

Sink-Or-Swim: TCDSU P.M.E Survey

Report 2023/2024

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Analysis

There were 123 P.M.E (secondary-level teaching) postgraduate students enrolled at Trinity College Dublin in the academic year 2023/2024. This group is often neglected by the student union. This is despite this cohort of students facing huge issues, including placement issues such as discrimination and unpaid labour, exhaustion, bullying, unfair grading and impossible workloads. As such, we ran a survey with a 47% response rate (n=59), the results of which will be used to lobby the relevant stakeholders for change.

More than 60% of individuals surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with their education and training, believing it lacked balance. A significant portion of this group, almost 80%, criticised the overemphasis on theoretical, in-class education, as opposed to hands-on, practical training. Furthermore, nearly half of all respondents at 47% raised concerns about the fairness and transparency in the evaluation of their work, suggesting a widespread unease about the assessment processes in their educational or training environments. Workload, which will be discussed later on, featured as a massive concern in relation to the structure of the programme. While practical training was appreciated, the concept of unpaid labour was criticised by students themselves, just as it has been criticised by trade unions like ASTI and TUI. While the responses highlighted that Trinity has its shortcomings, a lot of the criticism was not necessarily directed at them. They were directed at the Department of Education, which is run by Minister Norma Foley, as well as the Teaching Council, who are the main decision-makers, especially regarding what is perceived as exploitation via unpaid labour and impossible workloads.

"Trinity's PME is quite simply not fit for purpose. It is expensive yet fails in its most basic aim: to prepare student-teachers. Little to no aspect of the academic side of my degree has aided me in my development or preparation as a teacher. Placement was the only area where I learned -

however, this is ostensibly free labour. Signing up for the PME is a two-year commitment to work for free. A tick the box exercise which is poorly planned and places student teachers under undue pressure.”

“I believe that the root causes of the issues many have felt in this course are due to the demands of the Teaching Council, not so much the TCD programme coordinators, who I think, overall, have tried to make the workload as feasible as possible for us (particularly in Year 2). The nature of the Teaching Council requiring 200 hours unpaid teaching is the crux of the problem: as student teachers, we are then working 200 hours in place of a working teacher in a school, who is being paid for the time that we have worked instead of us. As a result, teachers and schools take advantage of student teachers (like expecting students teachers to do exam corrections etc). The knock on effect of this is financial pressure, physical burnout (as most of us work part time) and bitterness towards the profession where you’re expecting to pay €13,000 for a masters AND work for free during most of it. The School of Education could certainly set out clearer boundaries as to what is or is not expected of student teachers, but they are not the cause of the issues. The root cause lies instead at the Teaching Council and Department of Education policy level.”

As for the School of Education, the ‘School Placement’ module would be a starting point to addressing these issues, according to students.

“School Placement” module, not actually taught how to teach or giving us any information we need to be prepared to enter the classroom. Just guest speaker after guest speaker for 2 hours twice a week. Complete overkill and I left without having any idea of even how to fill out a lesson plan or unit of learning properly.”

It was also suggested that there be a coordinator that liaises between P.M.E students and schools.

While 80% did not face discrimination on placement, 20% respondents disclosed such experiences during their placements. These numbers are positive, but it is clear that some students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, are more at risk. Among the 20% of individuals, more than 60% attributed the bias to ageism, while over 50% reported instances of sexism. Based on the course demographics, in which almost 70% are women, we can see how sexism can arise when it comes to interaction with men who may hold leadership positions in secondary-level schools. As well as this, a higher-than-usual of 35% said that they are mature students, in which the fact that post-primary teaching P.M.E is one of the few courses eligible for postgraduate Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) may be a factor. Additionally, approximately 30% faced discrimination related to their race, with 40% feeling marginalised due to their social background. The course demographics indicate that 85% are Irish, and that 72% of P.M.E students also work, supporting the data. Applying an intersectional analysis, we can understand that students in P.M.E who come from underrepresented groups may struggle more with discrimination. One student in a text box lamented the predominantly “white Irish middle-class” composition of teachers in the country. Additionally, 35% of the respondents expressed reluctance to approach staff with their concerns, fearing potential

repercussions, highlighting the need to continue to strengthen reporting mechanisms in secondary-schools as well as other safety nets for P.M.E students. It is certain that the amount of discrimination experienced is dependent on which schools students go on placements to, but procedures should be in place everywhere to handle these issues in a private and professional way, with information available on how to access these mechanisms. The lack of procedures was highlighted by students including the lack of *“information either about boundaries or what to do in these situations”*, as well as the *“complaints procedure [was] extremely unprofessional in all manners with staff evidently sharing emails with each other”*.

“Myself and a couple other people from my course had a really bad experience with a lecturer when we reported them, the response from course management was that myself and the lecturer needed to sit down and talk it out. Still to this day my results are being affected. “

“I have also been consistently picked on by a member of Trinity PME staff throughout my time at Trinity which has made my time in the course all the more difficult and has led to extra stress and difficulties while on placement. I have addressed this with the college and they did offer advice and some steps to help me, but I still feel extremely unhappy on the course, and would be taking further action if I wasn’t so close to finishing the course and worried about the repercussions of doing so.”

Students also expressed an issue with discrimination on the grounds of disability, with one student complaining that LENS reports are not being complied with. In a recent TCDSU survey, 51.7% of students reported that their reasonable accommodations were fully met without needing to initiate requests, whereas 48.3% did not, indicating that there is a systemic issue¹.

“There are continual issues with the School’s handling of LENS reports. I have had to reach out to individual lecturers every single semester so far. Last year my disability advisor from the DS was in contact with them too, and my accommodations were still not met.”

We consider it concerning that nearly 80% of respondents indicated that they incurred significant expenses related to the practical components of their placements. Notably, almost a quarter of these individuals reported spending in excess of €250 monthly, aside from their regular course fees, to participate in their course. This financial burden underscores the considerable cost that practical training can entail for students in P.M.E, highlighting the economic challenges associated with pursuing this degree. These costs may include travel, equipment and other costs like accommodation depending on where placement is located. This is correlated with other research², with more than 70% of student teachers either “often” or “very often” worried about having enough money for regular expenses. The study also showed that P.M.E students are struggling up to the point of having to take up financial loans to finish their degrees. There were comments made in the text boxes by students that the *“attitude is that we should give up all paid work and focus entirely on studies”* is not a possibility for most,

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<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kyZJurozenlkcZzXqjBNI357r6HDFt-s/edit?usp=sharing&oid=115390938181696454380&rtpof=true&sd=true>

² <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40329842.html>

and that when combined with the workload of both the course and the placement, leads to burnout.

