%
Agree	30	27.27%
Neither Agree or Disagree	5	4.55%
Disagree	1	0.91%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

5. Social work is a rewarding career, but can also be challenging. Please indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the statements below:

Supports for self-care - The teaching on my Degree course has helped me understand how to develop supports to enable resilience and self-care.
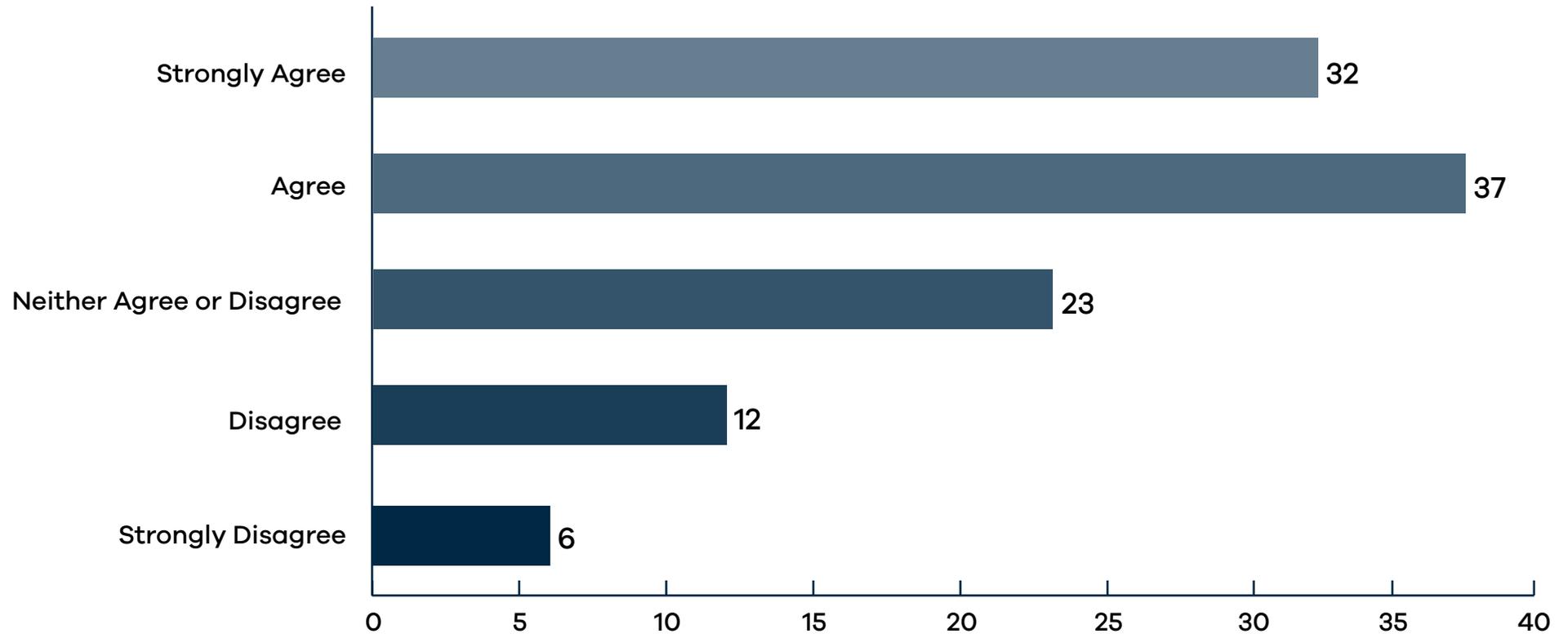
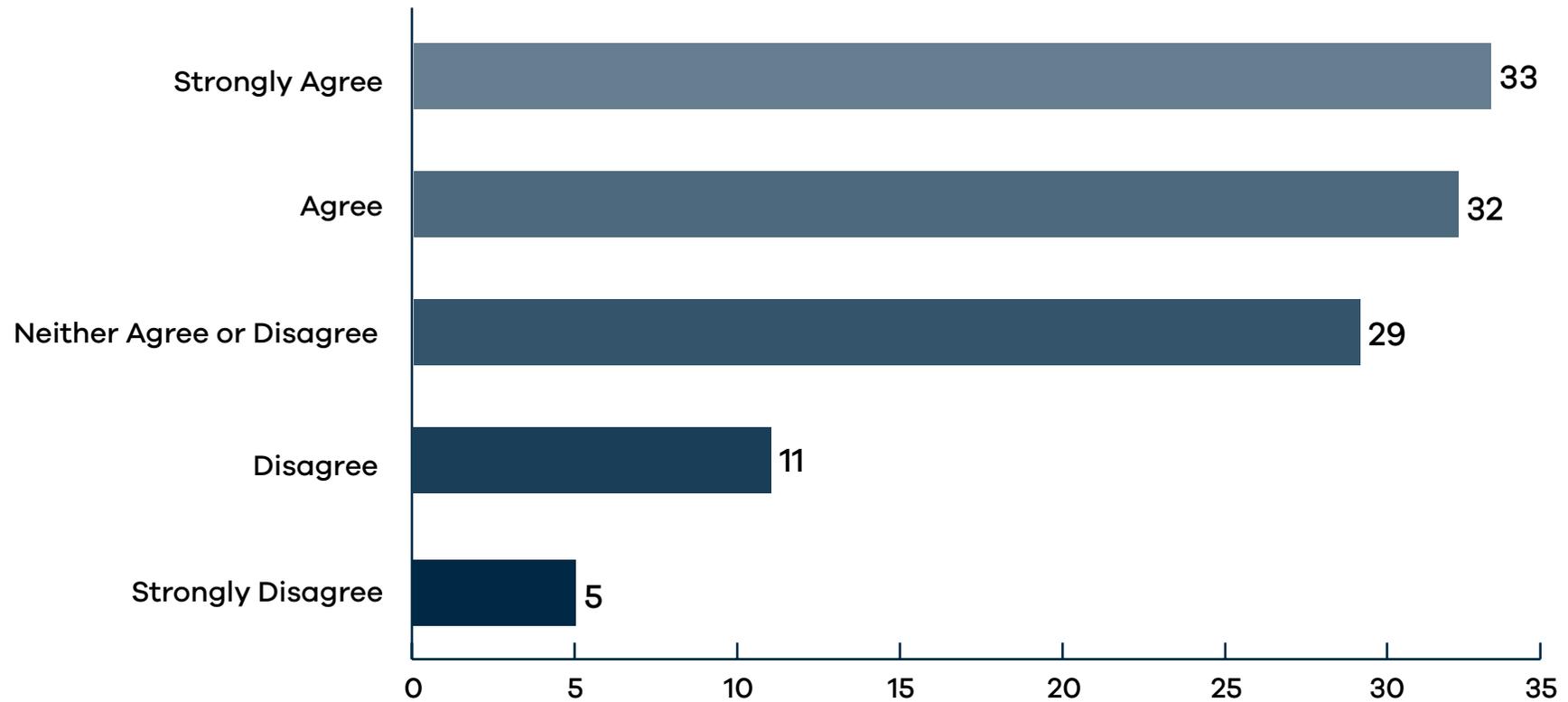| Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	32	29.09%
Agree	37	33.64%
Neither Agree or Disagree	23	20.91%
Disagree	12	10.91%
Strongly Disagree	6	5.45%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Supports for self-care - The Practice Learning placements I have completed have helped me to understand what supports are available to me within the workplace to build resilience and develop self-care strategies -

