

# PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL WORK



## **SURVEYING THE MOTIVATIONS & CHALLENGES IN BECOMING A SOCIAL WORKER**

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## Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the Humanities Research Ethics Committee at University College Dublin.

## Conflict Statement

The authors of this study have no conflicts of interest to declare in respect of this study.

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An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
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*(information correct as of February 2023)*



## Executive Summary

This study examined pathways into the profession of social work. It specifically explored participants' perspectives on social work education, their motivations and challenges in joining the profession, and what can be done to attract more candidates.

We surveyed 135 potential new entrants into the social work profession and while they may not speak for the wider pool of those who may possibly enter the profession, they do present some insight into the understanding and awareness of social work by these cohorts. Across the entire sample there was a perception of social work as a stressful profession, much maligned in public and media narratives, and one that can potentially lead to burnout. While this sense was strongest among current social work students, there was also a strong awareness of this among both social care and social policy student respondents also. This was blended with strong motivations driven from personal experiences of adversity, a wish to help others, and desire to fight social injustices and uphold human rights.

The findings of this study show that there is a wide awareness of social work as a predominantly female profession and a perception that social work, as a profession, does not represent the diversity of the populations it is privileged to serve. The findings also show that social work students, but also those yet to consider a career in social work, are strongly aware of a negative narrative surrounding the profession. One of stress, burnout, and poor resources. For those qualifying in Ireland, approved social work education programmes are the only route to becoming a CORU registered social worker being able to practice in Ireland. These programmes are currently offered by six schools across six different Higher Education Institutes. The findings of this Report present a strong view, across the entire sample, that social work education is expensive, and that this cost may in fact be prohibitive to those deciding whether to enter the profession. This finding also represents a perception that such expenses potentially act as a barrier to increased diversity in the profession.

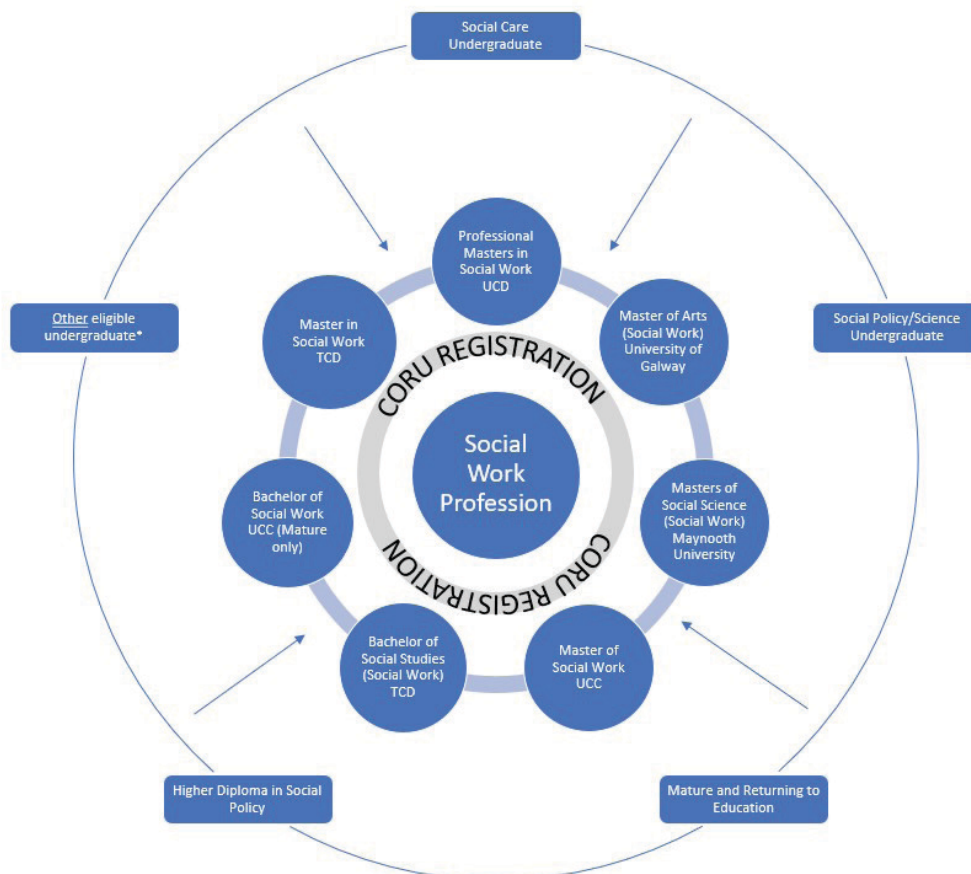
Following from these findings and drawing upon import research that has recently been conducted in this area (particularly McCarten et al., 2022; O'Meara and Kelleher, 2022) this Report calls for a national strategy for the profession of social work. Such a strategy should seek to develop a national awareness campaign regarding the role and value of social work, across its diverse settings. It should also seek to collate the good work being conducted elsewhere, from Department-level, to work within and across the Higher Education Institutes, and work across sectors where social workers operate.

# Section 1: Introduction

This report focuses on ways the pathways by which people enter social work education and practice in Ireland and how these choices and transitions might be improved. The Report was commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY). Data collection commenced in January 2023 and concluded in late-March 2023. The Report provides an introduction section setting out the aims and scope of the Report. This is followed by a context section which aims to map the current ‘market’ for places on social work programmes, i.e., who wants to become a social worker and how do they do this? This section is followed by a brief literature review, the aim of this Report is to provide a comprehensive but rapid snapshot of the issue and it is not aimed to be an in-depth academic study of the literature. That said, the core literature is addressed, and our findings do align with recent work in this area in Ireland. The study design and methodology are set out in the next section, and this is followed by a comprehensive exposition of the findings of this study. The Report then concludes with what we feel are recommendations evidenced by the data we gathered.

We use the term ‘pathways’ in this report as there is not one standard route of entry into the social work profession.

Fig 1: Pathways to social work



The findings of the report are not generalisable, but a best attempt has been made to provide a comprehensive snapshot about the range and types of social work educational programmes and student views about their experiences of these processes. What is meant by this is that the scope and duration of this study was not such that the views of all those who could potentially enter the profession of social work could be sought. However, the report offers a typology which seeks to explain the experiences of three cohorts who may be considering or have become social work students: social care students; social policy students; and current social work students. This includes the views of students near completion and on the cusp of professional qualification. The findings of this cohort highlight strong awareness of issues such as burnout, high workloads and stress. The findings may help inform issues associated with the provision of social work education in Ireland, and how these are related to workforce planning and retention of social workers within the workforce.

There have been a range of international studies examining student's characteristics and motivations for pursuing social work education and a subsequent career in social work (McCartan et al., 2022; Hackett et al., 2003; Wilson and McCrystal, 2007; Christie and Kruk, 1998). The findings of the report seek to add to this knowledge base by examining the perceptions of potential social work recruits to social work education, with a particular focus on barriers to entry and the match between the 'market', current academic provision, and how these factors may impact upon the workforce. In this context we use the term 'market' to describe the pool of potential candidates that could feasibly pursue education and subsequent careers in social work. In doing so we also update the important mapping process conducted by McCartan et al. (2022) as part of their All-Ireland survey of student social worker.



## Section 2: Mapping the Market - Pathways to social work education and practice in Ireland.

### KEY MESSAGES

- Professional social work encompasses a broad range of settings and practice areas each with individual needs.
- Social work qualifications are generic and allow for employment in any social work practice area.
- There are a range of education providers with similar entry requirements.
- Provision of robust social work practice placements and the expense of social work education are challenging issues facing the market and education providers.

### Pathways to social work in Ireland

Professionally qualified social workers operate in a diverse range of settings such as child and family services, mental health and medical settings, probation, youth services, and within the community in the context of public health, primary care, housing, and addiction services. A smaller number practice in less familiar settings such as the armed forces, corporate settings, and the technology sector. Many are employed in public settings that usually offer standardised terms and conditions. Pay scales are publicly available and social workers are employed on a range of full-time, part-time, workshare, and contracted bases.

The latest consolidated pay scales from the Department of Health show that salaries for entry-level professionally qualified social workers begin at €45,773 rising to a possible €90,317 at the the Principal Social Worker grade scale (HSE.ie, latest figures March 2023). Employment agencies supplying contract workers also operate within the market; these social workers are often contracted to various state bodies such as the Child and Family Agency or the Health Service Executive. In recent times there has been a move towards the reduction in reliance on contracted agency staff with a move toward direct employment (Casey, 2019).



## Social Work Education and Admissions

The term ‘*social worker*’ is a protected title in Ireland and only those individuals who both secure an approved qualification and register with the Health and Social Care Council (CORU) are eligible to use the title. Approved qualifications are offered at both undergraduate and post-graduate level across various Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Ireland. There are six approved HEIs which have capacity to graduate approximately 290 students per year: Trinity College Dublin; University College Cork; the University of Galway; University College Dublin; Maynooth University; and the Atlantic Technological University Sligo. There is considerable variation in this provision. For example, the University of Galway offers approximately 25 places each year compared to University College Dublin which can offer approximately 55 places per year. It is important to note that programmes do not always meet their intake capacity for a variety of reasons. It is also important to note that these programmes do not also meet their output capacity, most notably when students fail either academic or practice components or exit due to a variety of either personal or family circumstances. Some students may also only graduate after periods of repeated studies or a leave of absence.

The majority of programmes (six) are offered at master’s level (NFQ Level 9) and are provided on a full-time basis over two years of study. Two programmes are offered at undergraduate level and the bachelor’s in social work at University College Cork is atypical because it offers a direct entry to mature students only (those over the age of 23 in February of the year of application). Trinity College Dublin’s bachelor’s in social studies is open via direct CAO entry to mature and school leaver levels (2<sup>nd</sup> level students). Both undergraduate programmes are delivered full time over four years of study. All programmes are required to seek approval from CORU, the Health and Social Care Regulator. This requirement then allows graduates of such programmes to register as professionally qualified social workers and to use the title ‘social worker’.

The admissions process by which candidates are selected for entry to social work programmes is possibly the most crucial point in determining who becomes a social worker (Shaw, 1985). Programmes offering social work education at master’s level have both educational and experience-related entry requirements. Most candidates pursuing postgraduate level education require an undergraduate degree (Level 8) and the completion of a required number of voluntary or paid hours of relevant experience (McCartan et al., 2022). Half of the programmes (Trinity College Dublin, Atlantic Technological University, and University College Cork) require applicants to have attained at least a 2.1 undergraduate degree, whereas University College Dublin, Maynooth University, and the University of Galway accept applicants with 2.2 undergraduate degrees and above. Programmes also differ in their requirements in respect of the subject matter of applicant’s academic qualifications. A majority require a social science or social policy major with scope within some programmes for related degrees such as law, psychology, social care, youth and family studies, and childhood education among others being

accepted as appropriate entry requirements. For many postgraduate programmes, where the requisite undergraduate qualification has not been achieved, a potential applicant may first pursue a Higher Diploma in a related field (e.g., social science, social policy) to allow them to be eligible to apply. Once qualified, from either postgraduate or undergraduate programmes, there is no distinction in working title or employment opportunities and terms.

As a requirement of CORU accreditation, social work education programmes must ensure that newly qualified graduates meet all requirements of the CORU Domains of Practice and related Standards of Proficiency (CORU, 2019). In Ireland students graduate with what is essentially a generic social work qualification which allows them to apply for roles in any social work setting. Thereafter specialist knowledge, education and training are often acquired through various forms of continuous professional development (CPD) and in-employment training. CPD opportunities are offered by a range of providers, including HEIs and NGOs (such as, for example, Barnardos, Children's Rights Alliance, HSE). The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW), which represents both professionally qualified social workers and social work students, also offers an extensive range of CPD opportunities for practitioners. The IASW represents about a third of registered social workers in Ireland (approximately 31%\*)<sup>1</sup> and does not have the types of powers and processes, in respect of CPD, that other professional bodies, such as the Law Society of Ireland or Irish Medical Council, possess. It can be argued that, given the relatively recent introduction of professional regulation and accreditation, CPD in social work is in its infancy, with formal recording and provision of CPD only being in place for the past decade.

Structural issues, associated with the cost-of-living crisis in Ireland, appear to adversely affect the experiences of social work students. There are CORU requirements in respect of student attendance on programmes at the various HEIs and also their attendance on practice placements and these present particular difficulties for students who often have limited income and may have a range of family, medical, and other commitments during their period of study. This, and other factors, are strongly highlighted in the findings of the Report.

### Dealing with a shortfall in graduating student numbers.

As described above, it is evident that it is not possible to guarantee that the maximum number of graduates exit the respective programmes each year. There are a number of possible solutions to this problem. One option would be to offer additional students places, but this is only possible if and when there is commensurate provision of structured and secure availability of quality practice learning placements. It is a requirement of the regulator, CORU,

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\* The IASW had 1630 members, as per its [annual report 2022](#), this was taken as a percentage of the 5,187 registered CORU social workers, from [CORU's latest registration statistics as of April 2023](#).

that approved programmes “must ensure that each student completes 1000 hours of placement, 350 hours of which must be in one block and full time” (Criterion 2.2, CORU, 2019). Given that programmes often do not meet their own capacity in respect of student applying for places, it is also not clear if this solution would increase graduate numbers.

Also, currently, there is no centralised structure for the supply of appropriate social work practice placements. Placement coordinators, or equivalent roles, in each HEI enter a process ahead of each placement cycle to secure placements on an individual basis with service providers and agencies who offer social work services. There is a slight exception in the context of placements provided by the Child and Family Agency, in that they have appointed placement co-ordinators within their agency to coordinate and secure placements by Tusla area and liaise with placement coordinators within the various HEIs. This level of coordination, on an individual basis for approximately 290 students per annum places huge resource implications and challenges for individual HEIs and will be a key component in any debates regarding the increase of HEI places on social work programmes.

The lead and second authors of this Report are current and former Directors of Professional Practice, respectively, on the social work programme at University College Dublin, and so are acutely aware the difficulties faced, by our colleagues across programmes, in securing robust placements year on year. There are a number of policy initiatives that might address this important issue. The first of these is the work of the National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative which is a collaboration between the six HEIs. A Project Coordinator post was established by the HEI Placement Learning Coordinators, funded by the DCEDIY in 2020. This group is working towards the establishment of a National Advisory Board that will support and promote and grow practice teaching sites across all employment sectors.