“I have spent about 25,000 euro of my own savings since starting this course, between fees and the cost of living while working a full time job for free.”

We are extremely concerned about the workload of the P.M.E. Every single question in this category calls out an urgent need for change. The survey results indicate that respondents are struggling significantly with integrating into College life and achieving a healthy balance with their social activities. An overwhelming 95% of participants stated that they are not engaged in any co-curricular College activities, which are often vital for fostering a sense of community and belonging. Furthermore, nearly 85% of respondents feel they do not have a healthy social life outside of their academic commitments, a concern that mirrors the proportion of individuals who believe the demands of their course are negatively impacting their mental health. This correlation suggests a deep-rooted issue within the academic environment and its combination with placement, where the pressure and workload associated with coursework and placement work are not only hindering social engagement but also contributing to mental health challenges among students. In some cases this is further intensified by additional responsibilities such as caregiving, work, etc. The student responses in the text boxes blamed the Teaching Council, which they say seems to have the final say rather than College on the issues, and highlighted multiple times the urgency of addressing these matters. The course has been likened to ‘sink-or-swim’, with students lamenting the lack of supports while undergoing immense workload-related stress.

“The workload whilst on placement is ridiculous, assignments on top of lesson plans on top of units of learning on top of reflections. Combined with homework or tests you also need to correct is beyond manageable.”

“Many of us were unable to work on our very important thesis during placement due to the massive workload we had which has put many of us under pressure and stressed for the semester ahead.”

“9 hours required teaching per week, plus daily reflections for every class, plus weekly reflections is far too much. Having to prepare lesson plans every day is more than enough work without having to do reflections every day too. Weekly reflections should be enough.”

“The amount of written work - lesson plans, unit plans, reflections - plus actually creating resources for classes, plus assessing and reporting and doing all teacher related admin in addition to actually TEACHING the classes - is astronomical. I have no idea how I got through Year One as we had about six different assignment deadlines in addition to the above.”

“I feel that many of the contents of the masters overlap and turn repetitive. The placement workload is massive and I feel I am behind all the time, even though I have gave up my social time and sport time to dedicate my evenings to plan and do all the course work on top of the assignments for the modules. The time that we do the in campus lectures could be used to get

all those assignments done, so that would be one less worry during placement. Finally, during placement, there are way too many reflections that take time out of the important stuff: planning.”

“There are too many demands put on PME’s with the expectation to fulfil the role of teacher and student. You are expected to prepare classes, correct work, complete unpaid extracurriculars, prepare exams, sit PTMs, do college modules and assessments, complete lesson plans, reflections and prepare for inspections. You have no rights as students teachers and feel unprotected. The cost of the course for 12 weeks of actual teaching is disgraceful and you are essentially paying to work for free. You cannot have a social life and are constantly burnt out. Any issues I have brought to PME management has been unresolved and left me feeling helpless. There needs to be a better balance and less expectations put on PME’s.”

“The workload is just too much, we should focus on preparing the classes but UoLs, LPs, daily reflections, weekly reflections and on tops of that assignments that need research is unmanageable, I don’t even have time to go to the library or to the park with my son, I go to bed everyday at 2am doing LPs and preparing lessons and wake up at 6:30 am to prepare myself and my family to start the day”

In the responses to the last two questions, the terms "workload", "work load", and "deadline" together are mentioned a total of 32 times out of a total of 91 responses. It was highlighted that while UCD students do a 5,000-6,000 word thesis, and Maynooth University does not do one, TCD expects a 10,000 word thesis out of P.M.E students. Other issues raised included ECTS balancing, which was sorely lacking, in the view of students. The assignment dates being very close together was also highlighted as an issue, as well as assignments not being connected to a holistic structure. It was further highlighted that the course structure may lead to students having difficulty finding work, *“Classes in term 2 of Year 2 should be after school as opposed to on Tuesdays - currently trying to find a teaching job but nobody can hire me if I can’t work Tuesdays.”*

“ECTS balancing is non-existent. One assignment, worth 20% of a 20-credit module (4 ECTS effectively), came to 103 pages/33,700 words while working within the lower threshold for the assignment. I have a sneaking suspicion that these assignments weren’t individually graded and we were given the same mark for the assignment that we got on placement, but this is just from anecdotal evidence from myself and others.”

“I simply think several elements of the course are hopelessly poorly conceived. As stated above, the real preparation for the practical elements of our placement, as well as the work the college expects us to compete during placement, are entirely inadequate. Certain assessments, such as the history minor, have not in any way been connected to the sessions leading up to it. Others, such as the English major, have been ridiculously shambolic in their conception and communication. We were given no clear guidance whatsoever as to what was expected of us, no clear ‘question’ or well-defined ‘task’ was ever offered to us; I seated we were drip-fed vague platitudes. Certain assignments are marked by persons with whom we have had no previous contact and who do not appear on the staff page of the school of education.

Mandatory sessions are often completely irrelevant to our purposes. The source of much of this dissatisfaction and stress is the unfathomable decision to keep students out of schools for the majority of the first semester. This leaves us with a far shorter time to accrue the required number of placement hours mandated by the Teaching Council, places an unnecessary amount of pressure on us during this period, and places us at a significant disadvantage with students in different courses who enter schools far earlier. Frankly, the PME is not fit for purpose and seems to survive only by the reflected glory of the college. I would never recommend the course in its current form to anyone and am exploring options to transfer my credits to another programme.”

Furthermore, more than half of the survey participants revealed that the intensive demands of their course had pushed them to the brink of wanting to discontinue their studies. Despite these challenges, over three-quarters of the respondents are juggling employment alongside their academic responsibilities, underscoring the significant pressure to balance work and study. Among those not currently working, over 90% expressed the belief that adding a job on top of their studies would be unfeasible, highlighting the already overwhelming nature of their course workload. This data points to a widespread issue among students, where the rigours of academic life are not only causing significant stress but also raising concerns about whether they can continue the course. The drop-out rates are “huge”, according to research carried out by ASTI, with one student saying that their class dropped from 140 to 100 by the time they had graduated³.