There were 110 responses to this part of the question.
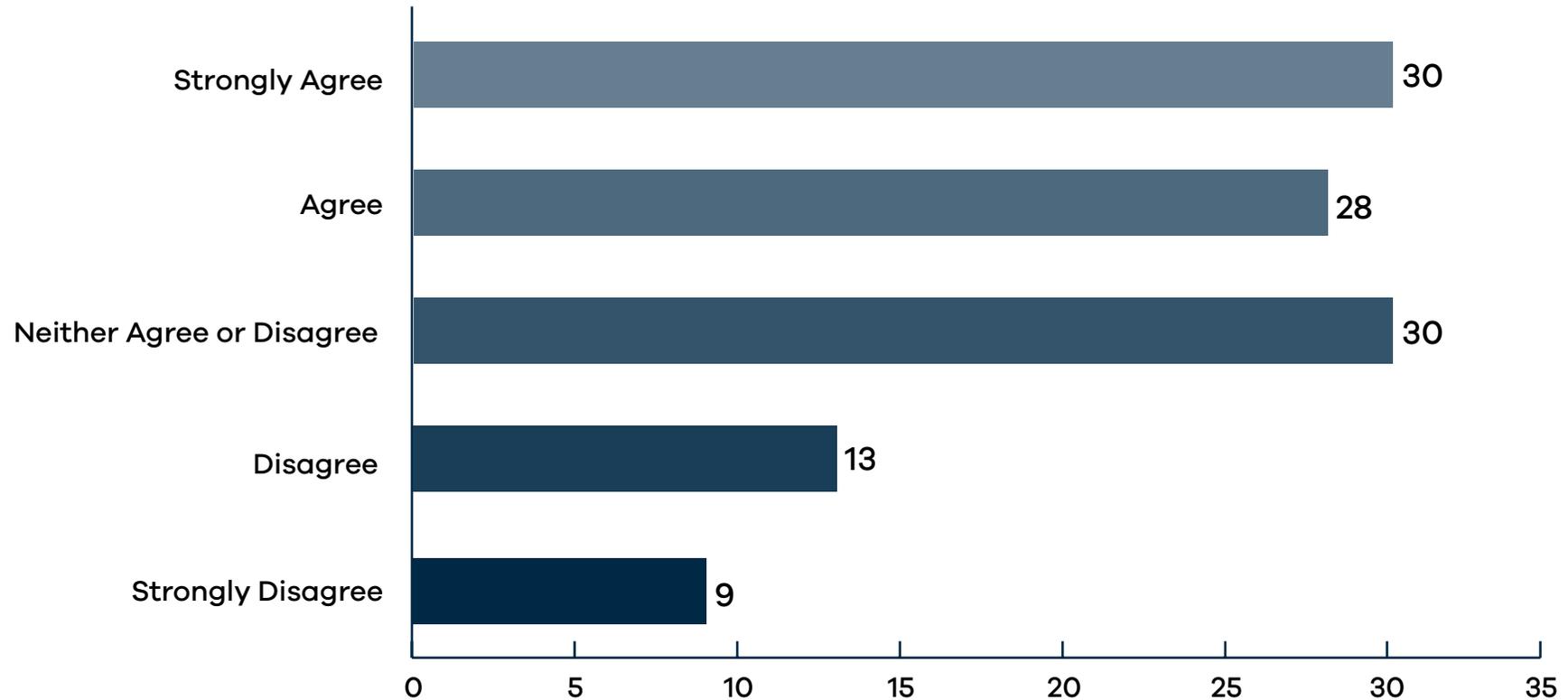
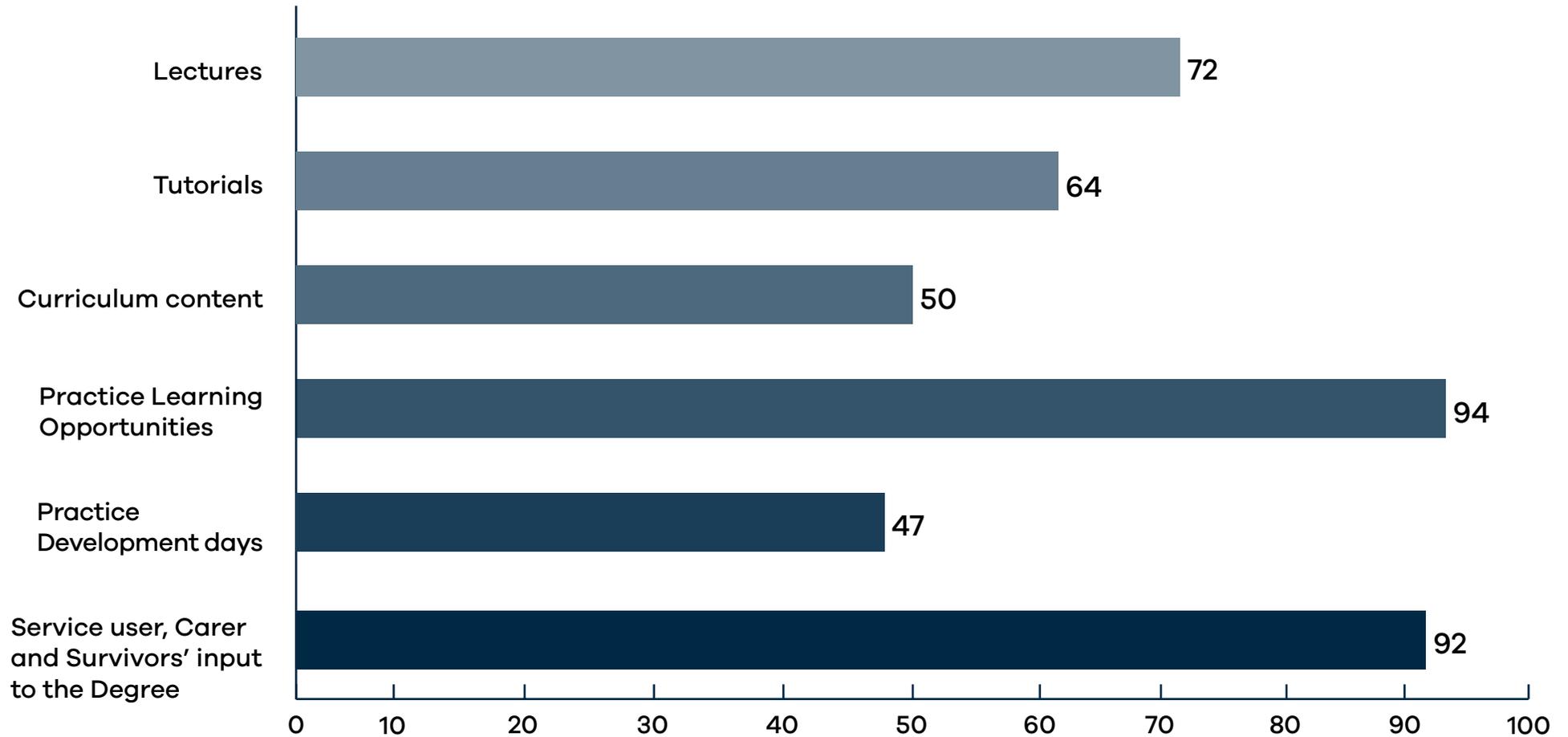| Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	30	27.27%
Agree	28	25.45%
Neither Agree or Disagree	30	27.27%
Disagree	13	11.82%
Strongly Disagree	9	8.18%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Supports for self-care - Social workers I worked with on my placements have demonstrated and resilience and positive self-care strategies - There were 110 responses to this part of the question.