Another initiative, the Practice Education Multi-Stakeholder Workshop series has been organised by the National Health & Social Care Professions Office (HSCP). It aims to provide a collaborative forum between HEIs and HSCP stakeholders work on the potential solutions to increase capacity for practice placements, thereby ensuring a supply of new graduates year on year. Work is also underway in individual HEIs to chart and map placement needs and the challenges these pose.

Ultimately, the supply of robust and appropriate placements depends on professionally qualified social workers and their agencies to take on students. Currently, they do so in the context of significant challenges in respect of staffing, recruitment, and retention. Our student cohorts’ awareness of these specific issues is also a major finding of this study and will be discussed below.

## The Social Work Role

The social work role is complex and wide ranging:

*“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”*

(International Federation of Social Workers).

This globally recognised definition of social work sums up the broad range of skills and the value of the social work profession to society. The definition also points to the broad range of theoretical and empirical foundations that underpin the professional practice of social work. This highlights the range of skills, knowledge, and values that practitioners need to attain to enable them to deliver their role.

The way that social workers and their employing agencies deliver this role is affected by wider policy and political contexts. In the Irish context the social work role is often compared with that of other social and health care professionals. While diversity of the workforce and a move to further integrate interdisciplinary practice is to be welcomed, it remains to be seen what impact this may have on the number of social workers required by various agencies and what ‘types’ of work are seen as the ‘job of social work’. The Report seeks to explore these issues by accessing the views of a range of potential applicants including current social care students. This includes a range of perceptions and their understanding of social work, including their motivations for entering the profession. While this report does not seek to address what the role of social work is in practice, it does point to how we define and promote a role that crosses many disciplinary settings and functions. In our use of the concept of ‘the market’, being able to define ‘the product’ is a key step towards promotion and attracting new candidates.



## Section 3: A brief literature review

Understanding student’s motivations to become social workers has long been recognised as an important factor when seeking to develop both social work education and the profession as a whole (Stevens et al., 2012). While research has been carried out on the topic, there is a limited recent data available. It is crucial that we understand the reasons why students choose to enter the social work profession, because it has a profound impact on how students learn, understand and apply the professional values of the profession (Christie & Kruk, 1998). Such knowledge could also help us develop strategies to attract those individuals who may have a skillset for, or interest in, pursuing professional social work as a career. As we see from the findings in this Report, students’ motives can either ‘help to sustain them through the professional and academic demands of the courses, or contribute to a sense of disillusion and discontent, as they struggle with the challenge of integrating the ‘professional’ with the ‘personal’ and developing a ‘professional identity’ (Christie & Kruk, 1998, p21).

Motivation to pursue a career in social work can be influenced by numerous factors such as family background, life experience, previous employment experience, financial remuneration and the opportunities available for career development (Rompf & Royse, 1994; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007; McCartan et al., 2022). McCartan et al (2022) carried out a comprehensive analysis of student motivation to pursue a career in social work in Ireland. The study involved students beginning their social work course in 2018 in one of six institutions that deliver social work education in Ireland: University of Galway, Queen’s University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, Ulster University, University College Cork and University College Dublin. This collaboration between the six universities, both North and South, was the first comparative study of its kind. A mixed methods research design was used with an anonymised online survey designed to examine student motivations for choosing social work and identify potentially relevant life experiences and beliefs that may have contributed to them choosing the career. A total of 240 students completed the survey (response rate of 53.6%). As well as describing the characteristics of the students and their motivation to study social work, it also identifies implications for social work education and curriculum planning as well as implications for workforce planning.

McCarten et al., found that ‘over a quarter of their respondents had some personal experience of social services or social work in their lives’, and that over a third ‘identified bad experiences of social work as part of their motivation to become a social worker’ (2022, p239). Much like the findings highlighted in this Report, many also mentioned influencing social change and social justice as their driving motivations – something to be harnessed and nurtured. The study also found that many were intending to seek employment in child and family services, but fewer chose adult services leading to potential concerns for services for our aging populations (McCarten et al., 2022).

Also flagged by McCarten et al., and others before them, adverse childhood experiences have been found to be a strong motivator with Stevens et al., (2012) finding that a third of the respondents in their research reported that they believed that social work was the career for them due to life experiences, including having personal experience of foster care. Wilson & McCrystal (2007) had similar results with over half of the students in their study reporting that they had experienced a previous personal trauma. Of relevance for social work educators and employers is that whilst having experienced adverse childhood events may give the student the status of expert-by-lived experience and enhance their understanding and ability to help, it may also be associated with shame and a reluctance to seek help when needed for fear of seeming weak (McCartan et al, 2020). Such experience may also only come to the fore, or be ‘triggered’, when the student is faced with academic course content or within social work practice itself whilst on placement. This points to the need for social work education programmes to explicitly address the lived experiences of students on their programmes and help them to recognise the impact, both positive and negative, these experiences might have both on their education but also their future career as social workers (Furness, 2007; Christie & Weeks, 1998).

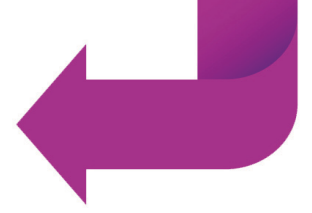
Hackett et al., (2003, p170) note that very few of the students in their study ‘drifted’ into social work without a specific reason or due to a lack of a career focus. Overwhelmingly studies indicate that students choose to study social work due to a desire to help people however the desire to promote social change or the social justice motivators were reported as being increasingly unimportant (Christie & Kruk, 1998; Wilson & McCrystal, Gilligan, 2007). Pearson (1973) with a sample of 73, found that 13% of students wanted to achieve career advancement, 27% wanted to change society in some way and 80% were seeking personal fulfilment through their work. With respect to the second, 67% of students hoped to avoid ‘the rat race and formal, routinized work’ (p214); and 80% said that they hope to avoid specific features of society that Pearson describes as “materialism’, ‘prejudice’, ‘narrowness’, ‘self-centredness’ and ‘complacency” (p214). Solas (1994) used Pearson’s study design to examine social work students’ motives, administering the study to 10 graduate students at the University of Queensland, at the beginning of their two-year social work programme and at the end of each semester. Solas found that the students were largely motivated by the desire for personal and professional fulfilment. As opposed to Pearson’s characterization of social work students as ‘politically deviant,’ Solas saw them as ‘neutral technocrats’: at no stage during their training did students identify that they might have a future role to play in broader social change, and there appeared to be an absence of any moral stance in the accounts of students’ motives to become social workers. Solas suggests that this reflected the general shift to the right in the politics of students. Gilligan (2007) appears to support Solas’s hypothesis suggesting that the reason for the decrease in social justice as a motivator reflects dominant cultural narratives which promote individual rather than collective responsibility.

Of interest is that more recent research found that while helping people remained a primary motivator, helping others overcome discrimination (Hackett et al, 2003) and a desire to contribute to social improvement (Petersen, 2022) featured as important factors for students choosing a career in social work. Both Hackett et al (2003) and Petersen (2022) found that there was a

combination of altruistic and professional strategic motives for students choosing social work, with Stevens et al (2012) noting that although altruistic motivations for choosing social work dominated, students were also influenced by career issues and the day-to-day aspects of social work (p. 16-17). 'Results show that motive is not ever singular but is a part of a complex web of different motives' (Petersen, 2022). These complex webs of motivations are also reflected in the findings of the Report.

Social work is recognised to be a fulfilling but challenging career. The challenges associated with the profession and the resulting high stress levels mean that the career of an average social worker can be relatively short compared to other professions, with Lloyd et al (2002) noting that burnout is a particular problem associated with social work. Having previous contact with a social worker either via a therapeutic/professional interaction for themselves or a relative, or through knowing a social worker on a personal level was found to be helpful (Byrne, 2019). Interaction on a professional or personal level may lead to students having a better understanding of the complexity of a career in social work and the stressors that might be associated with the career.

The overwhelming message emerging from previous research is that there is a need for a much greater understanding of what motivates students to choose social work as their career. With life experiences playing such an important role in motivation, it is essential that social work education programmes are aware of this and respond with support to help students recognise the strengths that their lived experience gives them but also the difficulties it may pose for them in their careers. These motives can either help to sustain them through the professional and academic demands of the courses, or contribute to a sense of disillusion and discontent, as they struggle with the challenge of integrating the 'professional' with the 'personal' and developing a 'professional identity' (Christie & Kruk, 1998, p21). Knowledge of what motivates students can also potentially help employers to predict career patterns and the training needs of social workers and in planning recruitment strategies for diverse fields of practice (Christie & Kruk, 1998, p. 21). At a macro level within Ireland, the IASW report (2022) highlights the dearth of comprehensive data about the social work profession as a whole in Ireland, noting that there is a lack of an overall government cross-departmental strategy specifically related to the training, recruitment and retention of social workers in Ireland (O'Meara and Kelleher, 2022).



## Section 4: Study design and methodology

### Overview of the research design

The following section describes the design of the study, using mixed methods, to ascertain the views of three cohorts of students who may potentially enter the social work profession. The study included a mixed method approach via a survey instrument and qualitative focus groups. The survey instrument attracted 135 respondents across all three cohorts and broke down as follows; social work (SW) – 84 responses; social care (SC) – 35 responses; social policy (SP) – 16 responses. Throughout this report, and in the context of keeping quotations anonymous, quotes used from individual participants are referenced using their cohort and age range only, e.g., SC, 18-24. This is particularly important given that the cohort is predominantly female cohort, there are small numbers on some programmes, and details of the regions within which participants live may have led to participants being identifiable.

All survey participants were invited to join a follow up online focus group and an incentive of a €20 One for All voucher was offered. Initially twenty-eight survey participants responded to the questions asking them to flag their interest in attending a focus group on one of two identified dates in March. Seven participants ultimately completed consent forms and provided email addresses to receive a link to the focus group. We finally had two in the first focus group and five in the second focus group. Direct quotes from focus group participants are referenced using the identifier FG2, FG5 etc., denoting Focus Group participant 2, or 5.

The study also incorporates data collected by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in respect of a project they are currently conducting with students at transition year level in secondary schools nationally. The project, among other aspects, discusses the role of social work and asks students to share their views via a brief survey. One of the questions, pertinent to this study, is whether students would consider a career in Tusla. The findings resulting from analysis of these survey data are included in this report.

The study received ethical approval from the Humanities Research Ethics Committee at University College Dublin (Ref: HS-23-13-Mooney).

### Surveys and rationale for the typology approach

To gain the views of the three types of potential entrants to social work programmes, a three-stream survey instrument was used. The survey gathered data on participants experiences, views and understanding about social work education and social work as a profession. Participants were also asked about potential facilitators and barriers which may affect their decision to become social workers. The survey instruments were developed using an EU-Licensed, secure UCD Staff version of SurveyMonkey to ensure security of data collection and storage and compli-



ance with GDPR protocols. While each survey utilised a number of common questions, they were also tailored to the specific group with a view to using the data to compare results. For example, all cohorts were asked basic demographic questions and questions about their understanding of social work. However, only social care and social work students were asked about their understanding of differences between their two professions. Both undergraduate cohorts were also asked about their understanding of the cost of social work education, and we were able to analyse any differences of opinion between the cohorts in this way while also identifying barriers and facilitators that may be specific to each cohort.

The three groups sampled were students currently engaged in social work education, social policy and sociology undergraduates, and social care undergraduate students. This was a convenience sample, and the findings are not generalisable, in that they cannot be said to hold true for all potential candidates who may consider careers in social work. That said, they do shed some light on the views and motivations of social work students and potential applicants to social work programmes. Furthermore, whilst not generalisable, the findings do provide further evidence of some common perceptions of the social work profession as being stressful, synonymous with child protection work and burnout, but also perceptions of social work being a rewarding job.

Surveys were issued to all current social work students on programmes across the Republic of Ireland, undergraduate social care students on social care degree programmes in the South-eastern Technological University (SETU), Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT), and the Technological University of Dublin (TUD). A survey was also issued to current undergraduate social policy and sociology students on University College Dublin's DN750 BSocSc in Social Policy and Sociology undergraduate programme.

### *Typology 1 - The Social Work Cohort*

Current social work students were sampled for two reasons. Firstly, they are pursuing careers in social work and were viewed to be best placed to comment on the motivations and barriers to entering the profession. Secondly, this cohort includes mature students, some of whom had previous, alternative professional experiences and are returning to education to pursue careers in social work. It was felt, an understanding of their motivations and former professional backgrounds potentially offered valuable insights into why the profession was attractive to this subgroup. To explore this distinction in the student social worker cohort, participants were asked if they were returning to education/entering as a mature student, what previous professional or employment background they were coming from, and how long it had been since they were last in full or part time education.

As mentioned, current social work students were accessed via the various schools of social work across Ireland. The survey link was shared via a schools of social work list-serv and 85 responses were collected. Given the total maximum social work college places in a given year is approximately 290, this response equates to approximately 30% but is most likely slightly

higher than this given that most programmes do not fill their capacity.

### *Typology 2 -The Social Policy Cohort*

An undergraduate in social policy or social science is a prerequisite for entering social work education in most programmes in Ireland. Some programmes allow for equivalent qualification where there is a majority component in these areas such as some law degrees, social care, or community development for example. We felt it was therefore important to gather the insights of such potential candidates for social work education. To do this we accessed students on the largest social policy undergraduate programme in the country, the BA in social policy and sociology at University College Dublin. This was also a sample of convenience as the programme sits within the same school as the authors of this Report. A survey instrument was tailored for this cohort and was shared across the three years of the programme, circulated to 348 students. That said, the survey only attracted sixteen responses which equates to a 4.5% response rate. Of those sixteen, fourteen identified that they wished to pursue a career in social work which perhaps provides an insight into why they chose to respond and not others.

### *Typology 3 -The Social Care Cohort*

For our third cohort we decided to sample from undergraduate programmes offering social care degrees. Social care graduates are increasingly applying to enter the social work profession via the various educational programmes. The role of social care workers within agencies traditionally staffed by social workers, such as Tusla, is also increasing. Social care undergraduate programmes also often meet the requirement for applicants to have attained a substantive social policy or social science undergraduate qualification prior to applying to enter social work education. We wanted to gather the motivations and perceptions of social care undergraduates which may provide a useful insight into an emerging market for recruitment into social work.