As far as the sentiment analysis questions go, a significant majority, over 60%, expressed discontent, feeling that the College falls short in understanding and supporting their needs. This sentiment of dissatisfaction extends to the TCDSU as well, with over a third of the participants feeling underrepresented. We acknowledge that there has been a lack of focus by the TCDSU on P.M.E students and we aim to rectify the issue. Furthermore, more than half believe that clubs and societies fail to accommodate the interests of students from their specific courses, which is not surprising given previous data showing the lack of connection P.M.E students have with campus activities. While the responses regarding support during placements were mixed, with just under half feeling unsupported and over a third feeling well-supported, the overall outlook remains bleak. Concerns were amplified with regards to the planning and execution of placements; nearly 60% criticized the lack of proper planning, although a bit more than a third acknowledged well-organized placements. Alarming, over two-thirds felt ill-prepared for the tasks during their placements, and a similar proportion reported being assigned responsibilities beyond their qualifications. This issue of exploitation was further underscored by the fact that more than three-quarters of the respondents viewed aspects of their placements as mere free labor, disconnected from their learning and development goals, highlighting the issue that trade unions such as ASTI and TUI are talking about.

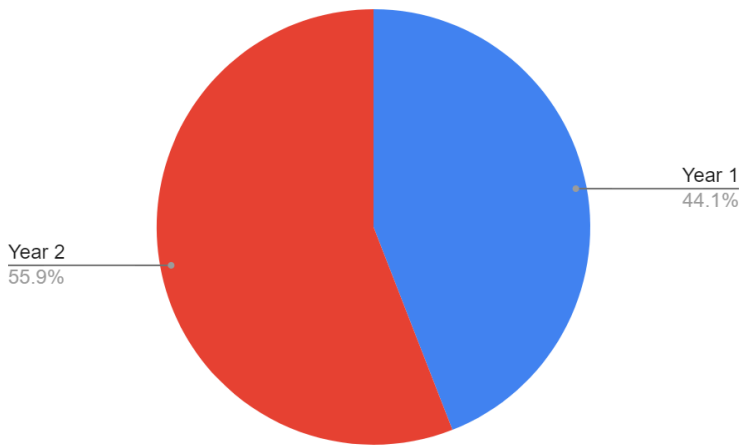
The overwhelming majority of respondents, over four-fifths, not being members of their relevant professional union, underscores a critical disconnect between students and the awareness of the importance of unionisation. This gap is particularly concerning a perspective

³ <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40855142.html>

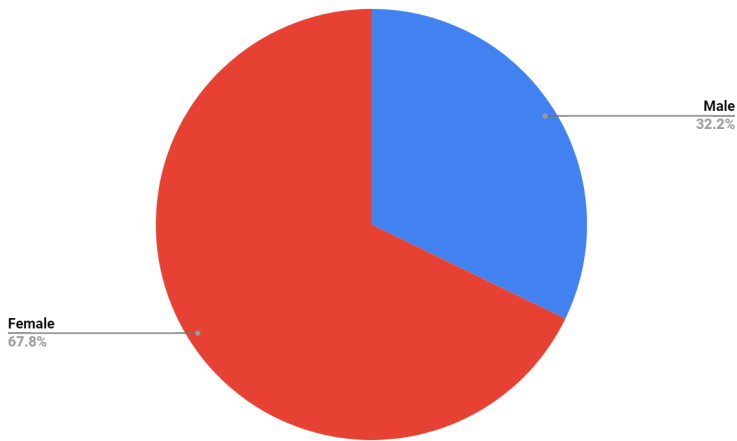
of standing up for the workers' rights of P.M.E students through collective bargaining and trade union representation. Furthermore, the fact that a significant majority of those who are union members would prefer to seek advice from their professional union over the Students' Union or college tutors further highlights the fact that College-level support structures have a deficit. This scenario suggests a pressing need for educational institutions and student unions to not only encourage union membership but also to collaborate closely with professional unions to ensure that students are well-informed and supported both academically and professionally. Strengthening this partnership can serve as a powerful mechanism to empower students, ensuring their voices are heard and their rights are protected as they transition from academia into the professional world. The TCDSU at its February 2024 Council passed a motion mandating its support for ASTI's campaign to end unpaid labour in secondary-schools for P.M.E trainees, as well as this the TCDSU is working with ASTI and TUI to increase unionisation, and TCDSU has given out materials from ASTI to P.M.E students. We will continue to fight for and represent P.M.E students and the variety of issues that they face.

General Demographics of Respondents

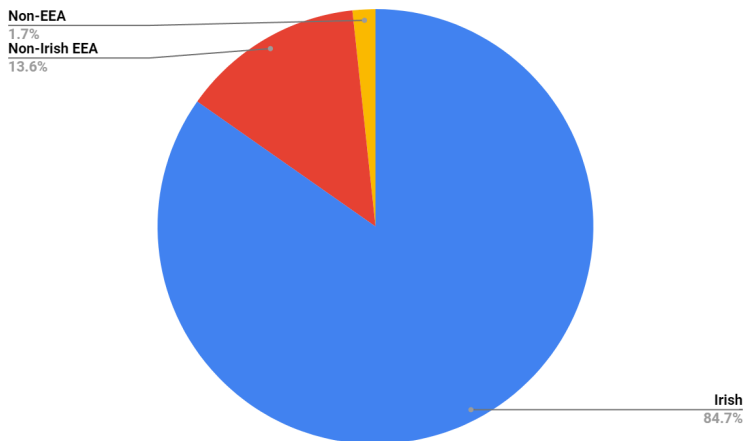
Year of Study



Gender



Nationality



The survey was completed by 59 students.

Some key breakdowns are:

26 in Year 1 and 33 in Year 2

19 Male and 40 Female.

50 respondents (84.7%) are Irish.

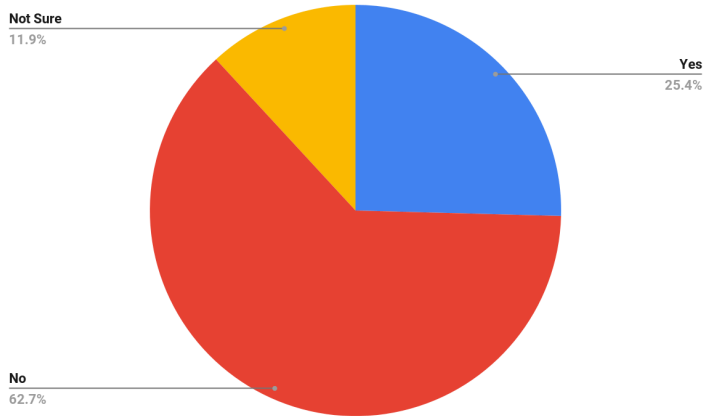
19 respondents (32.2%) are Mature Students.