Response	Count
Strongly Agree	33
Agree	32
Neither Agree or Disagree	29
Disagree	11
Strongly Disagree	5

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	33	30.00%
Agree	32	29.09%
Neither Agree or Disagree	29	26.36%
Disagree	11	10.00%
Strongly Disagree	5	4.55%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

6. **The Degree in Social Work - preparing you to respond to current and emerging needs in society as a social worker. Please indicate which elements of your Degree course are useful in preparing you for social work practice (tick all of those options that apply).**

Preparation for Practice

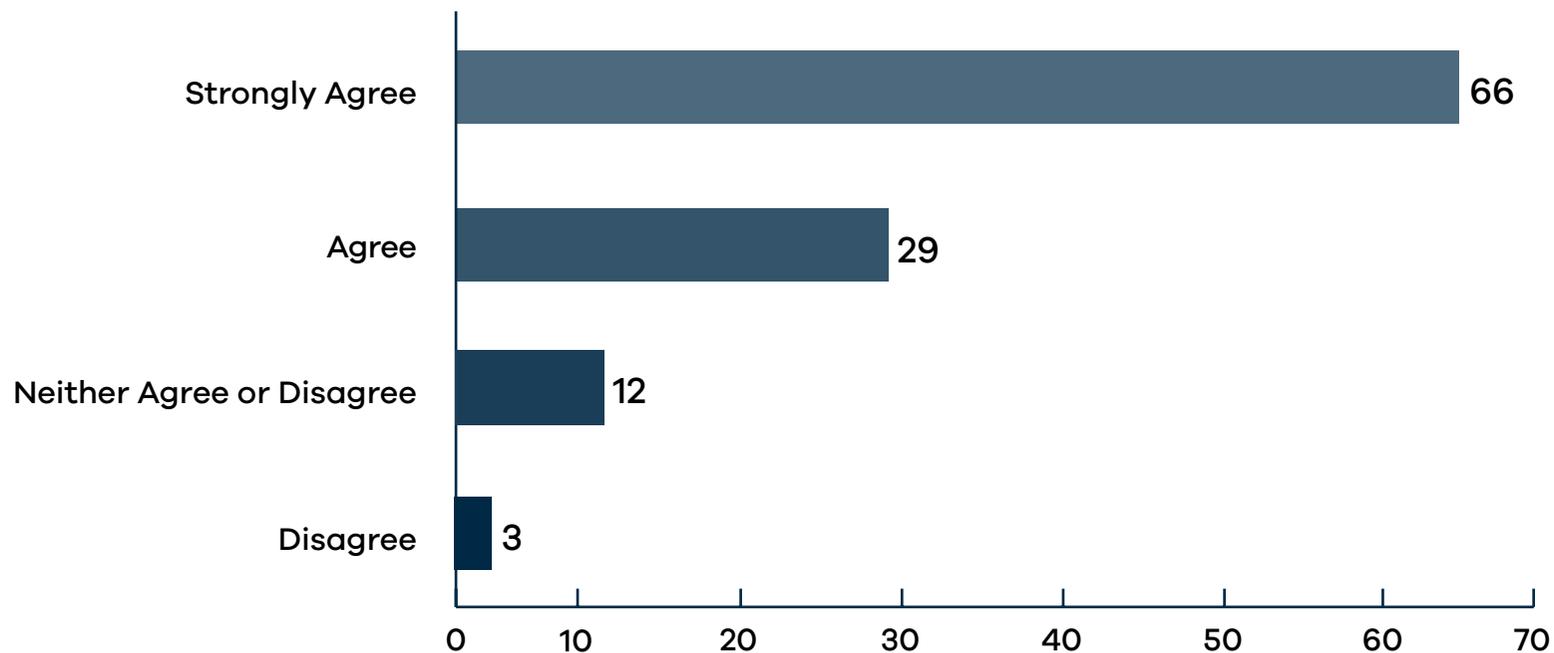| Option	Total	Percent
Lectures	72	65.45%
Tutorials	64	58.18%
Curriculum content	50	45.45%
Practice Learning Opportunities	94	85.45%
Practice Development days	47	42.73%
Service User, Carer and Survivors' input to the Degree	92	83.64%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

7. **NISCC Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Work Students. (Please indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the statements below.)**