## **Focus Group Sessions**

The survey instruments used across all cohorts included an invitation for participants to take part in a follow up focus group interview, using Zoom (Archibald et al., 2019). This enabled the research team to further explore issues emerging from the surveys. Focus groups were recorded with consent and notes were taken by the field researcher for analysis purposes, no transcriptions were produced.

The two online focus groups, which lasted for one hour each, were carried out in March 2023 (27<sup>th</sup>/28<sup>th</sup>). While initially twenty-eight survey participants signalled an interest in attending a focus group on one of two identified dates in March, only seven participants provided consent

and shared an email address to receive a link to the focus groups. One of these participants was completing an undergraduate in social policy, the rest were current social work students. Two participants took part in the first focus group and five in the second focus group. A topic guide was used to facilitate the discussion about the findings from the survey data. To preserve anonymity, the codes FG1, FG2 etc are used throughout the findings section of this report.

Analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis which is described as: "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This approach was chosen because of its capacity to encapsulate large amounts of data; to provide thick descriptions and to facilitate the identification of similarities and differences across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p.79). With the consent of participants, the interviews were video, and audio recorded on Zoom. These were deleted once the thematic analysis phase had been completed. Phase One involved familiarisation with the depth and breadth of the recordings and audio transcripts including ensuring that the transcripts honoured and remained true to the voices of the participants. A first list of ideas contained in the data and their relevance was then compiled. Further analysis was carried out to organise themes into a coherent pattern and produce the report.

## Presentation of the Findings

The survey instruments used a mixture of questions that gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. For ease of reading and clarity across the three cohorts, quantitative data are presented via the number of participants within the overall sample, or sub-cohorts, who responded, e.g. (n=45/135). Percentages are used at points to emphasise a specific finding. It is important to note also that not all questions were mandatory as some may not relate to the participants own experiences, in these instances the response rate is cited as above. The follow-up focus groups were an iterative approach to further explore themes and issues which arose in the survey analysis. The findings are therefore presented in the Report as a blend of both survey and focus group responses which formed central themes. In some instances, these themes relate strongly to the questions asked, while other themes were more heavily influenced by the participant's responses. The findings from the survey instruments are presented first in these sections and supported by the in-depth analysis of the focus groups.

## Section 5: Study Findings

### Key Messages

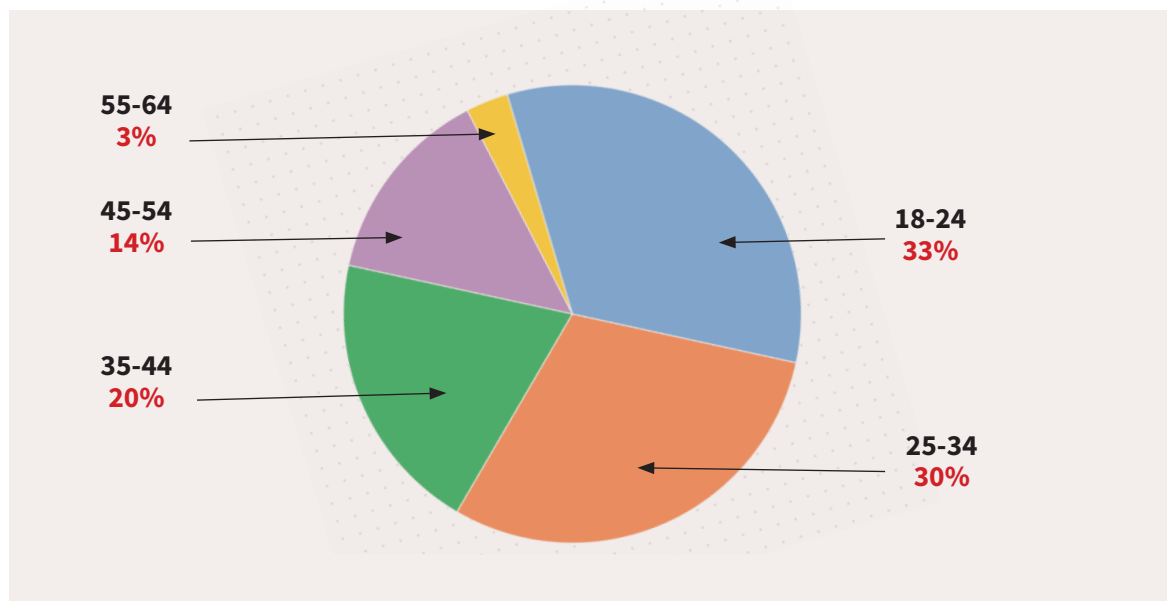
- Social work is a predominantly female profession. This should be a key consideration in any recruitment and promotion strategies but also in any strategies to support the current workforce.
- There is a sense that social work as a profession does not reflect the populations it serves in terms of diversity and culture. This warrants further scrutiny and exploration.
- There is a broad perception of social work as a stressful and demanding job, most believe the public and media perception of social work is negative and that this perception is unfair. Campaigns should be considered to counter such narratives.

### Demographics

#### Age

The entire survey cohort included 135 respondents. A small majority of the entire sample were in the age range of 18-24 (33%, n=45/135) which is not surprising given the focus of the study, pathways into social work education. However, taken together, 37% (n=50/135) of participants were aged 35 or above, with four aged above 55.

*Fig 2: Age range of full sample*



In terms of the three cohorts, the age profile of participants from the undergraduate programmes was understandably younger, given these programmes are direct entry via the CAO. Most of the social care (57%, n=20/35) and social policy (62%, n=10/16) undergraduates were aged between 18-24 years, whereas the majority of social work students (mostly postgraduate or mature undergraduate direct entry) were aged 25-34 years (41.6%, n=35/84) with only 17% (n=15/84) in the 18-24 age bracket. While everyone will have individual life journeys and trajectories, the cohort, and it could be assumed the wider market for social work education, therefore spans an age range that encompasses many life stages, from those who enter undergraduate degrees straight from leaving cert, to those returning to education after full careers in alternative sectors.

### Gender

Nearly all respondents, across the three cohorts, identified as female, reflecting a long-standing perception of social work as a predominantly female profession. The social work cohort included 85.7% (n=72/84) of participants who identified as female with similar percentages in both social care (91.4%, n=32/35) and social policy (87.5%, n=14/16) cohorts. The survey also asked participants to state whether they thought the gender ratio within the social work profession was (1) equally split, (2) more males than females, or (3) more females than males. 87 participants across the three cohorts responded to this question and across all cohorts there was a strong perception of the profession being predominantly female. 98% (n=85/87) believed this to be the case with 2% (n=2/87) believing it was equally split between males and females. No respondents believed the profession was comprised of more males than females.

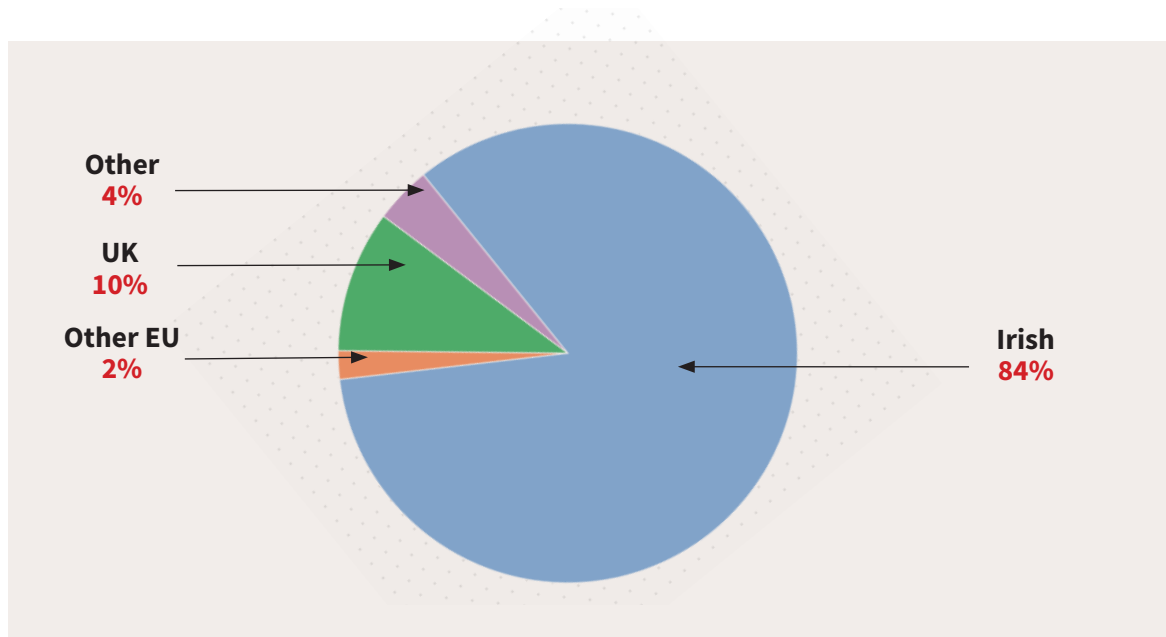
This was explored further in the focus groups where all participants commented that there were fewer males than females in their college classes. Most were unsure why more females are attracted to social work as a profession. FG2 commented, *“and in a class of approximately 40, we’ve got 4 lads”*. FG3 stated that *“I think women are just innately caring”*. FG2 summed up the views of most participants stating, *“So I don’t understand why it’s so female orientated to begin with. Maybe it’s just perceived as another caring profession. But even nursing is changing now in terms of the male female ratio. I think that male social workers are a really valuable asset”*. One linked this to practice areas within social work stating that *“probation tends to be more male orientated and maybe that is due to the client base”* (FG1). FG6 suggested that an information campaign to promote different aspects of social work might make the profession more appealing to men, *“We had a lecturer, and she had worked with the Irish army.... I’d say most men don’t know that they could be a social worker with the Irish army, or maybe I don’t know whether there’s social workers with the Gardai?”*

### Nationality and Cultural Diversity

Respondents were asked to identify their nationality. This was asked as an open text question and so participants could self-identify as opposed to select from a selection of regions or countries, three participants did not respond to this question. The majority (86%, n=114/132) iden-

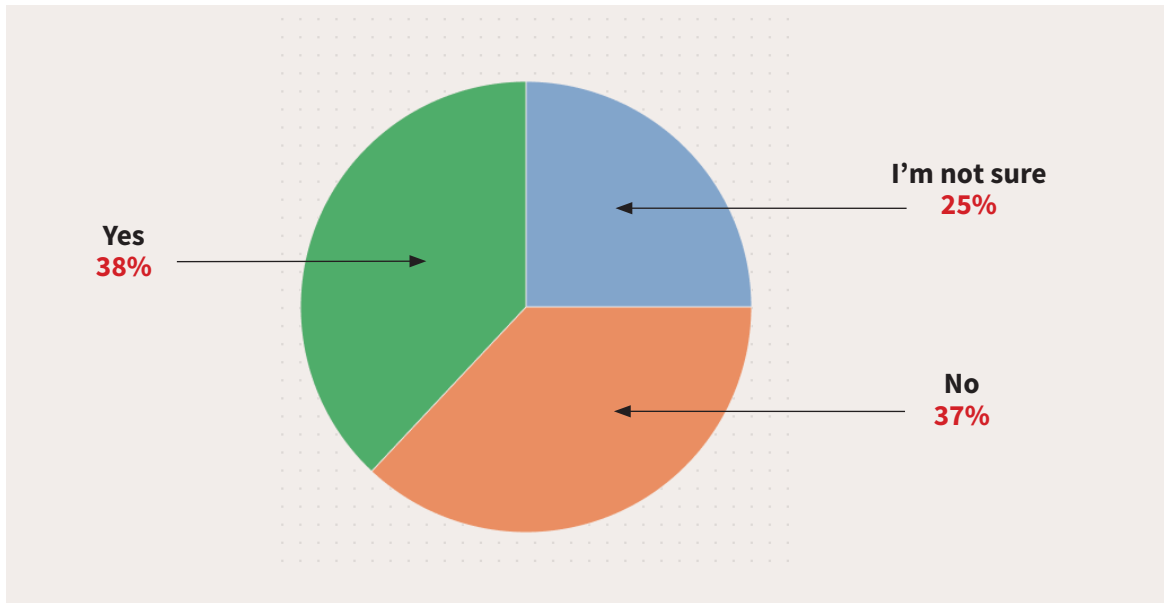
tified as being Irish, this included self-identified categories such as ‘Black Irish’, ‘White Irish’, ‘Irish-Algerian’, and ‘Irish’. 9% (n=12/132) identified as being from the UK, which included British (n=10), English (n=1), and Northern Irish (n=1). 5% (n=6) identified as being from other regions which included one each from America, Russia, Sweden, Lithuania, Italy, and Zimbabwe. It is possible that the large cohort of those identifying as being Irish possibly reflects the increasingly diverse nature of those with Irish citizenship and the various cultural backgrounds included in broader Irish society.

Fig 3: Nationality, as self-identified by the participants across the whole sample



In this context, all participants were also asked if they felt the social work profession reflected the diversity of the population it serves. Eighty-seven participants responded to the question and interestingly there was a mixed response. A quarter (n=22/87) were unsure, while almost equal amounts suggested that the profession does (38%, n=33/87) and does not (37%, n=32/87) reflect the diversity of the populations it serves. While these findings are not generalisable, it is interesting to note that that the social work student cohort most strongly believed that the profession does not reflect the diversity of the population it serves (Social Work cohort – No it does not - 46% (n=24/52), Yes it does - 38% (n=20/52), I’m not sure - 15% (n=8/52).

**Fig 4: Do you think social work reflects diversity?** Result across all cohorts (n=87)



Participants were provided with a text box option to provide further comment on this question and while neither the social care nor the social policy students chose to do so, 19 current social work students did provide further comment. These comments varied. Some felt there was little diversity within the profession, *“its predominantly white people”* (SW, 45-54), and that the profession *“Needs more diversity especially in terms of class”* (SW, 45-54). Others felt that diversity is improving, *“There is diversity but is certainly female dominated. In terms of nationality/ethnic diversity - this is increasing”* (SW, 25-34) and *“It’s clear from the classroom that social work is becoming more multicultural however there is still more to be done in terms of ethnic minorities”* (SW, 35-44). A number of those adding additional comments linked a lack of diversity to the cost of social work education, which is discussed more generally below. One suggested that *“Social work claims to reflect diverse groups, however academic fees within Ireland act as a barrier for including people from a low socioeconomic background into the profession”* (SW, 25-34). Another participant, also reflected this sentiment, stating *“The cost of doing a masters makes me lean towards no. The cost outright and the cost of 2 years out of work and doing 1000 hours unpaid work isn’t a privilege many have, Lower and working class are locked out in this regard”* (SW, 25-34).