5 respondents (8.5%) identified as being a 'Student with a Disability'.

4 respondents (6.8%) reported being student parents.

Academic Experience

Do you feel that the combination of course work and practical work have provided you with a balanced and rounded level of education and training?

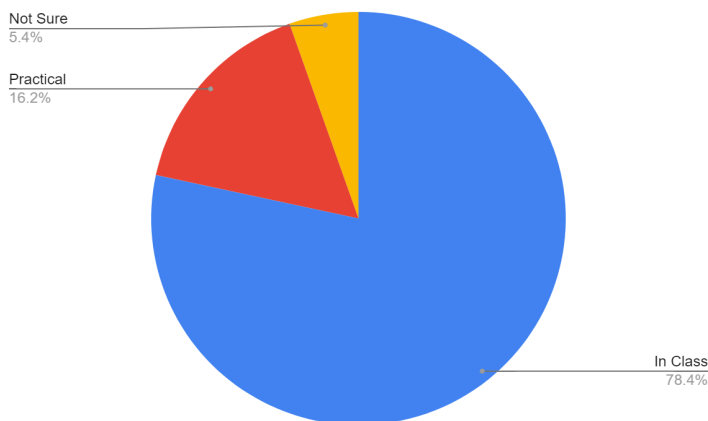


Over three-fifths of respondents feel that they have not been provided with balanced level of education and training.

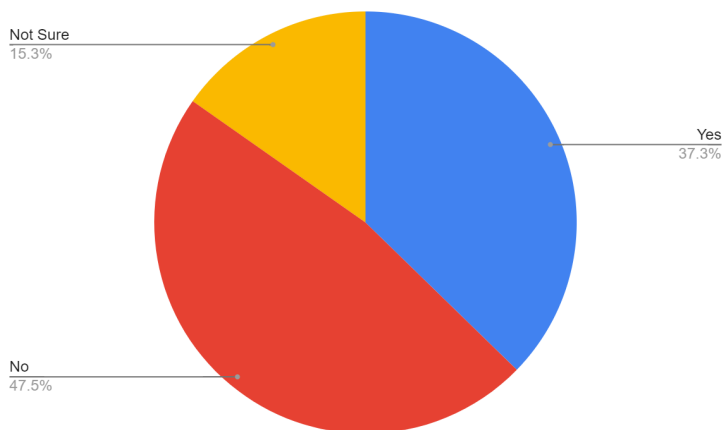
Over three-quarters of those who feel that way feel that the training received has been far too focused on in-class education rather than practical training.

Almost half of all respondents advised feeling that the assessment of their work is not fair and transparent.

If no, do you feel that your education to date has been too heavily focused on academic in-class learning, or on the practical elements (placements)?

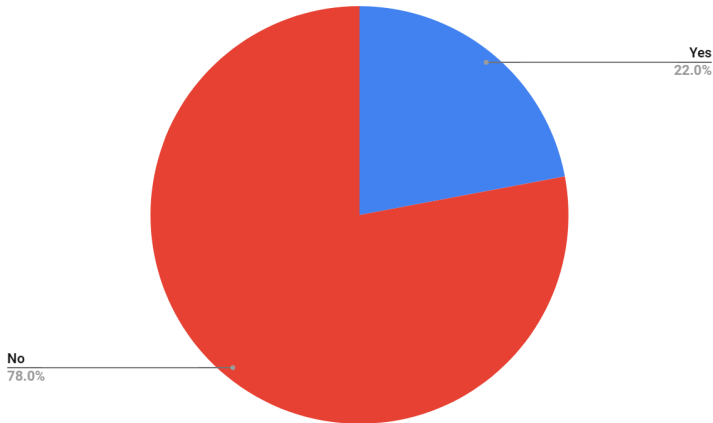


Do you feel that assessment of your overall work is fair and transparent?



Personal Challenges

Have you ever felt discriminated against while on placement?



Over one-fifth of respondents reported feeling discriminated against in some way while on placement.

We asked those respondents in what way(s) they felt discriminated against. Of those:

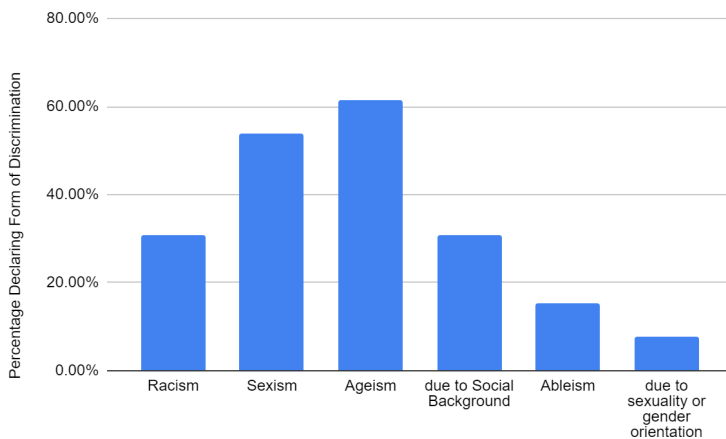
Over 60% felt that they were discriminated against because of their age.

Over half felt that they were victims of sexism.

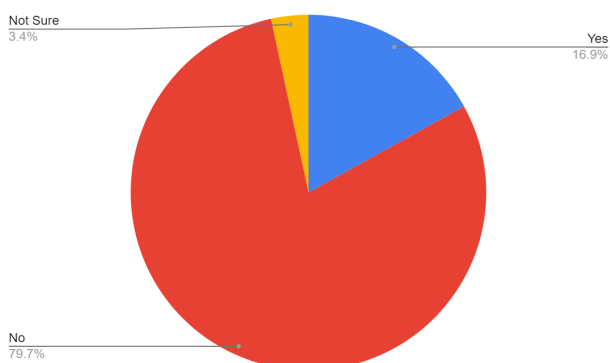
Around a quarter felt discriminated against due to their race and a quarter also felt discriminated against because of their social background.

Over a third advised that they would not feel comfortable approaching staff about problems, due to fear of repercussions.