Standards of Conduct and Practice - I have viewed/accessed a copy of the NISCC Standards for Social Work Students
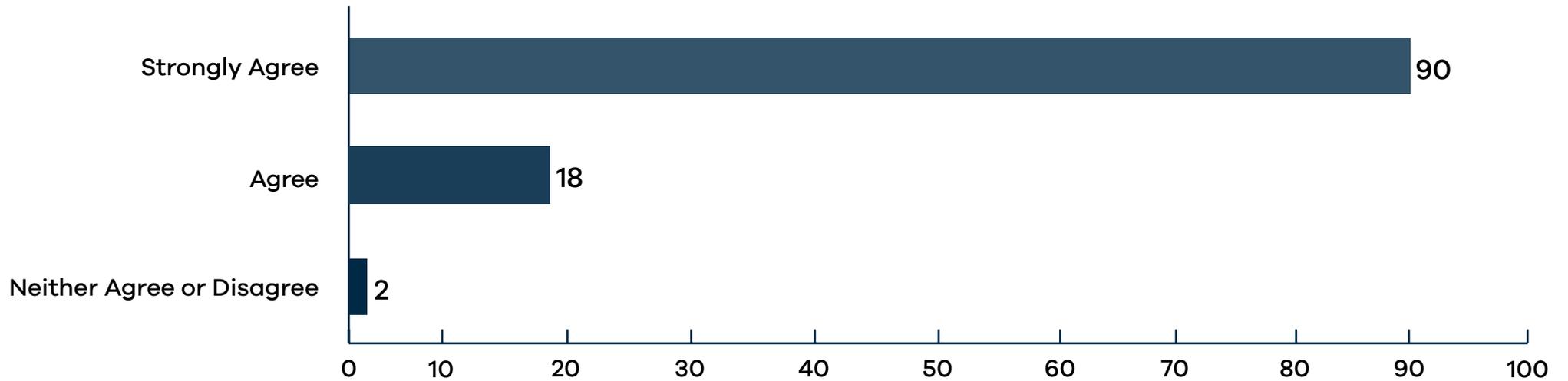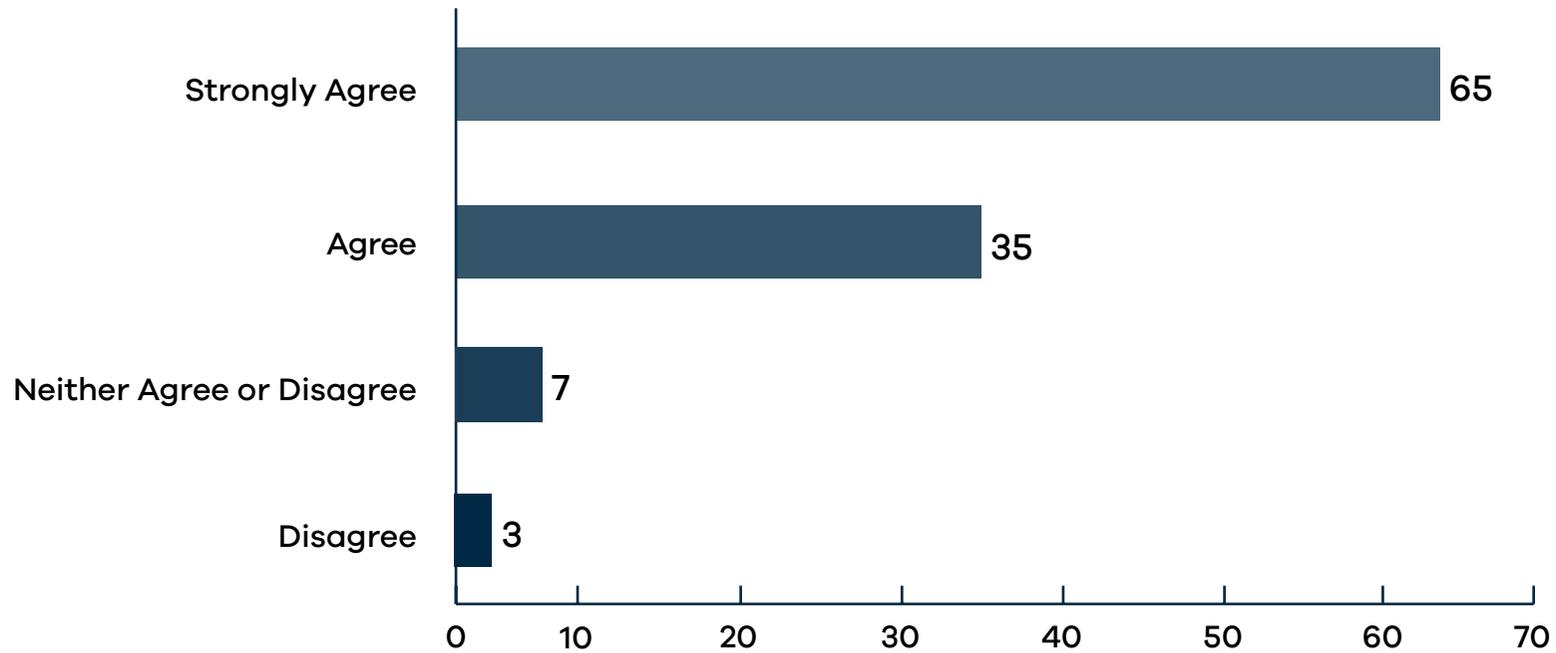

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	90	81.82%
Agree	18	16.36%
Neither Agree or Disagree	2	1.82%
Disagree	0	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Standards of Conduct and Practice - As a student I refer to the NISCC Standards regularly (regularly means at least once a month)

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	66	60.00%
Agree	29	26.36%
Neither Agree or Disagree	12	10.91%
Disagree	3	2.73%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Standards of Conduct and Practice - The NISCC Standards are useful in guiding me in my learning

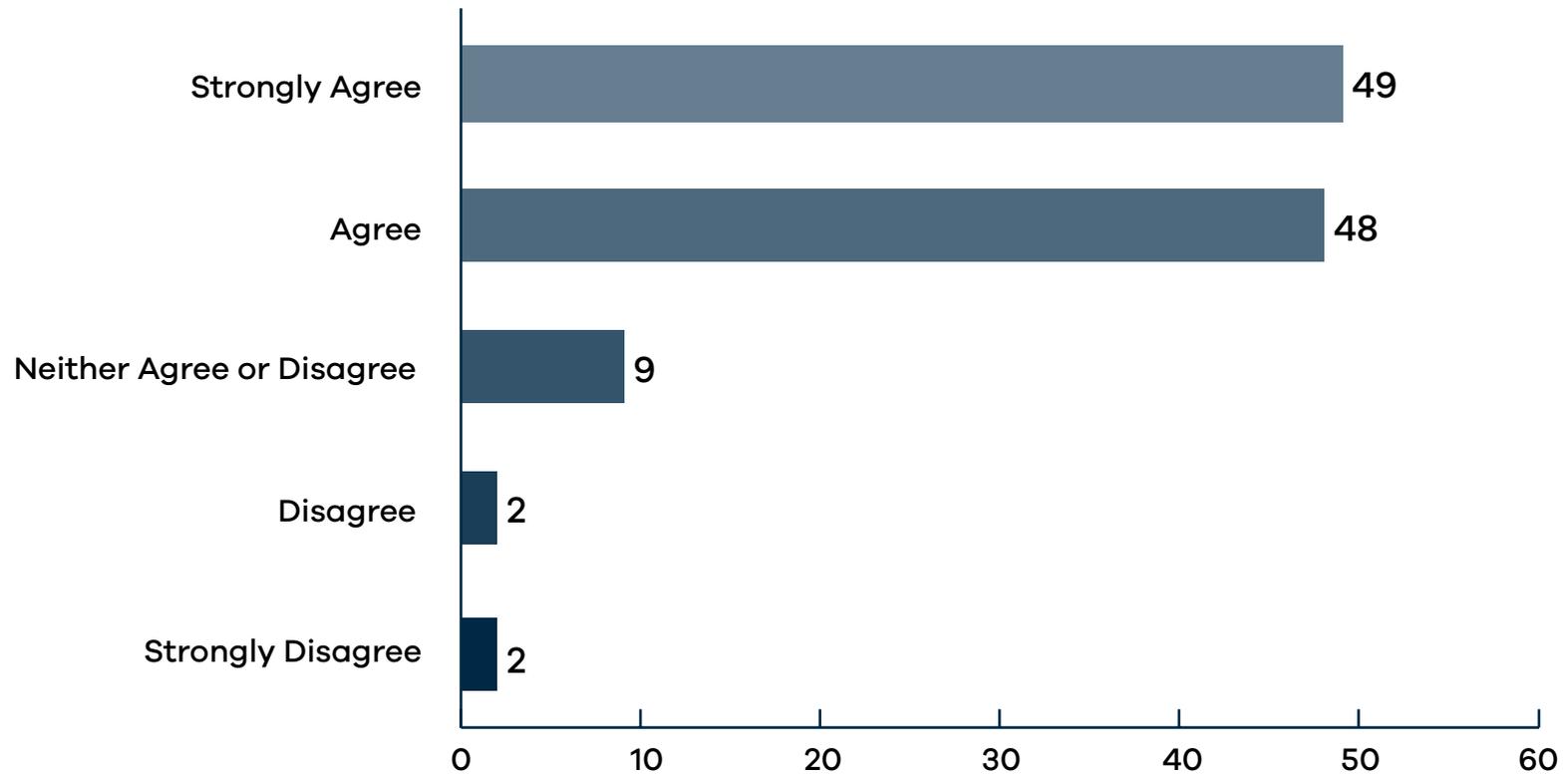| Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	65	59.09%
Agree	35	31.82%
Neither Agree or Disagree	7	6.36%
Disagree	3	2.73%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