Focus groups participants discussed that the composition of their classes is becoming more diverse. FG3 said *“it’s improved as time goes on... there are lots of people from an African culture in our class”*. FG6 added *“more than a third of our class are diverse and there’s a lot of Eastern Europeans as well”*. Everybody agreed that diversity was beneficial. FG5 said, *“I think it’s so beneficial even for learning for us, to learn the different approaches to care from different communities and different cultures, and how... just to just talking to them even informally but learning the different sides of it. It’s been really beneficial, for when I’m working with African cultures”*. FG5 pointed out that it is the colleges who select people for the courses and the responsibility for increasing diversity in university lies with those in charge of the selection process. While these are positive

sentiments, some of the data here belies a potential perspective that the social work profession does not reflect the diversity of the population it serves, which may warrant further scrutiny.

## Perspectives on Social Work

Survey participants were asked what they already knew about social work as a profession, and this was explored in further depth in the focus group sessions. The responses to this question were varied but key themes were identifiable. Many respondents commented on the difficult and stressful nature of social work, with some mentioning that it is dangerous and emotionally challenging. Issues of stress, burnout, and being under-resourced were issues raised by respondents. One respondent stated that social work is *“Difficult Under resourced Dangerous Under paid Involves working with all types of people in various settings, diverse”* (Sc, 18-24), another said *“It’s poorly represented and respected”* (SW, 45-54), while a social policy student stated, *“I know that there is a lack of resources, it has a huge emotional strain associated with it but that it is incredibly rewarding”* (SP, 18-24).

Within the focus groups, when asked what they perceived as the root causes of stress to be, participant responses were multi-faceted. FG6 described the work as *“very emotional, you’re dealing with a lot of trauma.”* FG5 described the work as *“thankless.”* FG2 identified a wide range of problematic issues: *“I think it’s a number of different things. So it’s the caseload, it’s a perceived lack of resources, and it’s the management that doesn’t fight for the teams. They have a resource budget, and they stay strictly within that.... Ireland is one of the richest countries in the world. We should be able to properly finance our social work budgets. There seems to be huge lack of staff. Yet people are leaving, you know, moving on and going to different countries and taking with them the skills that they’ve learned here”* (FG5).

A lack of clarity with regard to the role and remit of social work was identified as another cause of stress. FG5 believed that rigid lines between different teams can cause stress when trying to find an appropriate service for an individual in situations where no team is willing to take responsibility for the person and this occurs: *“when people don’t want to deal with them, the more challenging clients, or the more vulnerable clients - the cases that seem really hard to like fix”* (FG5).

FG7 also pointed out that lack of clarity with regard to the social work role can lead to criticism from the public. She cited examples of situations where neighbours are critical of, or are concerned about a particular parent or family, and they question why social workers are not intervening without understanding that social workers have to complete full and thorough assessments and: *“they don’t realise that we can’t just walk into a house and decide I don’t like the scenario....that there are procedures that have to be followed, and boxes that have to be ticked”* (FG7).

Some said that friends and family expressed surprise at their choice to pursue social work as a career and some were encouraged not to do so: *“I have 2 friends that are social workers [for] 20 years. Both of them urged me not to study social work. They said, It’s a very stressful job, you’re*



dealing with family situations, and a lot of people are involuntary clients, so they don't actually want to meet with you." (FG6). Similarly, FG4 said her family were very surprised when she told them that she was considering social work and spoke about a relative who is a youth worker who works closely with social workers and has often described the stress they experience. FG2 agreed, stating that in a former career she had observed "the pressure social workers were under, and the mistakes they made... everybody seemed overloaded with work" (FG2). FG6 also described the experiences of her friends who are social workers: "they just feel swamped. They just feel like they're firefighting." FG5 and FG7 also used the term "firefighting" to describe much of the work.

Poor supervision was identified as another stress factor both for practitioners and also for students in the context of the quality of placements. FG6 stated: "I think it's really important that on the job that social workers have really good supervision especially those workers that are starting out in their first year." FG1 agreed with this point and said that supervision should not only consist of case management every 6-8 weeks but should also include clinical supervision and this would reduce the level of stress. Some social work students, reflecting on their practice placements, did not consider that they received adequate supervision. One focus group participant said, "I know I have colleagues from my class that are also on placement and some of them are really struggling because they're not getting what they see as enough support in their placement and in their supervision... there needs to be enough people to actually adequately do the case studies and provide very good supervision" (FG6).

FG5 pointed out that social work students are trained to take a systemic perspective including context into account when working with clients and when assessing how their environment influences them and stated: "It's the same for us in work." She emphasised that when the workplace is a stressful environment this has a considerable influence on the workers. FG2 added, "I also think that you know, telling people to practice self-care just isn't good enough for the amount of work and the amount of stress that they are carrying." What is interesting in these responses is that they come from students and not a cohort of professionally qualified social workers. Participants appeared fully aware of the stresses and strains, perception of the role, and tensions faced by the profession.

While participants spoke about negative perceptions that they associated with the profession, they also acknowledged a number of positive attributes. For example, one participant thought that "It is very pressured. Underfunded. Emotionally draining but very rewarding" (SW, 35-44). This sense of contradiction was shared by others, "Social work is challenging, exhausting, unpredictable but dynamic, rewarding and fulfilling in equal measure" (SP, 18-24); "I know it's a difficult but rewarding job" (SP, 45-54); "Challenging, understaffed, underpaid. Rewarding." (SC, 45-54).

In this positive perspective of the profession the values of social justice and promoting human rights were mentioned and seemed to balance the negative perceptions of the job. One person's knowledge of social work comprised of "Fighting injustice, inequality and help[ing to] promote people's human rights. To help the most vulnerable in society" (SW, 18-24). A student social work participant said that "Social Work is a career path that involves supporting people to be knowl-

edgeable about their human rights and advocate for their social justice and human rights” (SW, 18-24). Many of the participants across the cohorts identified social work as having a helping and caring role. A social care student stated that “it is a way of helping families and people” (SC, 35-44), while a social policy student social work has a “Focus on the empowerment of individuals to improve their circumstances” (SP, 18-24).

### *Second level students’ perceptions of social work*

As part of this study, we also received access to data currently being collected by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency as part of an awareness project they are conducting with Transition Year students in second level schools. Transition year tends to be a year between junior and leaving examination cycles when students, approximately 14-16 years of age, get to learn about various topics outside of the main curriculum, include careers and industry. This Tusla project involves meeting with classes around the country to explain the role of Tusla and what is the job of a Tusla social worker. At the end of these sessions students are asked to complete a short survey. Many of the questions related to the session itself but, of interest to this project, they were also asked what they learned, whether they would consider a career with Tusla, and why? While the focus of the sessions is on the role of Tusla social workers, who predominantly work in areas such as child protection, fostering, and family support it is the only project we are aware of that engages with students at this level in respect of the social work profession. The responses therefore relate to Tusla, but they do provide a small insight into second level students’ perception of the social work role.

In terms of the sample received for this report, there were a total of 253 responses across six transition year classes. While we did not receive a gender break down for two classes, the other four classes included one hundred and six males, sixty-two females, and three that identified as non-binary. In terms of ‘what they learned about Tusla’ the majority listed elements such understanding that Tusla works with a large number of children and that Tusla help children. One student learned that “[Tusla] help children and families across Ireland in times of need”, another said they learned that “That TUSLA helps over 50000 children a year”. Potentially acting as a starting point to addressing some of the issues raised in the findings from our student cohorts in the main study, some transition year students also learned, via these sessions, that “that TUSLA work in a lot more areas than just child protection and safety”, that there are “Different ways you can enter the workforce”, “How to get into a career in social work”, and that “Jobs are offered straight out of college”.

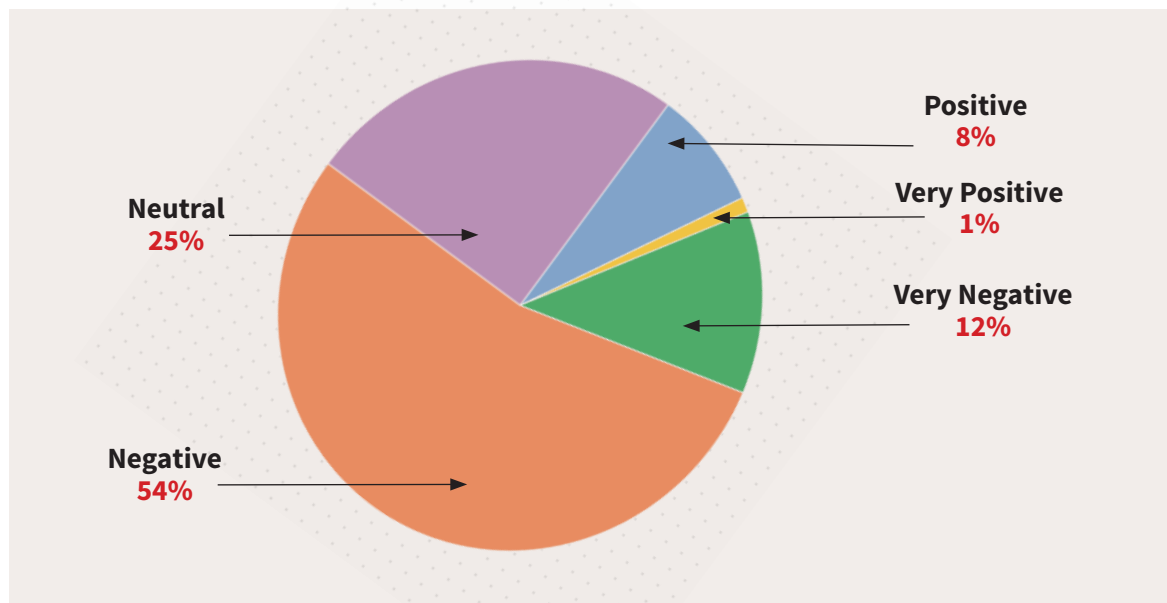
The students were asked if they would consider a career with Tusla. While these responses for one cohort were not available, almost half of those who did respond said that they *would* consider a career with Tusla (n= 95/194). They were also asked to comment on why they might consider this in the future and the responses varied. Many said they found they found it interesting, with one respondent saying “I’ve always been interested in this field of work”. A number also said they

would consider this career because they want to help people, echoing our 3<sup>rd</sup> level student cohort; “Always want to help families that are struggling because I have experienced it”. Those who said they would not consider a career with Tusla, provided less feedback on why, but in the main they related this simply to it not being a career for them, an example from one student is representative here: “I don’t think it is for me, but it is a career that seems good”.

### Public and Media Perspectives

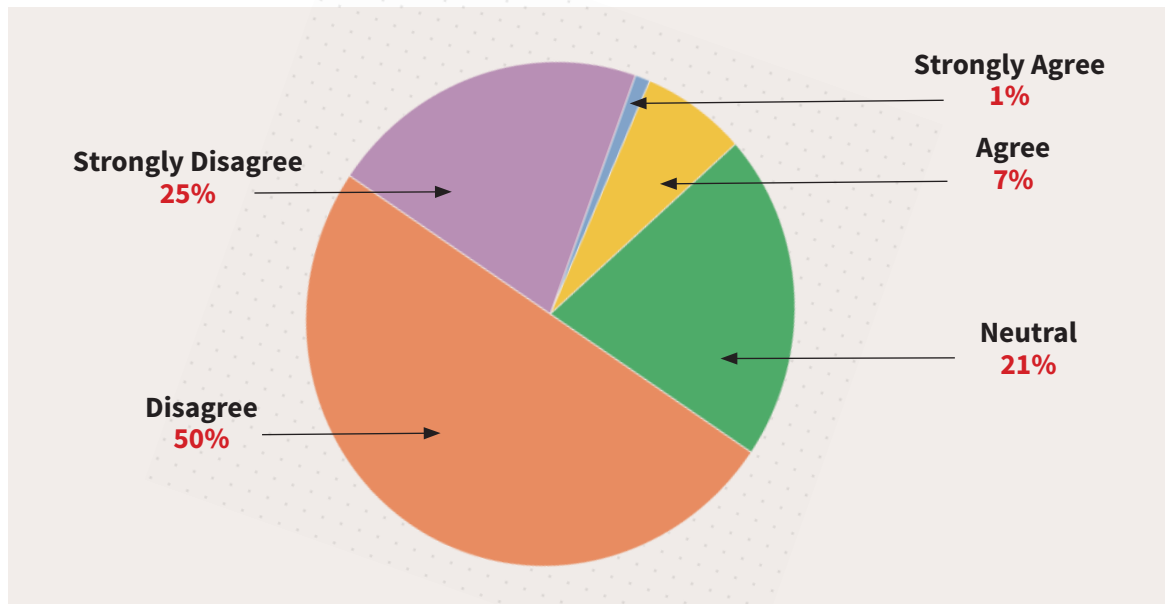
Participants were also asked if they felt the general public perception of social work was negative or positive. Many survey respondents (54% across all cohorts) felt that the public perception of social work was generally negative. Those already pursuing social work education perceived the public’s view of social work to be negative (n=31/52) or very negative (n=9/52). Within the social care student cohort, 10/21 respondents (47%) felt the public perception was negative with none feeling it was very negative. While, for the social policy students 5 out of 14 felt it was negative, and one felt it was very negative. Similar responses were received in respect of what participants felt about the media’s perception of social work.

Fig 5: **What do you think is the public’s perception of social work** (Results from all cohorts)



In terms of whether participants thought this public and media perception of social work was fair or justified, most felt that it was not (the response rate to this question was 52 social work, 21 social care, and 14 social policy students). This belies a sense that while there is an awareness of a negative public narrative, there is also a belief that this is not justified, or the whole narrative of social work.

Fig 6: Do you believe the public and media perception of social work is fair?