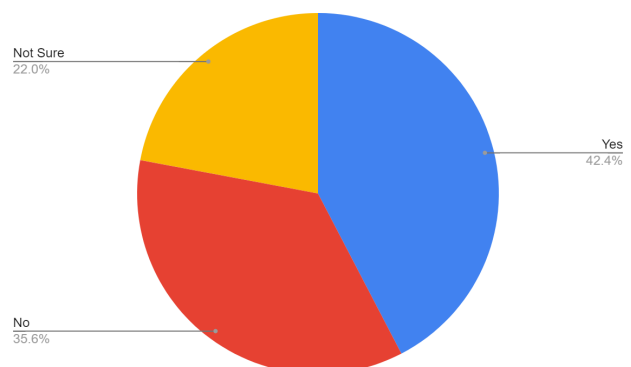
If yes, what kind of discrimination have you felt you have experienced? Feel free to tick multiple boxes if necessary.



Have you ever felt victimised or bullied while on placement?

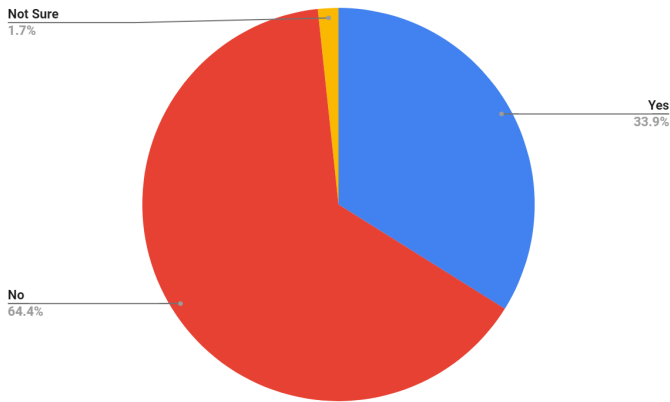


Do you feel comfortable approaching academic and administrative staff with problems or complaints, without fear of repercussion?

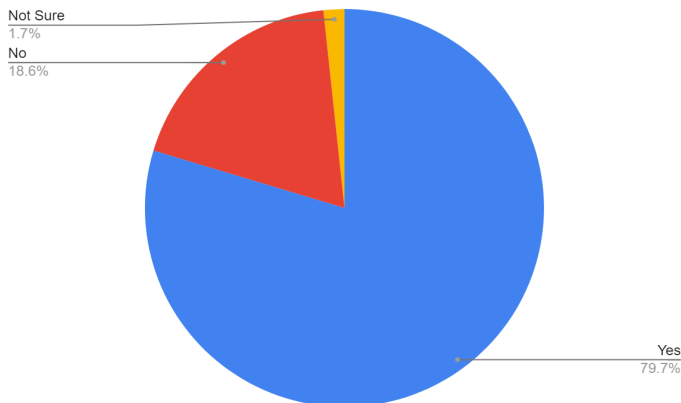


Experiences on Placement

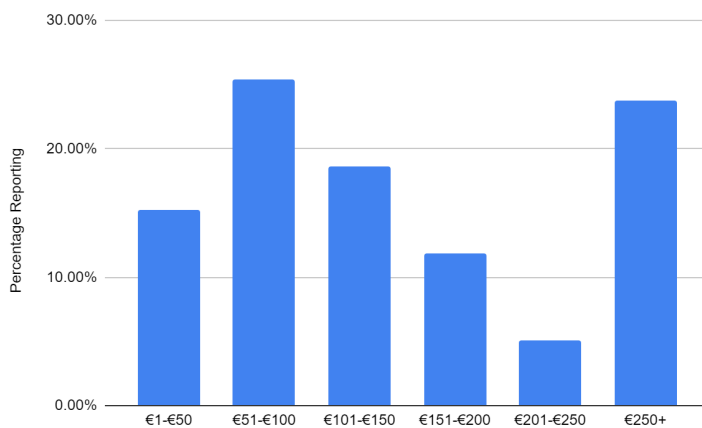
Have you had negative experiences on a placement which have led to you wanting to reconsider this path of study?



Have you experienced significant expenses due to practical elements of your placements? (eg. Needing to buy materials, needing to rent accommodation, needing to travel long distances?)



In addition to your fees (your registration fee or tuition fees), please state the average financial costs directly associated with your course on a monthly basis.



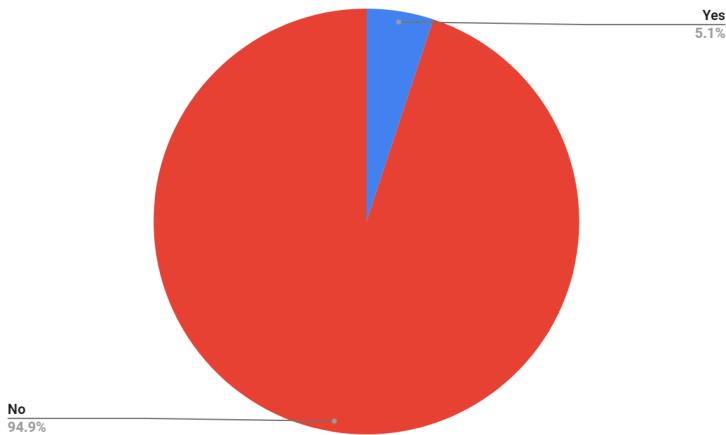
Over one-third of respondents reported having experiences on a placement which led to them reconsidering their path of study.

Almost four-fifths of respondents reported paying out significant expenses due to the practical elements of placements.

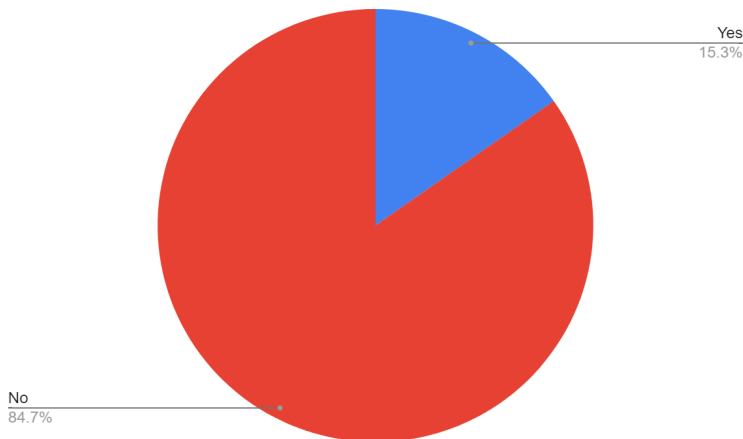
Almost a quarter of respondents reported that they spend over €250 per month (in addition to course fees) in order to take part in their course.