8. **Reflective practice for social work. Please, indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the following statements about your social work learning/development.**

Reflective Practice - The Degree provides opportunities to develop my skills in critical reflection
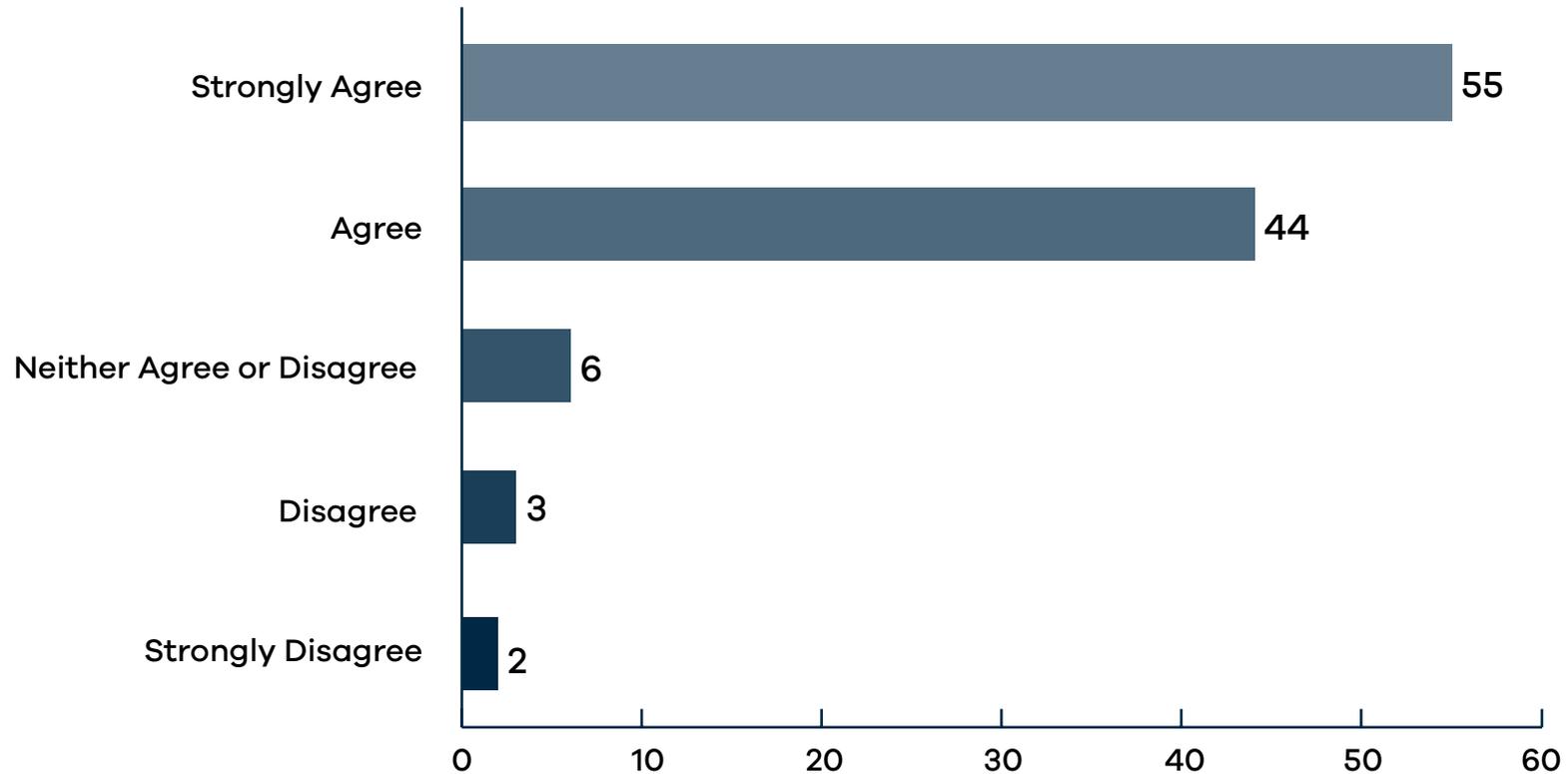
Strongly Agree	57	51.82%
Strongly Agree	55	50.00%
Agree	44	40.00%
Neither Agree or Disagree	6	5.45%
Disagree	3	2.73%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Reflective Practice - I am developing confidence in using critical reflection to improve my understanding

Response	Count
Strongly Agree	49
Agree	48
Neither Agree or Disagree	9
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	2