In our focus groups this media portrayal was attributed to the requirement to sell a story: “So the story has to be bad. It has to be... Somebody has to be outraged by it” (FG1). FG2 agreed with this point and also stated that “the media’s portrayal of social work is negative by necessity because everybody wants an outrageously bad news story, and this actually brings stigma to the profession.” Others also agreed with this perspective and FG7 said people often viewed social workers as “baby snatchers.” To illustrate this point FG7 described a situation where she was with a group of parents in a social situation where some children were engaging in horseplay, she said “... next thing I got an elbow, when they realised, I was a social worker. They were kind of taking a step back” (FG7). The implication was that they and their children were being judged by FG7.

The perception that social work is only about taking children into care, and the perception that social work is synonymous with child protection is widespread. In this vein, FG4 said her family were not in favour of her choice of social work as a career, “I suppose my family would be quite closed minded. I think people don’t really realise that it’s not just childcare services, you know it’s more than that and way broader. I probably didn’t even know as much myself until I looked into it further” (FG4). FG2 believed that because social workers are often required to take a management role or an enforcement role, this is negatively perceived and the supportive or advocacy roles are not widely known in the public domain. FG5 agreed, stating that “we need to be better at explaining our role to people especially the justice and human rights aspects of the role... so I think we need to get better at doing that, so that there’s better understanding of our role” (FG5).

Negative media and public perception lead to a strong sense of stigma for some in the focus groups. For example, FG6 said that she lives in a working-class area in social housing and “it would be problematic for me, if my neighbours knew what I do. Because I know that if anything

*happens to any tenants where I live, I [would] get the blame. Even if they themselves had caused problem] “whatever the issue was whether it was the police or child protection, or something to do with services they would blame me.... So, I tell people that I’m a Carer” (FG6). FG5 considers that the stigma “stems from child protection. But again, it is because of people not knowing our roles.” FG3 agreed and said she is constantly being told that she has chosen a very tough job “and you’re going to hate it and I feel people just put the stigma on you... and they think you must be very hard and very cold to do the job.” FG6 highlighted that social workers with whom she is friendly always ensure that they live far away from where they work due to fear of reprisals. She cited knowledge of colleagues who live in the same town as their workplace and “their cars have been attacked, they have been stalked online, had abusive phone calls and harassment of their families” (FG6). FG7 was also aware of a social worker in her area who has had her car damaged on several occasions.*

### **What Attracts People to Social Work?**

Despite these negative perceptions of the profession as a potentially over-worked, under-resourced, stressful occupation, social work still attracts cohorts of students each year across the six schools of social work in the Republic of Ireland. We asked participants what they felt attracted people to social work and what might make the profession more appealing. The overwhelming theme among survey participants was the desire to help people and to make a difference. This was strongly rooted in values of social justice and human rights - “Usually people go into the social work protection because they want to help people. They usually have strong values that align with upholding social justice and equality in society...” (SW, 25-34). Personal experiences of adversity or having interacted with social workers were cited as reasons that people might be motivated to pursue social work, and this was also linked with idea of helping others and giving back to society. Positive experiences of social work intervention in their own lives encouraged people to try to do the same for others in need, “Personal experiences where they feel they can support. They want to try and help our society live safe lives” (SW, 35-44). Financial security and having a ‘good career’ were also viewed as being important factors when thinking about what makes social work attractive.

In the focus group interviews, after detailed discussion about the stressfulness of social work, the barriers to entry and the cost, participants were asked why they were still attracted to the profession. Some had had personal experiences which drew them to the career. FG1 had personal knowledge of the area of addiction and recovery. FG2 had worked with legal aid clients “I came to social work through seeing social work.” FG6 had some personal experience of social disadvantage and also had worked in probation services and was aware of substance abuse issues and was interested in learning more and felt “I had a lot to bring to the table and could empathise with people.” FG7 had experience of disability services and said that everyone goes into this kind of work “to make a difference in someone else’s life.” FG5 agreed and said “people go into social work

*to help vulnerable people from either our own experiences or knowing about other experiences. But when you get into the field and get into the practice. I think it becomes stressful when either you're overloaded with the work." FG2 said "I think for me. I just love working with people. I like people around me, and I like working with people." FG1 said the attraction was "to affect positive change and intervene positively and in people's life and in times of crisis. I'm in it to make a difference."*

In terms of the question "what attracts people to social work?" we also asked, "what would make social work a more appealing profession for you"? Eighty-four participants answered this question and there was a lot of similarity between the three cohorts. The need for support around case-load management featured heavily in the responses, with participants noting that this would help to prevent burnout amongst social worker staff. One participant focused on the need to support newly qualified staff saying they need to have 'a manageable caseload to avoid burnout. Proper training and guidance in the first year. Protected caseload for the first year' (SW, 25-34). A similar point raised was in relation to supporting staff through favourable working conditions, with respondents believing that staff should be supported to work from home, be able to avail of a 4-day week or even self-care days. Respondents also commented on social work salaries, saying that they need to be increased and that staff should feel that the salary is commensurate with the job that they do – 'knowing that I'm getting paid for what I'm doing and being able to live comfortably while doing what I love' (SP, 18-24).

The high cost of social work education was also raised with the suggestion that social work educational programmes should be made more affordable, with financial supports being made available to students and also paid placements. A sample of responses from across the three cohorts are representative here of what might make social work more appealing - "If the masters programme wasn't so expensive and if placement was paid" (SP, 18-24); "funding for a degree or masters and hybrid" (SC, 35-44); "More funding available for people wanting to study social work. Better Image of social work in media" (SW, 18-24).

Several issues were also identified by participants in the focus groups in regard to making the profession more appealing and attracting more candidates. Clarifying the role of social work was considered important. FG2 said, "I think a lot of people don't actually understand what social workers really do... there's the image of the harried social worker who's made mistakes all the time, and children being taken into care as a result of it. And those pressures are always perceived by others, you know." FG6 agreed with this stating that many people "only think of the baby thing [child protection]"; suggesting that many don't realise that social workers are involved in mental health services, probation, medical social worker, disability services, to name a few. She said, "it's very invisible, like I've learned now with my course that there's all these social workers dotted around, and all these areas that touch everybody's lives" (FG6).

In the survey, participants were also asked to share what they felt were the positive aspects of the profession that might attract people to pursue social work? Similar themes were identified in the responses to this question and fell into two areas. The first of these related to a desire to help people and the concept of making a difference in peoples' lives. These ranked highly and

once again were underpinned by values of social justice and human rights; *“It gives us the chance to promote change and for people to have better lives”* (SC, 35-44). The idea of doing some good in the world was also identified as important and stepping forward to *“be the one adult needed”* (SW, 45-54). The second area related to the profession itself and the ‘job’ of social work. In respect of this aspect, issues identified as being important were that social work is a satisfying job with a good salary. The variety of areas that social workers can work in was also seen as being very attractive and the sense that it is perceived by respondents as being a secure, pensionable job. One respondent mentioned being a social worker gives a *“person a professional identity and career choice”* (SW, 25-34). Another response highlighted the diversity of sectors within the profession by stating that, *“You can work in a variety of different sectors and gives you the option to explore different areas. It’s rewarding”* (SW, 18-24). This is an important message given the strong link between perceptions of social work specifically with child and family services.

Some responses from participants suggest that countering the negative perception with positive descriptions of the profession might attract more candidates. FG2 stated *“I’m just trying to think. Have I ever met a social worker who openly loves their profession and tells everybody that that’s what they should be doing? And I don’t think I have.”* To counteract these negative perceptions and to attract more candidates, FG6 suggested a marketing campaign, *“...even whether it’s just leaflets in primary care centres, you know, with a picture of a social worker, you know, and just saying all the different things they do, and showing the different areas that social workers work in”* (FG6). FG2 suggested interaction with schools to promote the profession. Speaking specifically about the education sector, FG1 suggested promoting the profession on social media *“direct campaigns or the like. We’re on social media, and we have LinkedIn, and they don’t promote it. They might probably promote to recruit [for job vacancies], but they don’t promote the [education programme].”* One participant identified the benefits of a social work career which attracted him and argued that these benefits should be publicised more. FG1 - *“...actually one of the things for me is the stability of employment. So yeah, that’s very important. To put it quite frankly, if you go into college, you do your masters. You have a guaranteed job at the end of it... and social work skills are transferrable and useful with a range of clients and situations. These skills open up other opportunities such as going on to teach”* (FG1).

Like many professions that operate in challenging environments, there may be an anecdote that ‘social workers don’t do it for the money’. However, many of the participants did mention career and employment-related factors that did act as appealing or attractive elements of the profession. This was particularly evident in the cohort of respondents from Social Care who tended to focus on the job benefits of the profession. Five out of twenty-one of these respondents highlighted job and employment condition-related issues *only*, as positives that would lead people to social work; *“Higher income”* (SC, 18-24); *“Money, Pension, benefits, hours”* (SC, 18-24), *“Career opportunity and wages”* (SC, 45-54); *“Career advancement”* (SC, 35-44); *“Money”* (SC, 25-34). As social care undergraduates are degrees that lead to the specific profession of social care, as opposed to social policy undergraduates which can potentially have more varied trajectories, we specifically asked our social care cohort what would motivate them in moving from social care

to social work? The responses to this specific question are very similar to the findings above and relate strongly to the perceived pay and conditions in the profession of social work. One said, *“Better hours and better salary”* (SC, 18-24), another simply said *“The money”* (SC, 18-24), another said similar but was more reticent, *“Pay increase from scw to sw but it doesn’t seem worth it at the minute”* (SC, 25-34).

## Perceived barriers to entering the profession

Responses to both the survey instrument and focus groups session present a strong sense of a negative perception of the profession and participants felt that these also play out in the public and media domains. Such narratives most likely do not help to entice new candidates into the profession. However, in our survey we asked specifically what respondents felt were the negative, or *off-putting*, factors for people considering social work. Heavy caseloads leading to burnout and stress were seen as a very significant negative aspect of social work. Participants felt that the reasons for caseloads being heavy were linked with staff shortages and poor funding and resourcing. One respondent said, *“The most significant aspect that puts people off social work is lack of support in the workforce that can lead to burnout”* (SW, 25-34). Another looked at the broader funding context and noted *“it can feel like you are the scapegoat for structural issues such as a lack of resources... the lack of resources and staff in social work can be off-putting as you know it is going to be a stressful career”* (SW, 25-34). Social work was seen as a potentially dangerous job with difficult and emotional work. Negative reporting about social work in the media and negative public opinion about social workers were also given as responses like this one *“media coverage of awful cases of neglect or supposed failures which gets blamed on social services”* (SC, 35-44). Another person described it as the *“villainisation of social work”* (SW, 25-34) and identified that it is not just the media who have negative impressions of social work, but also family and friends.

In stark contrast to responses relating to positive or attractive factors about the profession relating to pay and conditions, low pay featured strongly across cohorts as a potential barrier in pursuing social work as a profession. The following sentiments are taken from across the three cohorts and pose as a concern across age ranges, *“Low pay for high workload”* (SP, 18-24); *“Massive workload does not equal pay given”* (SC, 25-34); *“Low pay, high stress, no staff”* (SW, 35-44).

The cost of social work education was also seen as prohibitive and a reason why people might be put off entering the profession. One comment was *“Educational cost is a major barrier i.e., €16,000 for the MSW in UCC”* (SW, 25-34) and another *“The amount of money it costs nearly 20,000! Without any special funding to study course unlike education or law... no payment for 1,000 hours of placement training with real service users and their cases!”* (SW, 45-54). The cost of social work education was explored further in the in-depth focus group sessions and was identified by all participants as a significant barrier to entering the profession.



FG1 received a scholarship to pursue his studies but said that if he had not had the scholarship “*due to the financial barrier, it [the MSW course] would have been off-limits.*” FG3 said “*I’m so lucky that I live at home with my parents, but I still work 7 days a week. I’m in placement. Monday to Friday, and I still work Saturdays and Sundays. Placement just breaks your bank account.*” FG6 also agreed and stated that the cost of training is “*absolutely off putting, and I think it’s really poor that if you want to be a teacher, you can go back and do a postgrad as a teacher, or go back and do a postgrad as a lawyer, and get all your fees funded but if you want to be a social worker, you have to pay for it as a as a post grad.*” FG6 stated that “*a lot of people drop out after first year because they can’t afford to continue.*” Similarly, FG5 said that a friend of hers has been saving for five years in order to fund the fees of the course. In her own case, FG5 said that when she was accepted onto her course “*I was nearly gonna not do it because I was like, I can’t afford this financially, and I really, really, really struggled and I had to fight with the college to even get like the financial aid, and everything is so means tested.*”

Addressing the high cost of social work training was also seen as a way to attract more interest in the profession. FG2 highlighted a desire to be paid while on placement and at a minimum not to pay fees while on placement: “*I think for me being paid - you know, recognising that the placement should be supported. Placements are an additional expense over and above fees... it’s one thing not being paid on placement but it’s another thing effectively paying to be on placement when you are bringing something to that organisation at some level*” (FG2). FG5 wholeheartedly agreed, “*But if I start, I won’t stop on the whole finances thing, because I really want to rise up about this. Our class had a huge discussion on this... I think there just needs to be some sort of help... as social work students, we all need to come together and fight on that. Maybe social welfare or maybe tax credits, well not tax credits if you have to wait until the end of the year, but something, some help.*” FG3 also suggested some payment “*even like a €100 a week*” (FG5). FG7 agreed and said “*even just to offset the costs not to actually, you know, come out with a profit. I’m already saving now for my work placement in third year, you know.*” FG5 said “*there was a really interesting article that our lecturer brought into us, and it was about an Australian study. It was called ‘our placement makes us broke’... our lecturers and placement coordinators say that they are only asking us for 14 weeks - but it’s not just the 14 weeks, it’s the cost and expense of actually going into college, and everything else which we already spoke about and the fact that you have to cut back*” (FG5).

Educational costs were also identified as a factor which affects diversity in the profession. FG6 posited, “*they make it so difficult for people to actually do the course and what they’re doing is they’re actually putting off an awful lot of people who are from the very communities that they should have in the profession, because they’re making it into very much a middle-class profession by making the fees prohibitive*” (FG6).