Life Outside of Studies

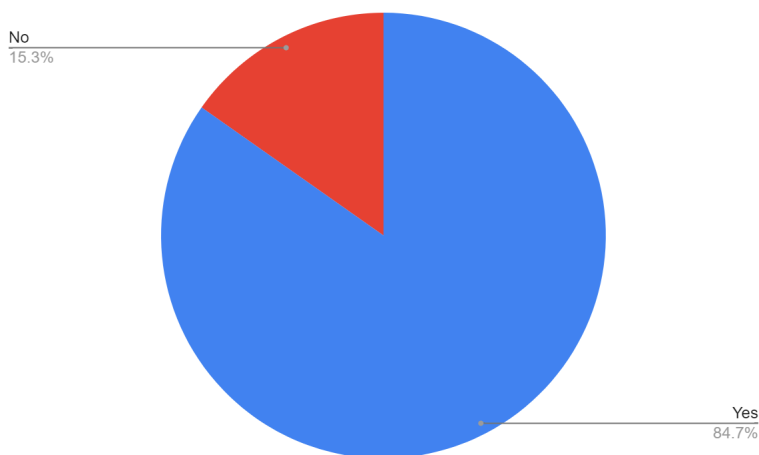
Are you involved on a regular basis with any co-curricular activities in College (e.g. sports club, society, Students' Union)?



Do you feel that you have time to have a healthy social life or pursue hobbies alongside your studies?



At times, have the demands of your course adversely affected your mental health?



Evidence from this survey would suggest that respondents are finding it very difficult to integrate with college life and very difficult to find a positive balance with their social life.

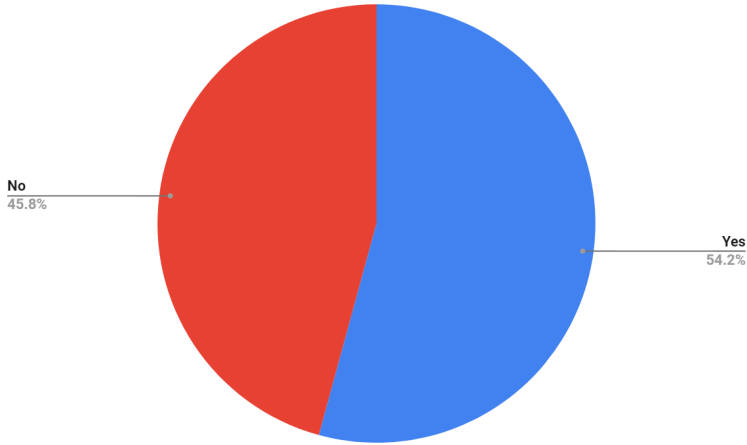
Almost 95% of respondents reported that they are not involved in any co-curricular college activities.

Almost 85% reported not having a healthy social life alongside their studies.

The same amount of respondents reported that the demands of the course were adversely affecting their mental health.

Life Outside of Studies

At times, have the demands of your course led to you wanting to drop out?

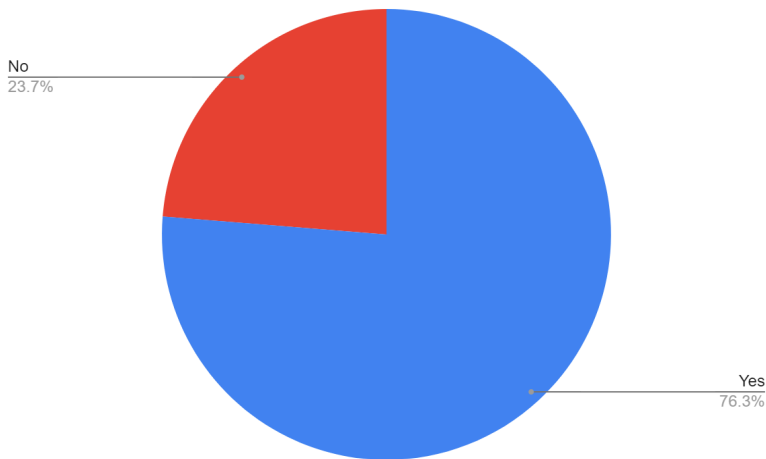


Over half of respondents reported that the demands of the course had led to them wanting to drop out.

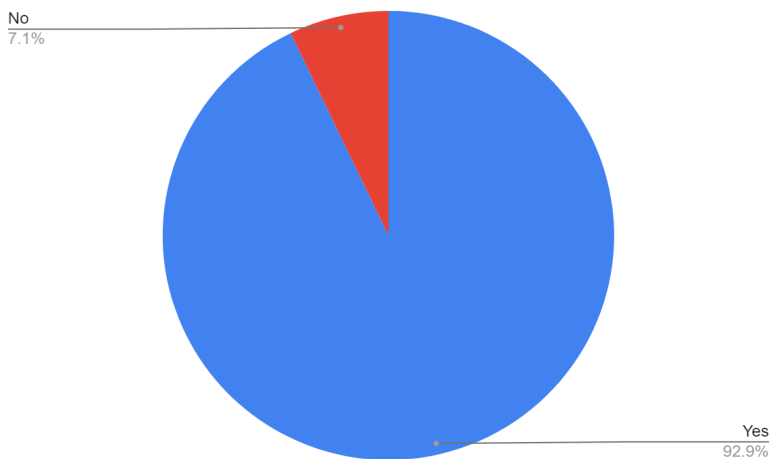
Despite the course being very demanding, over three-quarters of respondents reported that they also work, on top of their studies.

Of those who don't work, over 90% reported that they did not think it would be possible for them to work on top of their studies.

Do you work in any kind of paid job on top of your placements and/or studies?

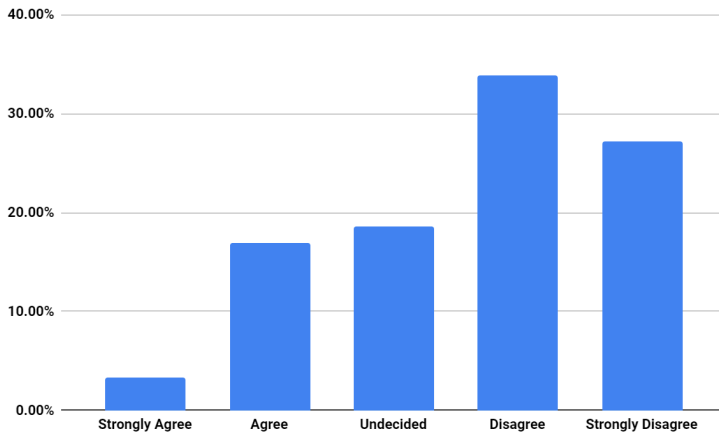


If no, do you feel like it would not be possible for you to work an additional job on top of your placements and/or studies?