Strongly Agree	57	51.82%
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	49	44.55%
Agree	48	43.64%
Neither Agree or Disagree	9	8.18%
Disagree	2	1.82%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Reflective Practice - My Degree tutors/Practice Teacher encourage me to use research and published articles to develop my knowledge
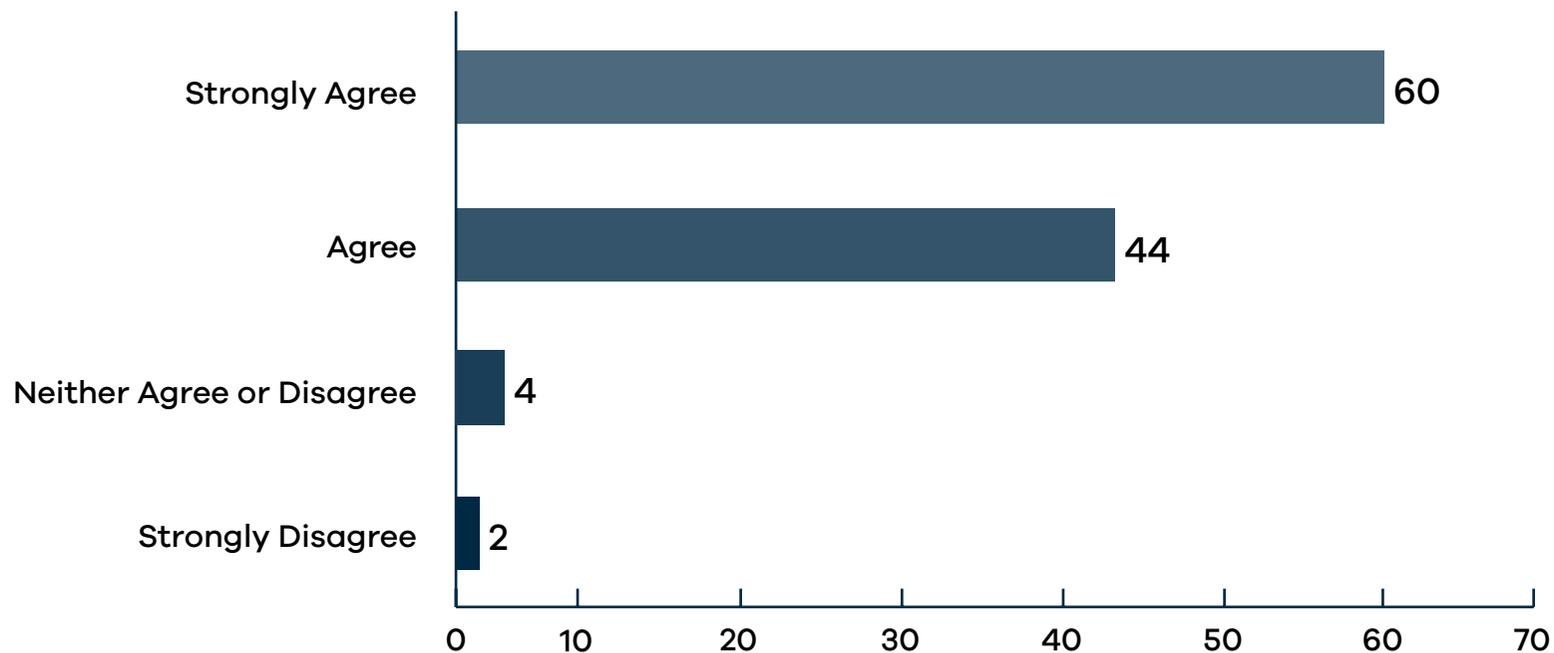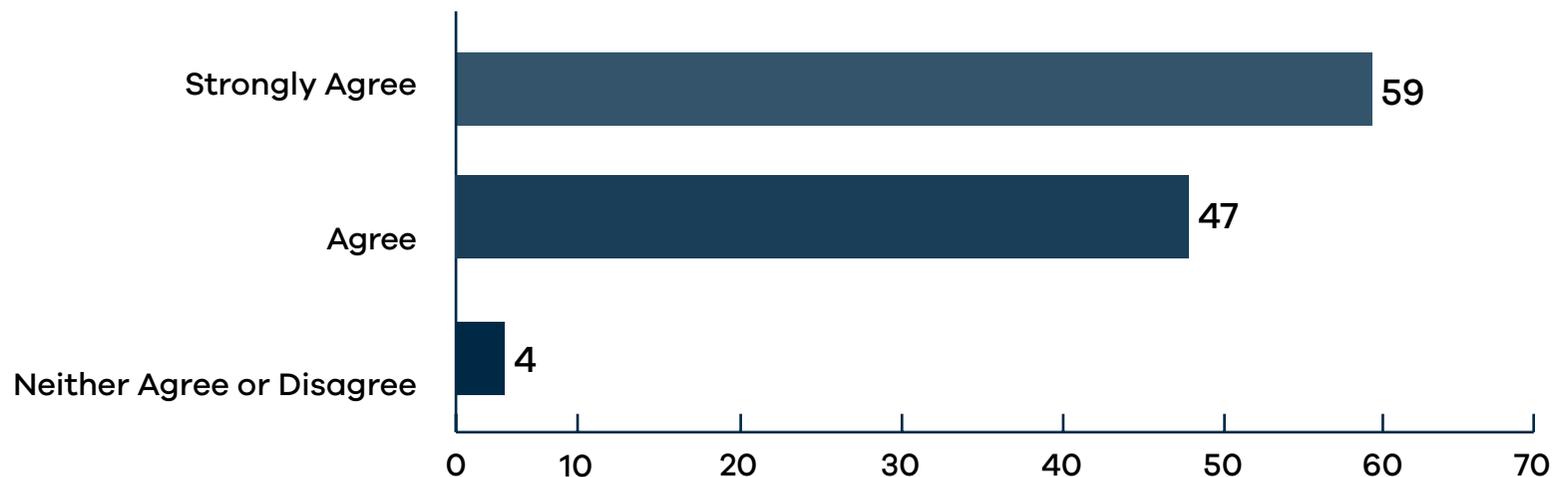

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	60	54.55%
Agree	44	40.00%
Neither Agree or Disagree	4	3.64%
Disagree	0	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.82%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Reflective Practice - I regularly refer to research and / or best practice articles to develop my learning (regularly is at least once a month)
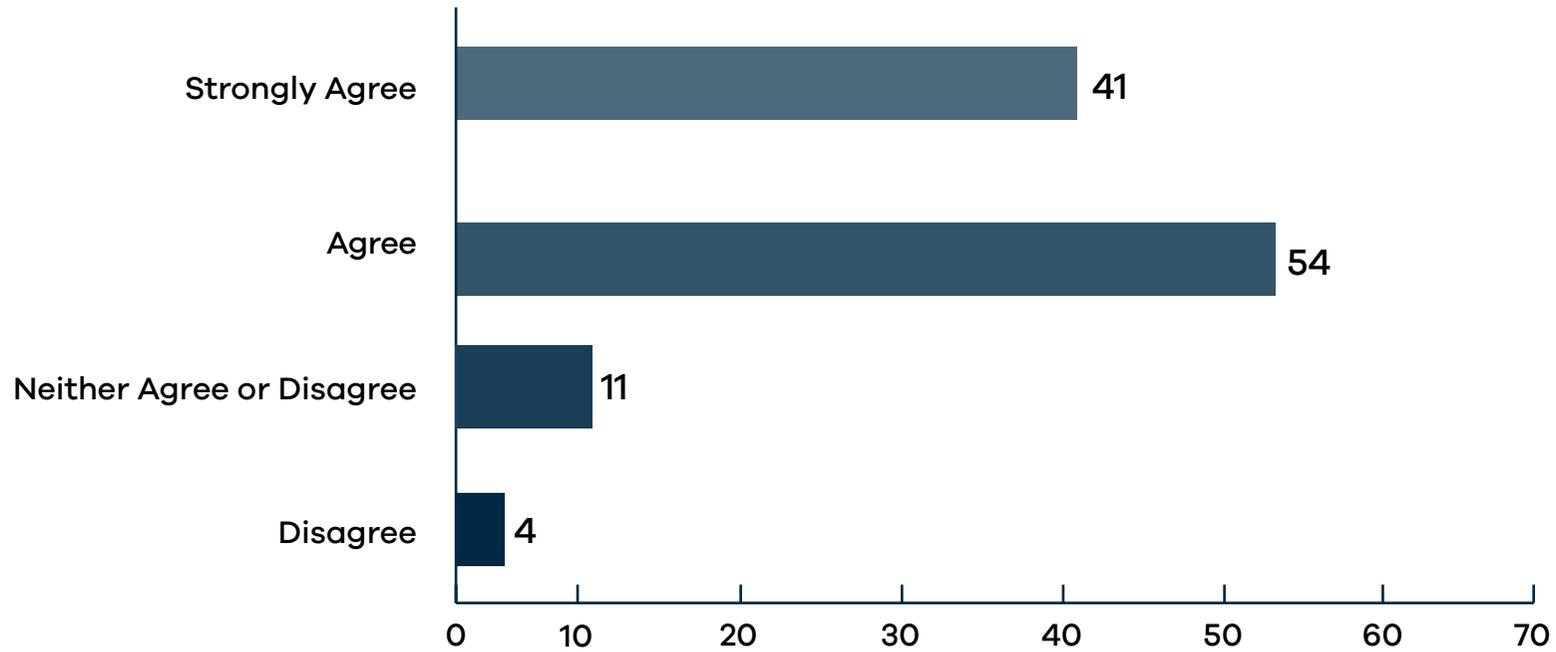
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	41	37.27%
Agree	54	49.09%
Neither Agree or Disagree	11	10.00%
Disagree	4	3.64%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Reflective Practice - Reflective Practice - It is important that my learning is informed by research evidence

Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	59	53.64%
Agree	47	42.73%
Neither Agree or Disagree	4	3.64%
Disagree	0	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Reflective Practice - The Degree is preparing me to work in a post pandemic environment
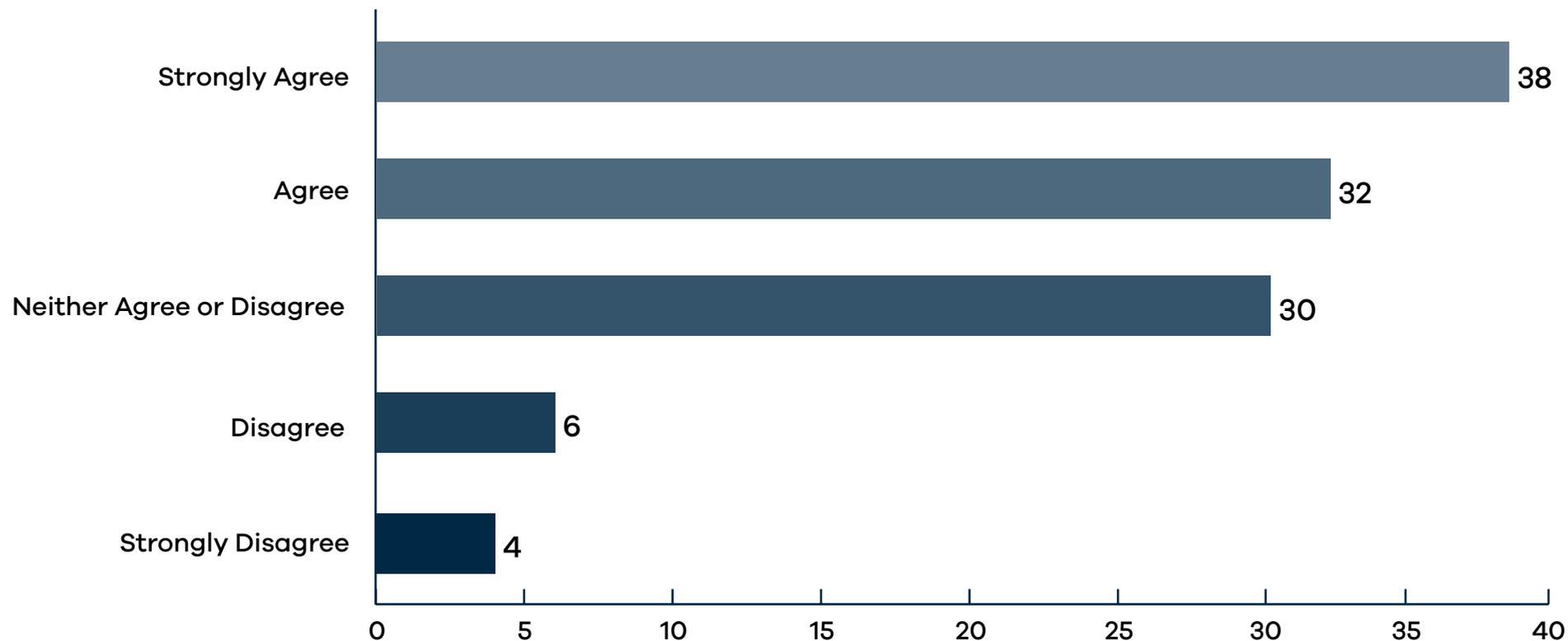
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly Agree	38	34.55%
Agree	32	29.09%
Neither Agree or Disagree	30	27.27%
Disagree	6	5.45%
Strongly Disagree	4	3.64%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

10. Leadership and Social Work: Leadership within social work is now being recognised as a key aspect of what social workers do. Has your learning experience to date helped you to develop your understanding of leadership skills required for social work?

Leadership skills
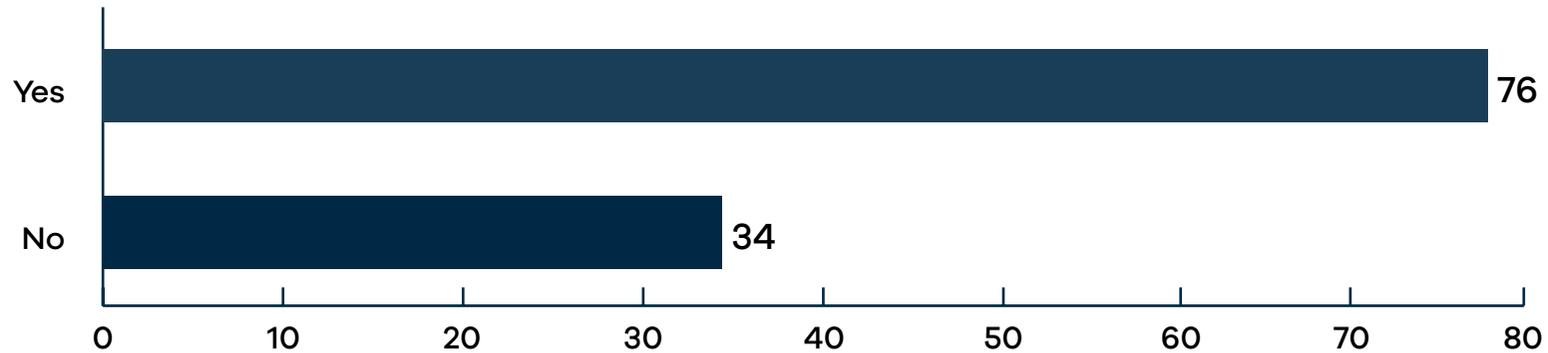
Option	Total	Percent
Yes	76	69.09%
No	34	30.91%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Appendix 7: Survey questions in full

Social Work Student Survey (2023-24)

1. Which Degree course are you studying?

Option
Undergraduate Year One
Undergraduate Year Two
Undergraduate Year Three
Relevant Graduate Year One
Relevant Graduate Year Two
Not Answered

2. Which areas of social work have you completed a Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO) in during your Degree course? (Please tick all that apply)

Option
Children's Services (including children with a disability)
Older People's Services
Physical Disability
Learning Disability
Sensory Impairment
Mental Health/Addictions
Education and Training
Justice
Education/Welfare
Homelessness
CAMHS
I haven't completed a PLO yet

3. Your identity as a social worker and views on being part of a recognised profession which plays a key role in interdisciplinary contexts: Please indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the statements below:

   Professional Identity - The teaching on my Degree course is helping develop my professional identity

   Professional Identity - The Practice Learning placements I have completed are helping me to understand what it means to be a social worker

   Professional Identity - It is important to me to be part of the social work profession when I graduate

4. Your professional identity: Please use the comment box below to give some examples of what supported you to develop your professional identity - in university and on practice placements, including in interdisciplinary contexts.

   What helped develop your professional identity?