Given that social work students have a full awareness of current fees for social work education, we posed a specific question to participants in the social care and social policy cohorts asking if they knew how much social work education costs per annum. Participants were provided with a range of cost options, from ‘€2000-€4,000 per year’ to ‘more than €8000 per year’. There was

a range of responses across the two cohorts with social care respondents being more likely to under-estimate the potential costs. Those in the social policy cohort however were drawn from a sample of UCD undergraduate students who can choose electives in social work with a view to entering the professional master's in social work at UCD and therefore may have had greater awareness of the costs on account of this. Eight of the fourteen (57%) social policy respondents thought the social work education costs more than €8,000 per year, while only six of the twenty-one (28%) social care respondents felt that it cost more than €8,000 per year. A third of this cohort (n=7/21) thought that social work education might cost between €2,000 and €4,000 per year.

The length of time required for social policy and social care students to firstly pursue undergraduate and then postgraduate study for a MSW qualification was identified as adding to the cost. FG1 said that Trinity runs the only undergraduate course for social work in Ireland and this is a significant advantage (Note: UCC also runs an undergraduate programme but this is only open to mature students). Elsewhere, in order to access the postgraduate courses, students first have to fund an undergraduate degree in social policy, social studies or something similar. FG2 pointed out that many other post graduate degrees are only one year whereas the MSW is two years and includes placements where *“they will require you to work for nothing.”* FG2 continued, *“Oh, it is expensive. I’ve paid €18,000 for the fees, and then I’ve had to work for 6 months for no pay.”*

The cost of being on placement was identified as a very significant barrier and those concerns shared by undergraduates on social care and social policy programmes appear to be borne out by those currently undertaking social work education. FG3 agreed and said, *“I’ve never been so broke as when I’m on placement...and I’m working seven days a week.”* FG5 stated that in addition to not being able to work to fund her course, she was also required to travel long distances while on placement and was not eligible for mileage or travel costs. A comparison with student nurses was drawn by FG6 who stated, *“...so, a nurse is changing your dressings and doing blood pressure and they are getting paid. Whereas the student social worker is out doing safeguarding in the community with vulnerable families and isn’t getting paid... and I just think it’s very, very poor of the government when social work is such an important profession.”* FG3 posited that if student social workers could be paid an allowance while on placement *“this would definitely help with staff retention.”* FG7 agreed and advocated that even if an allowance wasn’t possible, at a minimum cost should be covered so that the student could break even. The cost of learning to drive which is often required for social work posts was also identified as an additional cost. FG7 said, *“there’s about 4 people in my class who don’t drive and they’re in the process of getting their learners permission and doing their lessons. That’s a hidden cost and they’re feeling the financial pinch already with all these extra bits that are required.”*

As discussed above in the section on diversity, the cost of social work training was considered to result in the profession becoming middle class and elitist (FG2). FG1 argued that *“education is a huge tool for social mobility... and if you look at it from a class perspective... social workers primarily engage with people from the lower socioeconomic [groups]... but those working in social work do not live with them or have experience of them... and therefore there is a power differential.”* FG2

agreed and said social work training *“was hard for me to access. So, I really feel that people from the lower socio-economic groups, people with mental health issues. They’re not supported. It’s so elitist actually.”*

Social work education programmes in general tend to be resource heavy, particularly in the context of the requirement for each student to secure 1,000 hours of practice learning experience under the supervision of a qualified, CORU registered social worker (CORU, 2019). In this context the survey also asked what the preferred mode of delivery for social work education was among the cohorts. Participants were asked to rank their preferences for the following options: Fulltime in person, parttime in person, hybrid blended fulltime, hybrid/blended parttime, online fulltime, online parttime. The results varied, eighty-seven in total across all cohorts responded to this question, twenty-one social care students, fourteen social policy students, and fifty-two social work students responded. Even in the fallout of covid-19 and the upsurge in home and remote working more generally, there remains a strong preference for fulltime in-person training for social work. Both social care and social policy cohorts ranked this preference as their most preferred (Social policy, n=11/14; social care, n=12/21) while social work students ranked this option as a close second (n=20/52) with a Hybrid/Blended Fulltime option ranked as their most preferred (n=21/52). Interestingly, only one participant selected ‘online fulltime’ as their first preference.

The focus groups explored this in more detail and presented some contrary views highlighting the challenges of in-person training, again in part linked to cost. Participants were in general agreement that while in-person classes and interaction with their peers was beneficial, the cost of attending in-person in college was problematic and most favoured some type of hybrid arrangement for course delivery. FG2 said, *“part of the week in college, part of the week at home, and that really worked for me to save money on commuting, and to save time. It’s been full time on campus since January and I find that really hard going... it’s expensive. Parking is really difficult to find and it’s stressful trying to get from place to place... I want to move through the course quickly as possible as a personal preference. But I like I don’t want to be full time online, because I think you miss out on the interaction with people, so for me the hybrid model was the best one.”* FG1 agreed that with online lectures *“we didn’t have the experience of stressfulness of traffic or parking.”* However, FG1 said his home environment is not suitable for study due to small children. FG7 also has small children and said *“I’m kind of struggling with childcare...it’s a bit hazy here... and I suppose it kind of annoys me that they were able to go like fully online during Covid, but the mere mention of it now is a big no no.”*

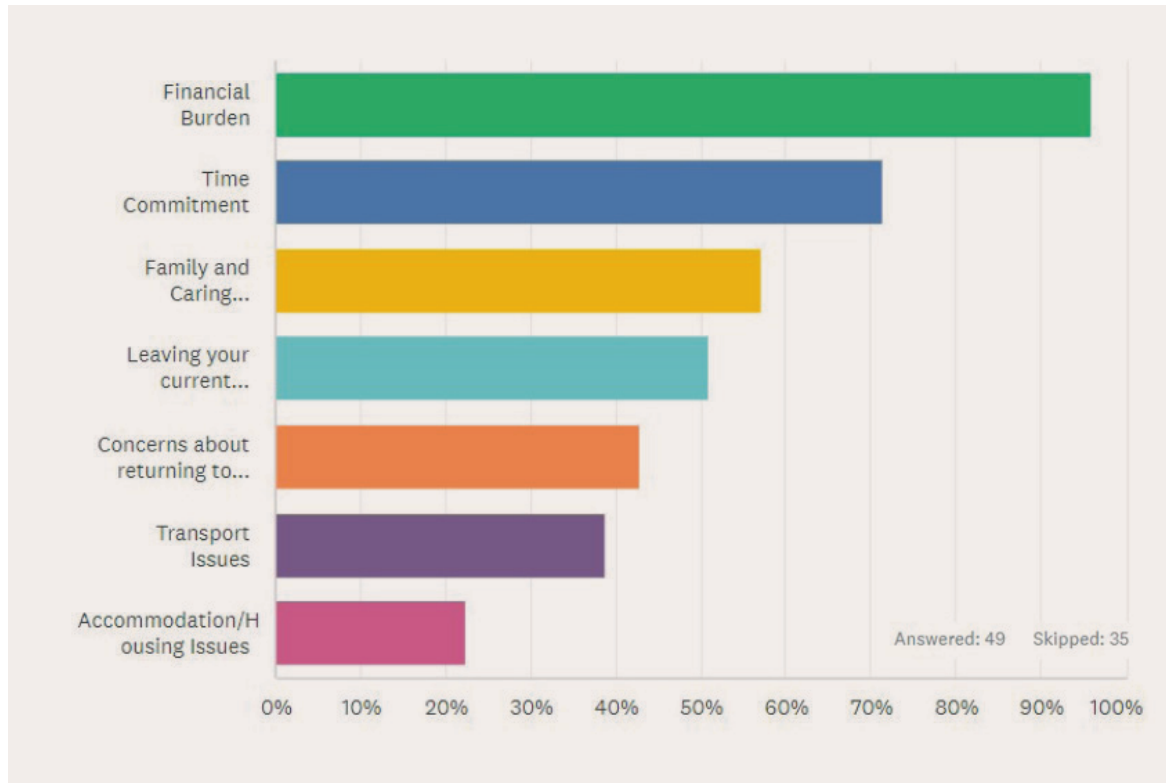
In particular, having to attend in-person for short periods was identified as problematic especially for those who cannot afford or source accommodation close to the college. FG5 said, *“You had 2 hours one day, then you might have a full day the next day, 2 hours the next day. It was just not worth it for people who are traveling.”* Although FG7 lives close to her college she said *“something as simple as me leaving my house in the morning to go to college, where I could literally be in for 2 hours and I’ve parking. If I don’t drive I have to get the bus and I’ve child care. That could be up to*

€25 for just one day where the lecture could actually be online.” FG3 said a student colleague travels from [a northerly county] two days a week. Similarly, FG5 said “out of the 25 of our class there’s 6 of us that we’re actually based in [the university city] and all the rest commute. There’s 2 guys coming from [across the country] every day, there was a girl from [a northerly county] and even one guy leaving their house at 5am and not getting home until 8pm and then they were expected to have 40 pages of reading done, and analysed, and questions about it for the next morning.”

Echoing the survey responses, none of the participants advocated a fully online mode of course delivery but having the option to log in to class online was considered attractive (FG5). FG3 said “Yeah, I was gonna say it’s more to have the option. You might be too sick to get up at 5 o’clock to go to Dublin and want to just sit in, and you just kind of want to be at home in your pyjamas. But like, if you can log on online, you’re not missing the day.” FG5 agreed with having an option but was clear that “I wouldn’t like to see areas go fully online because some of our lecturers did that, and were trying to be nice, and then everyone took advantage of it. And that is gonna happen. So, I think it needs to be more in exceptional circumstances... but I think the option, if say you missed the class that even the slides can be sent out like a record, you know, slides with some notes or something.”

The social work student cohort were best placed to speak to the current experiences of social work education and so, while the study examined barriers to entering the profession in general, it also explored what current social work students perceived as the barriers to entering social work education in particular. The survey offered a range of common issues and asked the participants to rank these barriers in order of their significance/relevance to them personally. Forty-nine participants responded to this question and forty-seven of those ranked ‘Financial burden’ as their number one challenge (n=47/49). This was closely followed by the time commitment required to pursue social work education (n=35/49) with family and caring commitments ranking as the third most challenging aspect (n=28/49).

**Fig 7: Have you encountered any of the following difficulties enrolling onto social work programmes?**



Participants were also offered an opportunity to comment further on these issues. One respondent was representative of others in summing up the burden related to becoming a social work student, “*The master’s in social work is extremely expensive - especially since social workers are in demand. Placements are long – necessary, but students are essentially paying thousands of euros to work full-time hours for free. This creates work burdens and means students are often having to work weekends to financially cope. This can mean students are regularly working a 7-day week. Not sustainable*” (SW, 25-34). Others highlighted the “*stress on relationships*” (SW, 18-24), and that the “*cost is prohibitive without family support*” (SW, 45-54).

## What led people to consider social work?

While the social work student cohort are currently pursuing careers in social work, we also specifically asked the social policy and social care cohorts if they are considering a career in social work. In addition to our entire social work cohort of eighty-four respondents, sixteen social care (n=16/35) and twelve social policy students (n=12/16) said that they were considering a career in social work. While we gathered data on the perceived positives and negatives surrounding the profession, as well as what might attract or deter people from entering the profession, we also asked what led the respondent themselves to consider social work.

The overwhelming response to this question across the three cohorts was the desire to help people and to make a difference in their lives. On a heartening note, many spoke about social work as something they have always wanted to do. Being an advocate for people was also referred to, as was the wish to adhere to the values of social justice: *“My interactions with social work have been mostly positive but the negative interactions made me go into the career so that we could try change the narrative. Fighting for human rights and social justice”* (SW, 18-24). Another said that they are pursuing social work for *“Many reasons especially seeing injustice in Ireland. Stigma against single parents, homeless people and people with drug issues”* (SW, 45-54). One social policy student said, *“Coming from a diverse background I want to change the narrative of social workers”* (SP, 18-24).

Another strong theme was that of career progression and obtaining a professional qualification. It was noted that social work has a better salary than social care and not having to do shift work means that the hours are more appealing. One participant commented on the stability associated with the career saying *“I feel the role will be more enjoyable than social care. It is a higher-paid career than social care, and it is a pensionable job in the public sector”* (SW, 25-34). This change in career or career progression was linked by many of the respondents to the sense that it was the *right time* for them to pursue a career in social work. As one participant said, *“It’s now or never, my children are in a good place, I did an Adult continuing education course in UCC and that gave me confidence in my academic abilities”* (SW, 25-34). The influence of having had personal experiences of adversity or having interacted with social workers as a service user did emerge from a smaller but still significant number of responses, in terms of their choice to enter the profession; *“Life events and realising I can help”* (SP, 25-34); *“Adversity in my own life led me to want to help others who may have similar difficulty in their lives”* (SW, 45-54). This lived experience was seen as a motivator to embark on a social work career.

### *Returning to education.*

As part of gathering the views of participants regarding what led them to consider careers in social work, we were also interested specifically in those returning to education as mature students. This included a cohort of current social work students on social work education programmes who are returning to education and may have had professional experiences in other

fields. Fifty-two of our social work cohort responded to this question and of those thirty-two said that they were returning to education. Within this cohort we selected those who stated that they were returning to education after more than three years. This sample included four individuals who were returning after 4-6 years, seven individuals returning after 7-10 years, and 15 individuals returning to education after more than 10 years.

What is interesting within this sample are the various fields and professional backgrounds from which they come. Social care was the most common previous professional background, with seven participants highlighting this. However, while there are only one or two in each category, we feel it is useful to set out all the other backgrounds that were mentioned. These included related fields such as a Family support worker, addiction support worker, classroom assistant, disability services, and youth work. But it also included ostensibly unrelated fields such as IT administration, finance, construction, engineering, hospitality, broadcasting, retail, and law.

While some of the motivations of social work students or candidates are explored above, we decided to take a closer look at the motivations of those coming from ‘less familiar’ backgrounds, into the profession of social work. A theme among this small group was that they were motivated by previous experiences of social work or their own lived experiences of adversity. The following is an example from one participant coming from an IT background, *“I first thought of social work as a career as a result of a key worker I had while living in emergency accommodation. I have always volunteered in various areas and have an active interest in promoting social justice, but my personal experience of homelessness made me reframe my career choice”* (SW, 25-34). Another trend among this small cohort was a desire to make a difference and fight injustices they have seen. One example from a participant coming to social work from law typifies this where they say they have a “Commitment to equality and caring” and they wish to *“combine my legal career with social work”* (SW, 55-64).