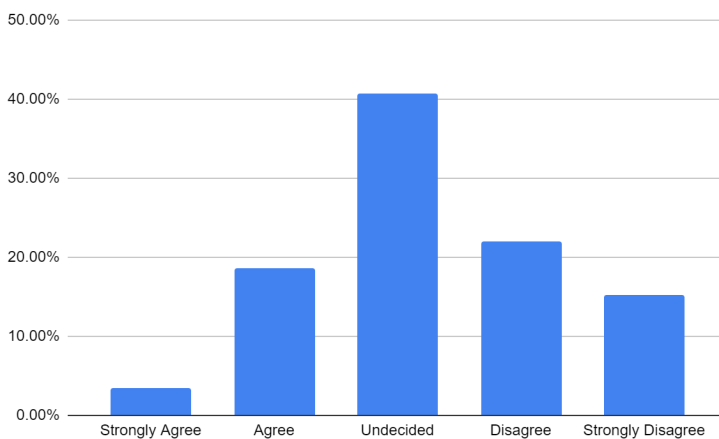


Sentiment Analysis

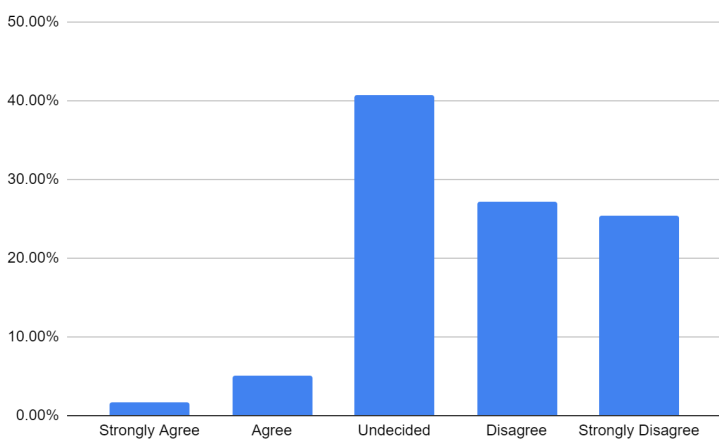
I feel like the college understands and supports my needs as a student, a professional, and a person with interests and responsibilities outside of college



I feel like the Students' Union understands and represents my needs as a student in a professional course.



I feel like college clubs and societies make an effort to cater for students on my course



Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with a number of statements on a 5-axis 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' axis.

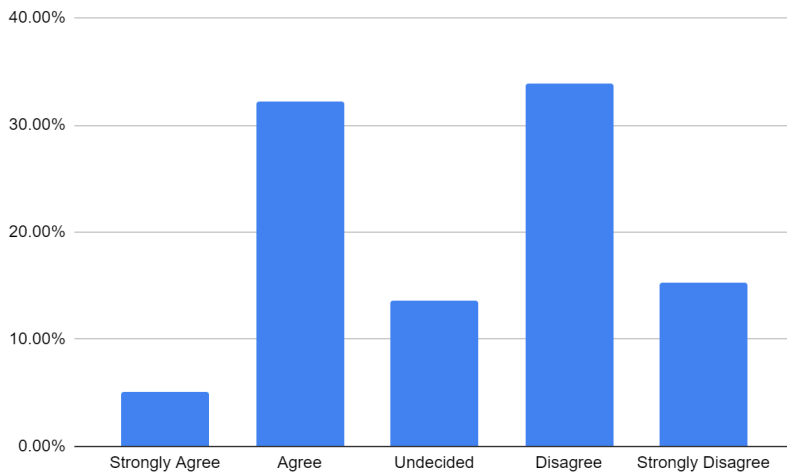
Over 60% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the college understood and supported their broad needs.

Over a third either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Students' Union represented their needs as a student in a professional course.

More than half of all respondents felt that college clubs and societies do not make an effort to cater for students on their course.

Sentiment Analysis

I have generally felt well-supported during my time on placements



Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with a number of statements on a 5-axis 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' axis.

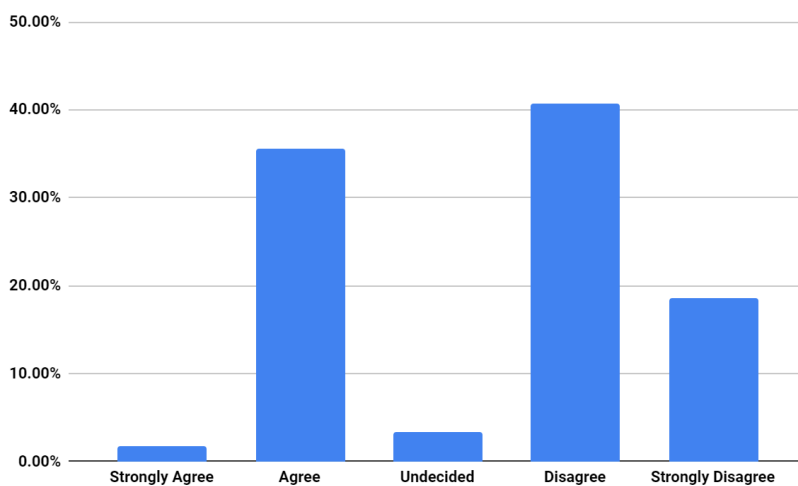
Just under half of all respondents disagreed with the statement that they had felt well-supported during placements. However, more than one-third of respondents agreed that they were, in fact, well supported.

Again the statement that placements were well-planned had varying views. Almost three-fifths of respondents disagreed with this statement while just over a third agreed that placements are well-planned.

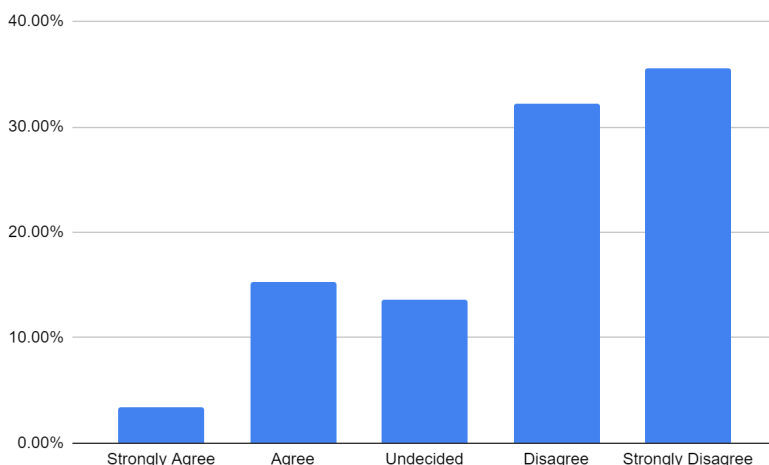
In the lower graph, we see the sentiments of respondents towards the statement that they have felt capable and well-prepared to do the work which was asked of them while on placement.

Worryingly, over two-thirds of respondents disagreed with this statement.

I feel like placements are well-planned

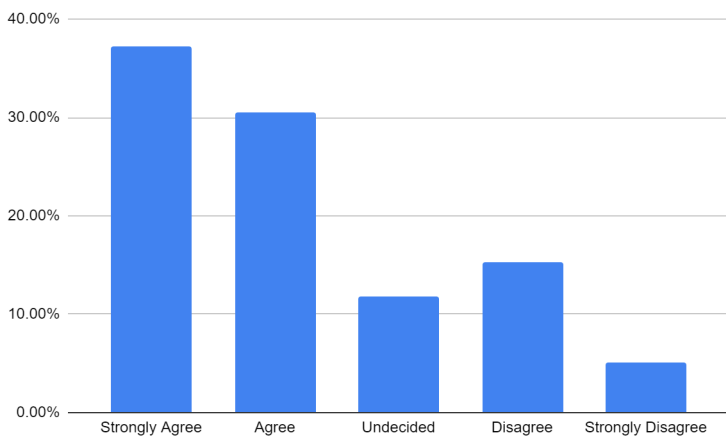


I feel like I have been capable and well-prepared to do all elements of work which have been asked of me while on placement

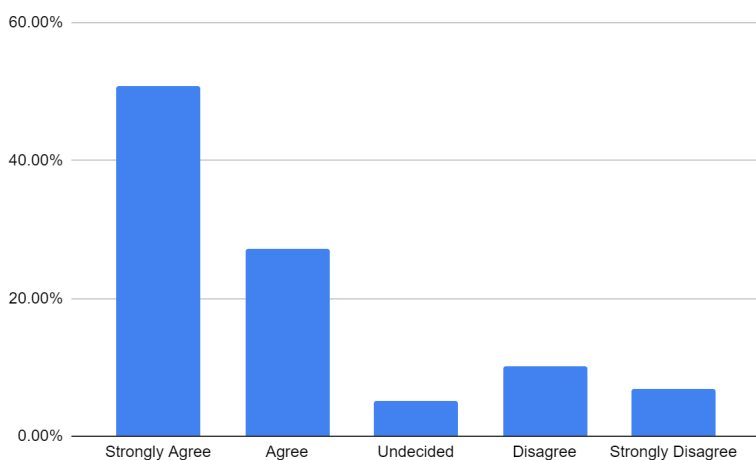


Sentiment Analysis

I feel like I have, on at least one occasion, been given responsibility above and beyond that which is appropriate to my level of qualification while on a placement.



I feel like a number of elements of my placements have involved me providing free labour which is not key to helping me learn and develop in my profession.



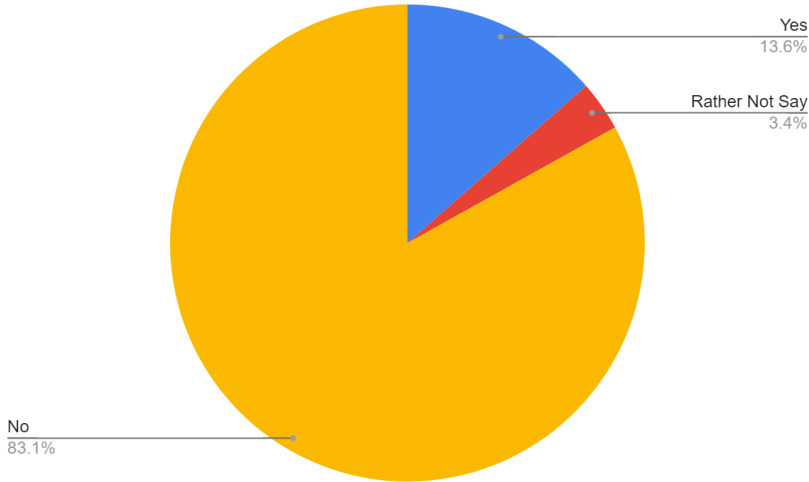
Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with a number of statements on a 5-axis 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' axis.

Following on from the previous graph, over two-thirds of respondents felt that they had been given responsibilities above and beyond their qualifications while on placement.

Over three-quarters of respondents felt that elements of their placements had involved them providing free labour which was not, in itself, a key part of their learning and development.

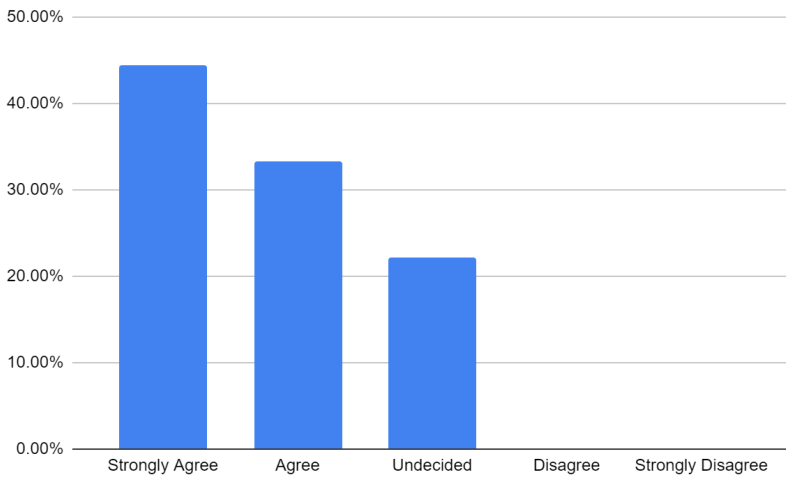
Union Representation

Are you a member of the relevant union for your area of professional training?



If you are in a professional union, then rate the following statement.

"If I was in difficulty with my course, I would rather seek advice from my professional union representative rather than the Students' Union or my college tutor."



Over four-fifths of respondents reported that they are not members of the relevant professional union.

However, of the small proportion of respondents who are, over three-quarters reported that they would rather get advice from their professional union than from the Students' Union or their College Tutor.