5. Social work is a rewarding career, but can also be challenging. Please indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the statements below:

   Supports for self-care - The teaching on my Degree course has helped me understand how to develop supports to enable resilience and self-care

   Supports for self-care - The Practice Learning placements I have completed have helped me to understand what supports are available to me within the workplace to build resilience and develop self-care strategies

   Supports for self-care - Social workers I worked with on my placements have demonstrated and resilience and positive self-care strategies

6. The Degree in Social Work - preparing you to respond to current and emerging needs in society as a social worker. Please indicate which elements of your Degree course are useful in preparing you for social work practice (tick all of those options that apply).

Preparation for Practice

Option
Lectures
Tutorials
Curriculum content
Practice Learning Opportunities
Practice Development days
Service User, Carer and Survivors' input to the Degree

Suggestions to improve the Degree - Please use this comment box to provide details of any other elements you feel should be improved upon or added to the Degree to help prepare students for practice

7. NISCC Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Work Students. (Please indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the statements below.)

Standards of Conduct & Practice - I have viewed/accessed a copy of the NISCC Standards for Social Work Students

Standards of Conduct & Practice - As a student I refer to the NISCC Standards regularly (regularly means at least once a month)

Standards of Conduct & Practice - The NISCC Standards are useful in guiding me in my learning

8. Reflective practice for social work. Please, indicate how strongly you agree with, if at all, the following statements about your social work learning/development.

    Reflective Practice - The Degree provides opportunities to develop my skills in critical reflection

    Reflective Practice - I am developing confidence in using critical reflection to improve my understanding

    Reflective Practice - My Degree tutors/Practice Teacher encourage me to use research and published articles to develop my knowledge

    Reflective Practice - I regularly refer to research and / or best practice articles to develop my learning (regularly is at least once a month)

    Reflective Practice - It is important that my learning is informed by research evidence?

    Reflective Practice - The Degree is preparing me to work in a post pandemic environment

9. Your skills in critical reflection. Please give some more detail on who, how and what has supported you in developing critical reflection and what the challenges have been. (It would be helpful if you could describe which models/research you have used.)

    Developing reflective skills

10. Leadership and Social Work: Leadership within social work is now being recognised as a key aspect of what social workers do. Has your learning experience to date helped you to develop your understanding of leadership skills required for social work?

    Leadership skills

Option
Yes
No

11. Please use this comment box to provide more detail about the leadership skills you have seen in the tutors, social workers and practice teachers you have been involved with through your Degree.

12. Further Comments. Please use this comment box to share any further information you would like to share about your experience of the Degree in Social Work course in Northern Ireland.

Social Work Student Survey (2023-24)

1. To help give context to your feedback, please indicate which level of social work student you supervise most of the time as a Practice Teacher.

Option
Level Two
Level Three
Mix of Level Two and Level Three

2. To help give context to your feedback, please indicate which level of social work student you supervise most of the time as a Practice Teacher.

Student level of knowledge

Option
Insufficient Knowledge – below expected level
Sufficient knowledge – appropriate for their level
Good knowledge – above expected level

3. To what extent do you agree with, if at all, the following statements about how well the Degree is preparing the students you are supervising?

    They understand their role as a social worker

    They can practice competently within their remit as a newly qualified social worker

    They can work autonomously with appropriate supervision

    They can demonstrate empathy

    They can establish positive working relationships with service users/clients

    They are resilient and equipped with skills to manage the challenges of the social work role

    They demonstrate digital competence commensurate with their role

    Equality, diversity and inclusion underpins their practice

    Their practice is evidence-based

    They are critically reflective

    They take responsibility for their own learning and development

    They show a strong sense of their professional identity as a social worker

4. As a Practice teacher, please use the comment box below to outline the topics/skills that you are aware are taught to students on their Degree in Social Work course prior to beginning their practice learning opportunity.

5. As a Practice teacher, please use the comment box below to share your knowledge of how Degree courses are equipping social work students with the skills to manage the challenges of the social work role.

6. Based on your experience as a Practice Teacher, please list three examples of positive changes made to Practice Learning during the coronavirus pandemic. If appropriate, please also list three aspects of Practice Learning that could be improved to support students in post pandemic practice.

7. From your perspective as a practice teacher, does the degree in social work support students to have a strong professional social work identity working in inter-disciplinary contexts?

8. Please use this comment box to provide details of other areas you think should be included in the Degree in Social Work (this includes both course content and practice learning) to support the development of a strong social work identity in Practice Learning

9. Thank you for taking time to complete this survey. If you would like to provide any further feedback to help improve the Degree in Social Work, from both a taught or practice learning perspective, please use the comment box below

Line Manager Survey (2023-24)

1. To what extent do you agree with, if at all, the following statements about how well the Degree has prepared the newly qualified social workers you have managed or worked with?

They can practice competently within their remit as a newly qualified social worker

They can work autonomously with appropriate supervision

They can demonstrate empathy

They can establish positive working relationships with service users/clients

They are resilient and equipped with skills to manage the challenges of the social work role

They demonstrate digital competence commensurate with their role

Equality, diversity and inclusion underpins their practice

Their practice is evidence-based

They are critically reflective

They take responsibility for their own learning and development

They show a strong sense of their professional identity as a social worker

2. Please use this comment box to provide more detail for the responses you have provided about NQSWs preparedness for practice when they join the workforce.

3. Using the scale below, please indicate how well you think the Degree in Social Work has prepared NQSW team members to fulfil their role as a new social worker on the Assessed Year in Employment? (Level 5 indicates 'Fully prepared and ready to contribute to the team once they completed workplace induction'. Level 1 indicates not at all prepared and requiring extensive support after completing workplace induction).

4. Please use this comment box if you would like to add any further comments about how well the Degree prepares new social workers for practice.

5. The impact of the pandemic has changed teaching and practice learning delivery. To what extent do you agree with, if at all, the following statements about the effect these changes have made to NQSWs preparedness to practice effectively in their role?

    They are better prepared

    They are less well prepared

    There is no change

6. Please use this comment box to provide more detail for the responses you have provided about the impact of changes made to teaching and practice learning delivery due to the pandemic.

7. The Degree in Social Work – preparing AYE Social Workers for social work practice. Based on your experience as a first-line manager, please list the three factors that you consider are the major strengths of the Degree in terms of preparing NQSWs for practice. If appropriate, please also list 3 gaps or aspects of NQSWs development that could be improved.

8. Please use this comment box to provide more detail for the responses you have provided about the strengths/gaps/improvements for the Degree.

9. Self- Care/Wellbeing - Social Work is a challenging job and it is important that all social workers have a set of self- care principles that promote their wellbeing. The challenges of the working environment, however can also contribute to the social worker's wellbeing. Based on your experience, do you think NQSWs have the ability to take steps to take care of their wellbeing?

Option
Yes
No

10. Please use this comment box to provide more detail about your experience of the newly qualified social worker's ability to take steps to take care of their wellbeing.

11. Leadership and Social Work - Leadership within social work is now being recognised as a key aspect of what social workers do. Do you see leadership skills in the NQSWs you have worked with?

Option
Yes
No

12. Please use this comment box to provide more detail about the leadership skills you have seen in the NQSWs you have worked with.

13. Thank you for taking time to complete this survey. If you would like to provide any further feedback in relation to the Degree in Social Work, please use the comment box below.

Appendix 8: References

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