### **Preferences for working in specific areas of social work.**

In the survey instruments, across all three cohorts, we asked participants if there are any areas of social work that they would like to work in, and why. Similarly, we asked are they areas they specifically do not wish to work in, and why not.

In terms of areas within which participants wished to work there was a mixed response, incorporating a wide range of social work settings and roles. Eighty-six participants responded to this question (responses across cohorts included SW n=52, SC n=20, SP n=14). The wider setting of children’s services was a strong preference for many across the cohorts. This primarily included Tusla services including fostering, duty social work, children in care, but also those who simply said they want to work with children. For the social work cohort, probation ranked as a second highest preference among that group, with nine out of fifty-two responses specifically highlighting this. Outside of these areas a number of participants flagged areas such as addiction

(n=5/86), medical (n=9/86), and mental health (n=5/86) among other areas. Respondents from the social policy cohort only mentioned children's services (n=7/14) and medical social work (n=3/14) as their preferences. Across the three cohorts there were also a number (n=17/86) who had no preference or had not decided yet.

In terms of areas that participants felt they did not wish to work in, of the eighty-six responses to this question, many identified children's services (n=26/86) and disability services (n=16/86) as sectors they would prefer not to work in. Stress, high caseloads, and stigma were the main reasons for preferring not to work in children's services. One participant stated, "*Child protection because of the high burn out rates*" (SW, 18-24), while in a similar vein, another said, "*child protection - high burnout, lack of support and highly sensitive materials*" (SP, 18-24). These were mostly representative of the responses in respect of not wishing to work in children's services. In terms of disability, the rationale for not wishing to pursue a career in this area varied. Some identified it as an area that "*just wouldn't be for me*" as one social care participant put it (SC, 18-24). Others highlighted the conditions they perceived as being present in disability services, such as this social work student who said, "*Disability, chronic underfunding and burnout rates*" (SW, 25-34).

We decided to explore this further in our focus group sessions. Respondents said one reason they would prefer not to work in the disability sector is ongoing publicity with regarding the lack of resources in this sector. FG2 had some experience of disability services and said, "*it was grossly under resourced, and your heart just broke for the people who had so many challenges in their life, looking after children who had such complex and challenging disabilities, and who were on waiting lists and that would never ever get the support that they needed... and you feel as if you're not making a difference. And part of the reason you get into this profession is to make a difference. In fact, all you're doing is raising expectations when there's nothing going to come at the end of it*" (FG2). FG7 had personal experience of disability services and agreed with this point of view, saying that, "*[the sector] does seem to be one of the ones that's mostly kinda like on the news. You see it every September. There's a lack of school spaces. There's a lack of speech and language therapy and outpatient therapy. There's just a lack across the board and to go into somewhere where there's already deficits, then the workload just becomes astronomical, you know. I suppose the feeling of helplessness, or you know, that you are up against a brick wall, and it's impossible.*" FG5 expressed a similar view about disability services, "*I think, the reason that people don't want to go into disability is because like what [FG7] was saying, there's so many limitations, and no resources, and everything is about trying to find some other organisation that can provide something*" (FG5).

FG3 added a different perspective and pointed out that many students work in the disability sector as a way of funding their college courses and then when qualified they feel "*It's just like no like I'm done with it... I've done my three or four years.*" This was also echoed in some of the survey responses. FG5 pointed out that a student colleague had worked in disability services as a social care worker and "*ended up getting her placement in the exact same office where she works as a social care worker... When we had our recall day, she was so frustrated. She said she was doing the exact same as a social care worker as a social worker, and that's what really frustrated her because*



*she was like. I'm not getting paid to do this [on placement], and then having to go in or stay on at work [afterwards or at the weekend] and get paid to do the same job."* FG7 agreed with this view and said, *"a lot of my friends actually work in social care, and they pretty much echo the exact same thing."*

On a positive note, FG6 said that she listed disability as an area in which she did not want to have a placement. Nonetheless, her current placement is in a disability organisation and *"I absolutely love this, and I would actually like to work here now, when I qualify."*

### **The differences between social work and social care.**

In light of the proportion of social care students applying to, and partaking in, social work education, the close working relationships between the social care and social work, and a continuing narrative and trend in diversifying workforces, we sought the views of both social work and social care students on what they felt the differences are between the two professions. Two main differences were identified between social work and social care. The first was that social work was seen to be more concerned with case management than direct work with clients *"Social Care is work directly with people, social work more distance, macro and meso level work"* (SC, 35-44). This theme was represented across more than half (12/21) social care respondents. Albeit not generalisable, the concern here is that many skills and practices traditionally associated with social work were perceived as being the role of social care as opposed to social work; *"one is hands on and one is more based on paperwork and decision making"* (SC, 35-44); *"Social work involves more administrative work and is less hands on than social care"* (SC, 18-24). These perceptions were possibly summed up by one respondent who, in response to this question about what the difference between the two professions is, stated *"very little other than the title of social worker is more 'recognised'"* (SC, 35-44).

Social care was identified as being more involved in the day-to-day aspects of people's lives and therefore there was more potential to develop meaningful relationships *"Social care is more person centred and working individually with people, going out and meeting service user"*. A small number of respondents identified that there are different educational requirements for social work and social care and that there may be differences in the theoretical approaches to each job *'social work uses strengths based, and needs-led approaches. Social care entails shared life-space opportunities to meet physical, and emotional needs'* (SC, 18-24).

The social work cohort, who were posed this question also, highlighted the need to be legally aware, work within statute, and having statutory obligations as being a distinctive factor between the two professions. The following are representative of the social work responses, *"Social workers have more responsibility i.e., statutory obligations. Court attendance is another difference. Social workers have a larger/higher risk caseload"* (SW, 25-34); *"Social work involves carrying out statutory duties"* (SW, 35-44); *"Social work has more legislative responsibilities"* (SW, 45-54).



## Section 6: Recommendations and Conclusions

### Key Messages:

- There is a strong awareness of a negative narrative surrounding social work that needs to be countered at a national level.
- Gender and diversity of the student body and future workforce are core issues that need to be considered in any approach to promoting social work or developing new pathways into the profession.
- Linked to diversity of the profession and sustainability of a stream of new graduates, the cost of social work education, particularly hidden costs related to practice learning, need to be thoroughly examined at a national level and within HEIs.

### Introduction

Social work as a profession is currently facing significant challenges in terms of recruitment and retention. The most recent figures released by CORU, the Health and Social Care Regulator, show that as of April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, there are 5,187 registered social workers in Ireland (see [www.coru.ie](http://www.coru.ie)). Not all of these may be in practice. For example, social work academics are required to maintain their registration annually and a majority of these are employed on a fulltime basis in Higher Education Institutes. However, accurate publicly accessible data on the national social work workforce is scant. Complicated by the many different sectors and settings in which social workers are employed. We know from various social work service providers and agencies that significant staff shortages are being experienced currently (Irish Examiner, 2022). This has led to statements from agencies, such as Tusla, that they are losing more staff than they can hire; leading to calls for an increase in new social work graduates. In our experience as social work educators we are aware that a majority of social work education programmes do not fill their available places year on year, and this prompts the questions, what attracts or deters potential applicants from a career in social work and how do we increase the supply of new social workers?

This study involved a survey of 135 potential new entrants into the social work profession and while their views may not be generalisable to the wider pool of those who may possibly enter the profession, they do present some insight into the understanding and awareness of social work within these cohorts. Across the entire sample there was a perception of social work as a stressful profession, much maligned in public and media narratives, and a profession that can potentially lead to burnout. While this sense was strongest among current social work students, there was also a strong awareness of this among both social care and social policy student re-

spondents who have yet to decide if they wish to pursue a career in social work.

For those qualifying in Ireland, approved social work education programmes are the only route to becoming a CORU registered social worker and ultimately being able to practice in Ireland. These programmes are currently offered by six schools across six different Higher Education Institutes. The findings of this Report present a strong view, across the entire sample, that social work education is expensive. Moreover, this view is linked with a perception that the cost of social work education may in fact be prohibitive to those deciding whether or not to enter the profession and may be a barrier to increasing diversity within the profession.

In terms of diversity, the respondents felt that the profession itself is not reflective of the populations it serves. The profession is viewed as predominantly female, middle class and, while progressing, is not representative of the cultural and ethnic diversity which Irish society is fortunate to have. These are current but not new findings. In 2010 a study conducted by University College Dublin in conjunction with the Health Service Executive examined recruitment and retention in, the then HSE, Child and Family Services. It found, among other things, that their student cohort 'had very particular attitudes about the profession, with clear perceptions evident at the start of their training about different areas of the profession in relation to levels of stress, job satisfaction, expertise required etc' (Redmond et al., 2010, p59).

The findings presented in this Report have prompted recommendations related to the marketing and promotion of the social work profession, gender and diversity within the profession, and the cost and provision of social work education. These three main recommendations could be best achieved by the development of a national strategy for the social work profession in Ireland encompassing the various issues across the life course of a social work professional: ***from considering the career - to nurturing the next generation.***

## Marketing the profession of social work

As noted in previous research, such as the IASW-commissioned report on recruitment and retention (O'Meara and Kelleher, 2022), there is a strong need to 'market' the profession. In fact, some of our participants went so far as to highlight the need for a public awareness campaign around the role of social work. From our findings, considering the difference in age ranges between those applying to undergraduate programmes such as social care and social policy and those engaging in social work education, any marketing strategies may need to be tailored to reach, or speak to, different cohorts. Such strategies also need to take cognisance of the predominantly female workforce, and entrants to the workforce. This is critical for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure that ample resources and supports are available to those already in and entering the workforce, but, secondly, to also begin to attract more males to the workforce to create greater balance but also to recognise the need for male role models in working in areas such as child

welfare and protection, for example.

There was a strong perception among the participants that social work has a negative image in the public eye and in the eye of the media. For some this was linked to ‘selling papers’ and the draw of the bad news narrative. If this is the case, then it is unlikely to change at media level and therefore the emphasis must be on the role of the profession itself in ‘selling’ its own narrative. Many of the positive experiences or perceptions of social work, relayed by the participants, and in other similar studies, were related to ‘exposure’ to the profession. Either having had social work involvement, knowing a social worker, or working closely with social workers or their clients and service users. It would seem important to capitalise on these positive sentiments and perspectives and share them with a wider audience, ‘exposing’ the public and media to these positive portrayals. Findings from this and other studies should be used as a basis to develop comprehensive marketing campaign for the profession of social work.

One of the hurdles that must be crossed in this regard is the fact that social work is a diverse profession and has many different stakeholders (Tusla, HSE, Probation Service, DCEDIY, Dept of Justice, Dept of Health etc.). Brining these stakeholders together to promote a shared view of social work would be a starting step in the direction of promoting the profession and raising awareness and familiarity among potential new candidates. HEIs delivering social work education have a large part to play in how social work is promoted and perceived. Findings of this study lead us to believe that stronger links are required between social work education programmes and those programmes that could pose as routes to entry. Stronger links with social care, social policy and other related and relevant undergraduate programmes across the country. This could be done by way of external lecturing, ‘Introduction to social work’-type modules, joint teaching, or development of seminars or summer schools that develop awareness of the profession among potential applicants. While HEI’s could develop such a strategy we would see it as important that this is done in conjunction with a national strategy to promote the profession. In this context the authors suggest that the findings of this Report support calls made by the IASW to develop a national strategy for social work (O’Meara and Kelleher, 2022).

### *Marketing to 2nd level students*

In addition to the above approach, the current project being conducted by Tusla, speaking with transition year students about the role of Tusla and careers in Tusla, appears to be imparting a foundational understanding of the role of social work at a point in students’ lives when they are beginning to consider their future careers. While limited data is available on this aspect, it would seem useful to develop this project beyond the role of Tusla and to engage with transition year and leaving-cycle students about the wider profession of social work, what it entails, what job opportunities are available, and how to access the profession. Such a project could be a starting point in also ‘reclaiming’ the narrative around social work and promoting some of the many positive aspects of the profession.

We would again like to note the research that has gone before, particularly recommendations

by the IASW-commissioned report produced by O'Meara and Kelleher (2022) who also suggested the need for 'information campaigns aimed particularly at second-level students' (2022, p5). We feel Tusla's experience in this respect makes them an obvious partner to begin to develop such a strategy. Again, we would argue that this should fit, as a work package, under and over-arching national strategy.

## Gender and Diversity

There is a clear perception across all cohorts of this study that social work is a largely female profession. This is not a new finding and is well documented in other studies and in the national statistics held by CORU in respect of their social work registrants. While for some this was linked to a notion of social work being a caring profession and therefore more synonymous with females, for others they were not clear why the profession attracted mostly female candidates. Furthermore, in respect to wider diversity within the profession there was sentiment that this is improving, with students stating that their social work classrooms are becoming more diverse and that this is a positive development. This was tempered by the perspective that the profession is not reflective of who it serves. This aspect warrants further study.

This study prompts approaches that again are strongly linked to how the profession is promoted. Attracting more candidates to the profession who identify as male should be viewed as an ambition for any future promotional strategy. This is the same for further developing the cultural and national diversity of the profession. One simple and recent example is the television advertisement campaign launched by An Garda Síochána to attract specific cohorts. In the advertisement the majority of those portraying the role of the Garda are either female or from an ethnic minority background. The campaign also resonates with social work as it attempts to address what is publicly perceived as a difficult, stressful, or thankless job, conducted by largely one gender. What appears to be emphasised strongly in this advertisement is the value of 'team' in the workplace and the person-centred nature of the work, strongly resonant with social work.

## The cost of social work education

Strongly linked to diversity within the profession, the cost of social work education featured as a prominent barrier or an existing issue for many of the participants. What is important here is that the participants themselves made this strong link, between cost of education and diversity within the profession. As one participant put it, "*Social work claims to reflect diverse groups, however academic fees within Ireland act as a barrier for including people from a low socioeconomic background into the profession*". One participant, reflecting other sentiments of this nature, described social work education in Ireland as 'elitist'.

In light of these comments shared by participants regarding the cost of social work education we decided to take a random sample of CORU approved master's level qualifications that run over two years on a full time basis - equivalent to the majority of social work master's programmes. We sampled across the various other professions that are also regulated by CORU, e.g., dieticians, radiographers, physiotherapy. We found that on average the cost of programmes for these other professional qualifications are higher than the most expensive social work master's qualification (€10,240 per annum, UCD). That said, social work tends to attract a diverse cohort overrepresented in terms of adversity, trauma, and life experiences of engagement with social services.

Irrespective of how costs could be reviewed or supported, the reality appears to be that for a proportion of new graduates at least, they will be entering what is already perceived as a stressful career with added financial pressures and burdens arising out of their education. Therefore, the promotion, cost of entry, and available supports within the profession must seek to reflect the population it serves. While many HEIs have programmes designed to widen participation and access, we argue that more needs to be done, specific to social work, to increase access and diversity within the profession. Significant attention to this issue is warranted, particularly if the profession wishes to increase the diversity of its graduates and the future of the workforce.

In this context a discussion is also required regarding the 'hidden costs' of social work education. Practice placements are a cornerstone of professional training in social work and a requirement of the social work regulator, CORU. Each student must complete 1,000 hours of practice placement under the supervision of a qualified social worker. Unlike some other professional training, social work students do not get paid while on placement. This creates a huge barrier and burden to the profession. Students, often with families, mortgages, and general life expenses and commitments, must attend on placement during office hours, normally for a block of fourteen weeks at a time. This reduces the ability to maintain or seek part-time employment to support college fees or general expenses and what we, as social work educators, experience is students working nights and weekends to make up the shortfall in their finances. These experiences are also reflected in the findings of this study. Targeted bursaries and scholarships could also be a way to increase diversity on social work programmes and support those who wish to pursue the profession.

Again, it is strongly recommended that this is developed by way of a national strategy related to the profession. Individual and once-off bursaries and awards, while valuable, may serve to deepen any inequalities already being experienced. One social policy student summed up the unfortunate potential impact of these costs saying, "*I would love to do masters in social work, but it is not attainable for me financially*" (SP, 45-54).

### ***Mode of delivery***

As a sub-recommendation related to the cost of social work education and increasing diversity, the mode of delivery of social work education is also discussed in the findings above. We feel this is important to highlight again here. In this post-Covid era there is increased attention to alterna-

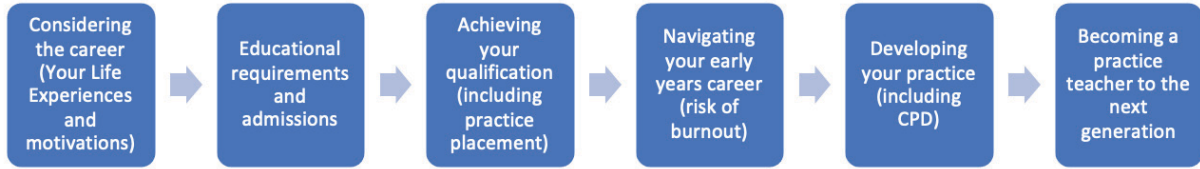
tive modes of working. Higher education is not, and was not, immune from this and during the height of our national lockdowns all HEIs moved to some form of online provision. We gathered many comments in relation to hybrid and online modes of delivery in the survey and focus group data. That said, social work is a practice-orientated, relationship-based profession. The skills required to become a social worker are built upon a firm academic foundation of theory, concepts, and existing international research. These skills are also however developed through inter-personal and practice competency-based learning which does not lend itself well to online or hybrid forms of delivery. The findings of this study highlight that students also appreciate these aspects and the preference shown by participants is generally for in-person training and education, with options. That said, we would argue that whether as a way of evidencing current approaches, or considering new or alternative approaches, there is a need for social work educators to consider current forms of deliver and in doing so develop an evidenced, best-practice approach to social work education delivery. Social work education stakeholders must develop a clear case as to why one or more forms of education are preferable to others. This could be achieved at national level among the HEIs while still retaining some individual approaches within HEIs. This, we argue, would offer certainty to candidates ahead of their applications to social work programmes, as to how they are delivered (which is provided by most HEIs) and, more importantly, why this is the case (which is maybe less clear to candidates).

## Conclusion

This Report highlights the challenges and motivators for those who may form the future of the social work profession in Ireland. We found that while core motivations of helping others, fighting for social change, and defending human rights, remain a consistent part of why people choose social work these are tinged with considerations around the cost of education, the public narrative around the profession, and the knowledge that so many new graduates face burnout and stress. It is important to remember that this survey did not sample current professionally qualified social workers. The cohort was comprised of current social work students, but also social care and social policy students who may or may not pursue the career. These narratives of burnout, stress, and public perception are therefore known to these cohorts to the extent to which they featured prominently in the responses. There is a strong argument for countering or providing an alternative narrative to reach these cohorts and beyond.

While useful and informative for understanding the experiences of current cohort, these findings do echo and reinforce important work that has gone before. The authors of this report feel that in recent years, via work by among others McCarten et al., (2022) and O'Meara and Kelleher (2022), alongside this study, we have achieved a strong picture of the challenges and factors that influence social work recruitment, retention, and education. It is therefore argued that, in adding these findings to the wider knowledge base, it is now time to act. We suggest that a holistic, life course perspective of the issues is required.

### *The life course of a social worker*



**Fig 8: Life course of a social worker**

In this vein we find it useful to think of the life course of a social work professional. This begins with their initial motivations, entry to a social work programme and successful completion of same. This then moves on into early career practice, a recognised period for risk of burnout (within the first 1-3 years). We believe our findings show that this risk is contributed to not only by the work conditions, synonymous with short staffing and low resources, but also by the process of reaching the status of a fully qualified social work professional; the expense, the time commitment, perhaps a triggering of one’s own adverse life experiences along the way, and exposure to a predominantly negative narrative about the career one is pursuing. Once established in practice the hope is that the social worker then moves into a period of facilitating practice placements and nurturing and guiding the next generation - and continuing the cycle. Like all life courses there are cycles, and we argue that there is a role to be played at each point on this cycle by multiple stakeholders related to the social work profession. We also argue that these stages of the life cycle are strongly related to each other and that such roles (for each stakeholder) need to be collaborative and hold the larger macro view in mind.

We acknowledge that there is currently strong collaboration among the various HEIs providing social work education. There is also good work being conducted at Departmental level between various stakeholders, such as the DCEDIY, Tusla, and the IASW to name a few. And across professions there are current efforts to map the issues and challenges around placement provision in the allied health and social care sector. What we argue for here is the development of a forum where these strands can be brought together to develop a clear national strategy for social work.



## Closing Message

*“I love social work. It is a tough profession and not for the faint hearted, but I believe building the skills for your future career during placement opportunities and voluntary work is vital to helping you manage the emotional toll and mental toll this job can have on you. I also think it’s important to ask for help if you are struggling with an area of social work, it could be asking questions, or dealing with a particular case that is impacting you. Don’t be afraid to ask someone like a team leader or a colleague for advice/support. People are happy to help. Furthermore, if you are the person who enjoys helping people, and encouraging people to help themselves and change their lives for the better, or you want to support someone who is struggling, then social work may be a career option for you. It is difficult but it is so rewarding when you know you can make a positive difference in someone’s life and that is why I love this job even with all the challenges it may bring.”*

(SW, 25-34)

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**Appendix: Social Work Programmes and Entry Requirements** *(information correct as of February 2023)*

Institute	Programme Title	Entry Requirements (qualifications)	Entry Requirements (experience)	Award	Average Annual Intake	Annual Fees (23/24)	Duration	Website
University of Galway	Master of Arts in Social Work	Level 8 primary undergraduate degree (minimum of Second Class Honours, Grade 2) in one of the following: Bachelor Degree with a major in Social Work, Sociology, Psychology Social Policy, Social Science, Social Studies, Social Care, Public and Social Policy, Youth and Family Studies, Health and Social Care, Childhood education, Community Development, or B.Soc. Sc or other relevant qualifications deemed equivalent by the College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Celtic Studies. These may include undergraduate/postgraduate degrees such as Childhood/ Children’s studies, Geography, Law, Economics, Theology, Philosophy, if such degrees have included a significant proportion of social science related subjects.	Prior work experience is compulsory, and candidates must have obtained six months (approx. 960 hours) of voluntary or paid work experience relevant to the social work profession in order to be eligible to apply. Relevant supervised placement learning will normally count for up to a maximum of 240 hours (6 weeks).	MA in Social Work (ECTS 120)	25	EU €8,040  Non EU €17,790	2 years	<a href="https://www.universityofgalway.ie/courses/taught-post-graduate-courses/social-work.html#course_overview">https://www.universityofgalway.ie/courses/taught-post-graduate-courses/social-work.html#course_overview</a>
University College Dublin	Professional Master’s in Social Work	Social Policy requirement  Applicants’ primary degree must include a large social policy component, equivalent to a major in social policy in an Irish degree. Applicants from countries or universities where social policy is not taught as a distinct discipline will have to demonstrate that their primary degree included modules and coursework which amounts to the equivalent of a social policy major. Please contact the admissions coordinator if you wish to ascertain whether your undergraduate degree is eligible  If you do not have the equivalent of a social policy major in your primary degree, you would need to undertake a suitable transition course, such as UCD’s Higher Diploma in Social Policy, in order to meet this element of the entry requirements for the Professional Masters in Social Work.	In addition to the academic requirements described above, we expect applicants to have been involved in relevant paid or volunteering experiences to demonstrate their commitment to a career in helping people. For this reason we expect them to have completed at least 250 hours of relevant paid or voluntary employment experience at the time of submitting their application, and in total 420 hours by the time the programme begins (end of August in the year of application).	Professional Master’s in Social Work (ECTS 150)	55	EU €10,240  Non EU €21,520	2 years	<a href="https://hub.ucd.ie/usis!/W_HU_MENU.P_PUBLISH?p_tag=PROG&amp;MAJR=W426">https://hub.ucd.ie/usis!/W_HU_MENU.P_PUBLISH?p_tag=PROG&amp;MAJR=W426</a>

Institute	Programme Title	Entry Requirements (qualifications)	Entry Requirements (experience)	Award	Average Annual Intake	Annual Fees (23/24)	Duration	Website
Maynooth University	Master of Social Science (Social Work)	A minimum Second Class Honours (2H2) primary degree (NFQ Level 8) in social science or equivalent, with social policy as a major component. Graduates with a Level 8 degree in other disciplines who have completed a relevant conversion programme e.g. Higher Diploma in Social Policy may also apply. A Higher Diploma in Social Policy is offered by Maynooth University	A minimum of 420 hours of relevant and verified social work/social service experience, paid or voluntary, by the time they commence the programme	Master of Social Science (Social Work) (MSocSc Social Work) (ECTS 120)	40	EU €8,000 Non EU €14,000	2 years	<a href="https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/study-maynooth/postgraduate-studies/courses/master-social-science-social-work#">https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/study-maynooth/postgraduate-studies/courses/master-social-science-social-work#</a>
Trinity College Dublin	Bachelor in Social Studies	School leavers who reach the CAO points (or equivalent) needed for entry. School Leaver applicants should enter BSS (TR 084) on their CAO application form.  Mature students with relevant practice experience who are selected by interview. Mature Student applicants should apply to the Admissions Office, Trinity College and complete a CAO application by the end of January.		Bachelor in Social Studies (300 ECTS)	50	EU €8,371 Non EU €26,985	4 years	<a href="https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/undergraduate/social-studies/">https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/undergraduate/social-studies/</a>
Trinity College Dublin	Master in Social Work (MSW)	The successful completion (minimum 2.1 grade) of a Level 8 degree in the social sciences is required prior to acceptance on the course. Candidates holding a primary degree in a discipline outside the social sciences must hold a postgraduate award in social sciences (minimum 2.1 grade)	In addition, candidates will be required to demonstrate a minimum of 850 hours practice experience (paid or voluntary). Hours completed while on student placements are counted at half the value of paid or voluntary work hours. For example, a 360 hour student placement would count as 180 hours towards the minimum 850 hours.	Master in Social Work (MSW)	25	EU €9,370 Non EU €19,996	2 years	<a href="https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/postgraduate/social-work/">https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/postgraduate/social-work/</a>

Institute	Programme Title	Entry Requirements (qualifications)	Entry Requirements (experience)	Award	Average Annual Intake	Annual Fees (23/24)	Duration	Website
University College Cork	Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	This programme is open to Mature Students only (i.e. those who are 23 years of age by 1 January of the year of proposed entry). Application is made through the CAO and the closing date for receipt of completed applications is 1 February of the year of proposed entry.	Evidence of interest and/or knowledge in social issues and social work; evidence of required academic potential; evidence of relevant life and/or work experience; readiness to undertake professional training.	Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	25	EU €6,325 Non EU €18,080	4 years	<a href="https://www.ucc.ie/en/ck115/">https://www.ucc.ie/en/ck115/</a>
University College Cork	Master of Social Work	Admission to the Masters of Social Work (MSW) is open to a limited number of students holding at least a Second Class Honours Grade I in a primary honours (NFQ, Level 8) BSocSc Degree (or its equivalent), or graduates who have successfully completed an approved conversion programme, i.e. the Higher Diploma in Social Policy with at least a Second Class Honours Grade I (or its equivalent).	There is a selection process based on the following combined elements: academic performance and research capacity; certified social work-related experience and initiative; knowledge of social work and motivation, commitment and suitability.	Master of Social Work (ECTS 120)	50	EU €7,965 Non EU €18,800	2 years	<a href="https://www.ucc.ie/en/cke64/">https://www.ucc.ie/en/cke64/</a>
Atlantic Technological University Sligo	Master of Arts in Social Work	Require a grade of 2.1 or above in Social Sciences i.e. B.Soc.Sc, Community Development, Early Childhood Care and Education, Psychology, Social Policy, Social Science, Social Care Practice, Sociology, Social Policy, Youth and Family Studies. If an applicant has a level 8 award in a discipline that is not social sciences, they must hold a postgraduate award in social sciences (minimum 2.1 grade). If an applicant has a level 8 award in a discipline that is not social sciences, they must hold a postgraduate award in social sciences (minimum 2.1 grade). Students with grade of 2.2 with greater than five years of relevant experience may be considered as suitable applicants to the programme.	Students must have complete 420 hours (min of 200 at interview) of non-study related practice experience before they commence the programme.	Master of Arts in Social Work (ECTS 120)	20	EU €4,750 Non EU €12,000	2 years	<a href="https://www.itsligo.ie/courses/ma-social-work/">https://www.itsligo.ie/courses/ma-social-work/</a>



School of Social Policy, Social Work, and Social Justice,  
University College Dublin



An Roinn Leanai, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth