

Veterinary Schools Council Graduate and Employer Surveys 2019

National surveys of recent graduate competency



Veterinary Schools Council



June 2020

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Introduction

The Veterinary Schools Council

The Veterinary Schools Council provides a source of informed opinion on matters concerning veterinary education and research. We engage in representative and policy work to ensure that the voice of veterinary schools is recognised for its experience and innovation.

UK members

- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Glasgow
- University of Liverpool
- University of Nottingham
- Royal Veterinary College

Non-UK associate members

- University College Dublin
- Utrecht University

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) aims to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare. We do this by setting, upholding and advancing the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

Background to the surveys

It is essential for veterinary schools to know how their graduates get on in the workplace. This helps them ensure that the education they provide is aligned with the needs of veterinary practice and the profession, and these needs are always evolving. The views of veterinary employers are crucial to this process. This was the basis for veterinary schools surveying employers in 2017, for the first time combining their efforts into a joint survey.

This year the Veterinary Schools Council collaborated with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to develop and distribute the questionnaire, aiming to improve the response rate from of the employers and graduates in the relative target populations.

For this next iteration, employers were asked to respond about their most recently employed graduate who graduated between 2017 and 2018. In addition, a second,

parallel survey was undertaken for graduates to respond to directly. This was for those who graduated between 2013 and 2015. The results of both surveys are in this report.

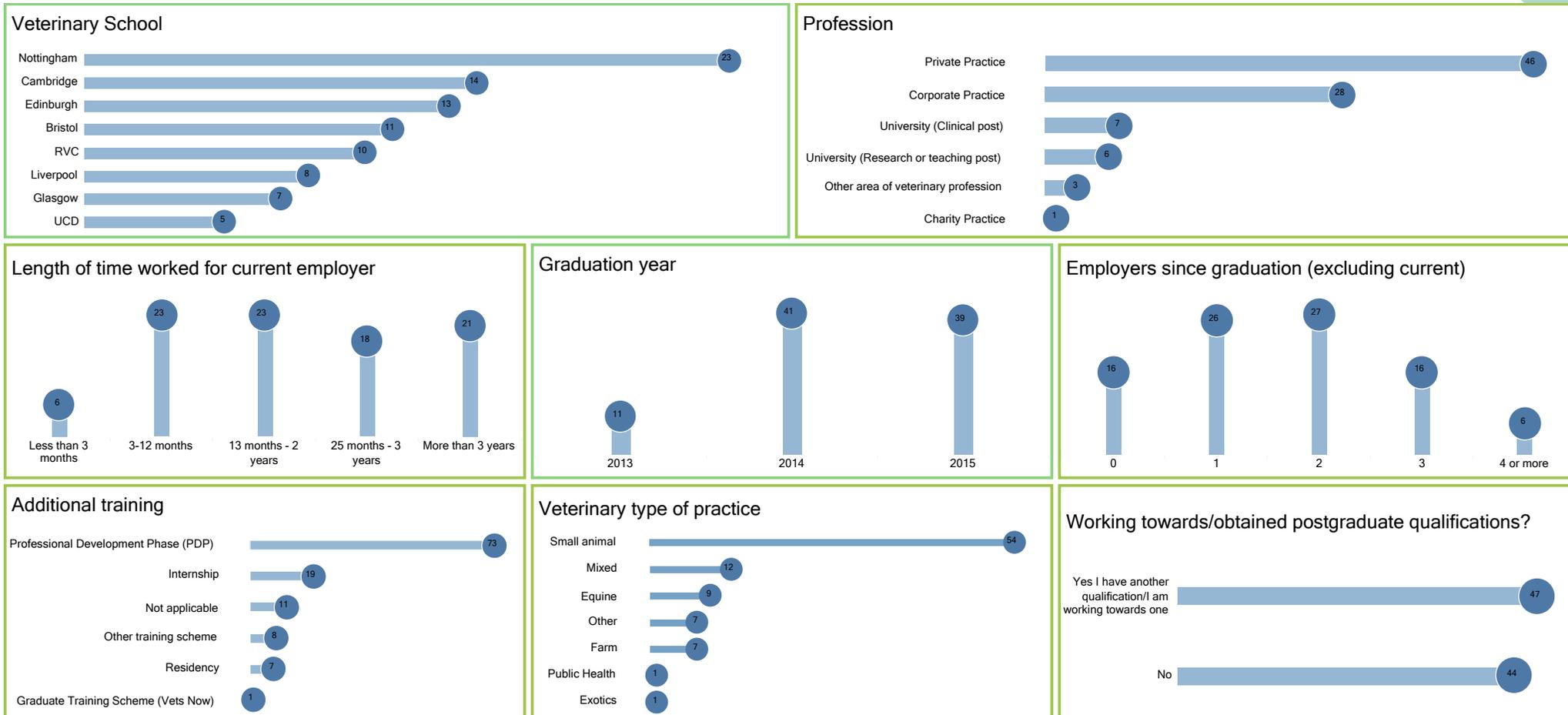
As the surveys are repeated over time, it will enable comparisons between the views of employers on graduate competency and those of the graduates themselves.

Format

The survey of employers and survey of graduates are presented concurrently and organised by theme, to enable quick comparison on the various topics.

The free text responses to the surveys are presented separately.

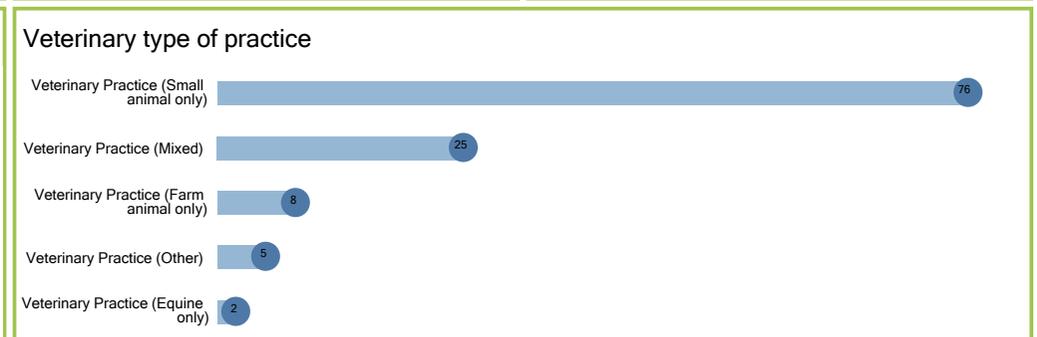
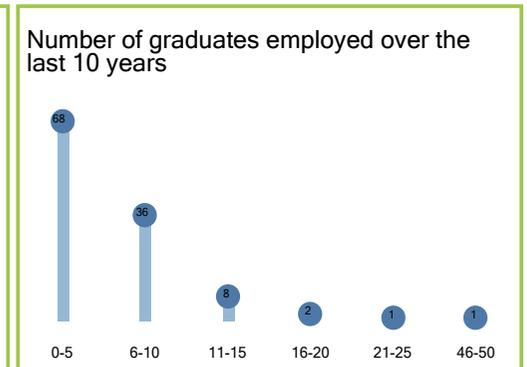
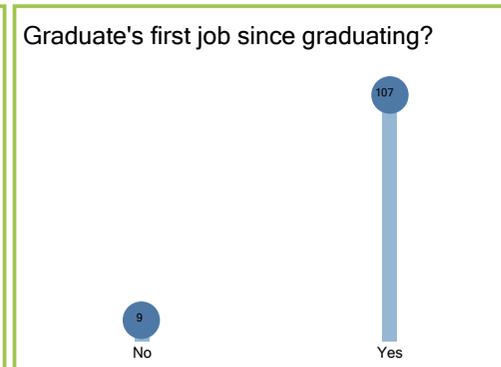
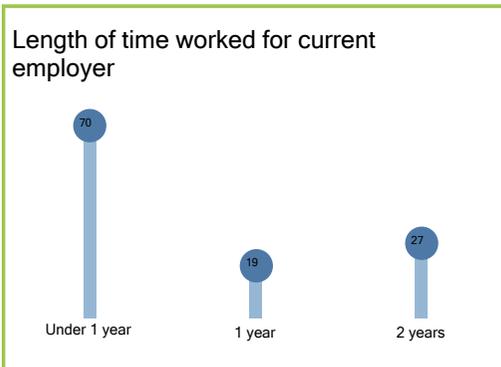
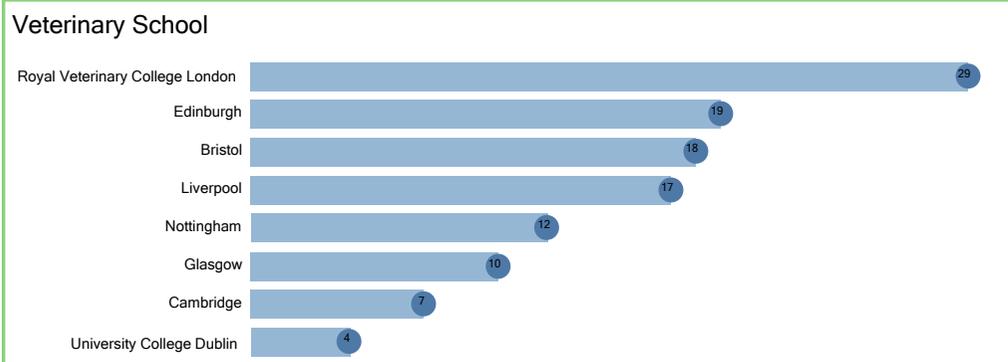
Demographics of surveyed graduates



The survey had a low response rate of 91, an estimated 5% of the eligible graduate population. All veterinary schools were represented but not equally. 79% of the respondents were working in private or corporate practices; 59% were working in small animal practices.

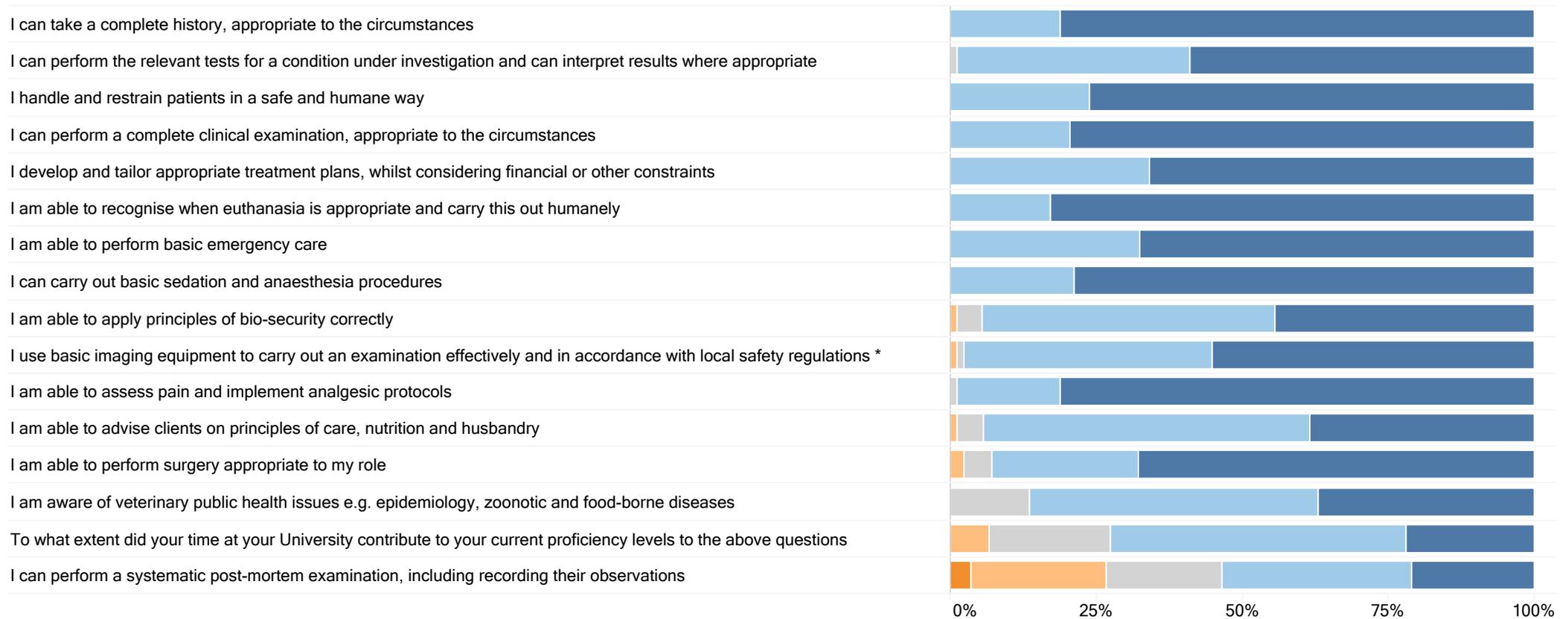
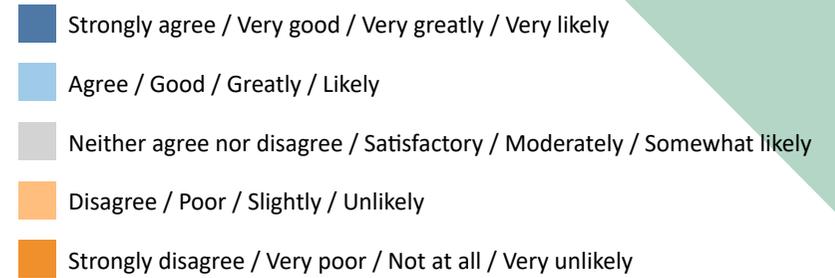
A graduate who answered the survey was most likely to have come from Nottingham (25%). They were equally likely to be employed for 3-12 months (25%) or 13–24 months (25%) rather than longer or shorter, and were very likely to have graduated in 2014 or 2015 (88%). They had usually had one or two employers since graduation (58%) and were most likely to be working in a small animal practice (59%). Most had done their professional development phase (82%) and were similarly likely to be working towards or had already obtained postgraduate qualifications (52%).

Demographics of surveyed graduates as reported by employers



Clinical skills

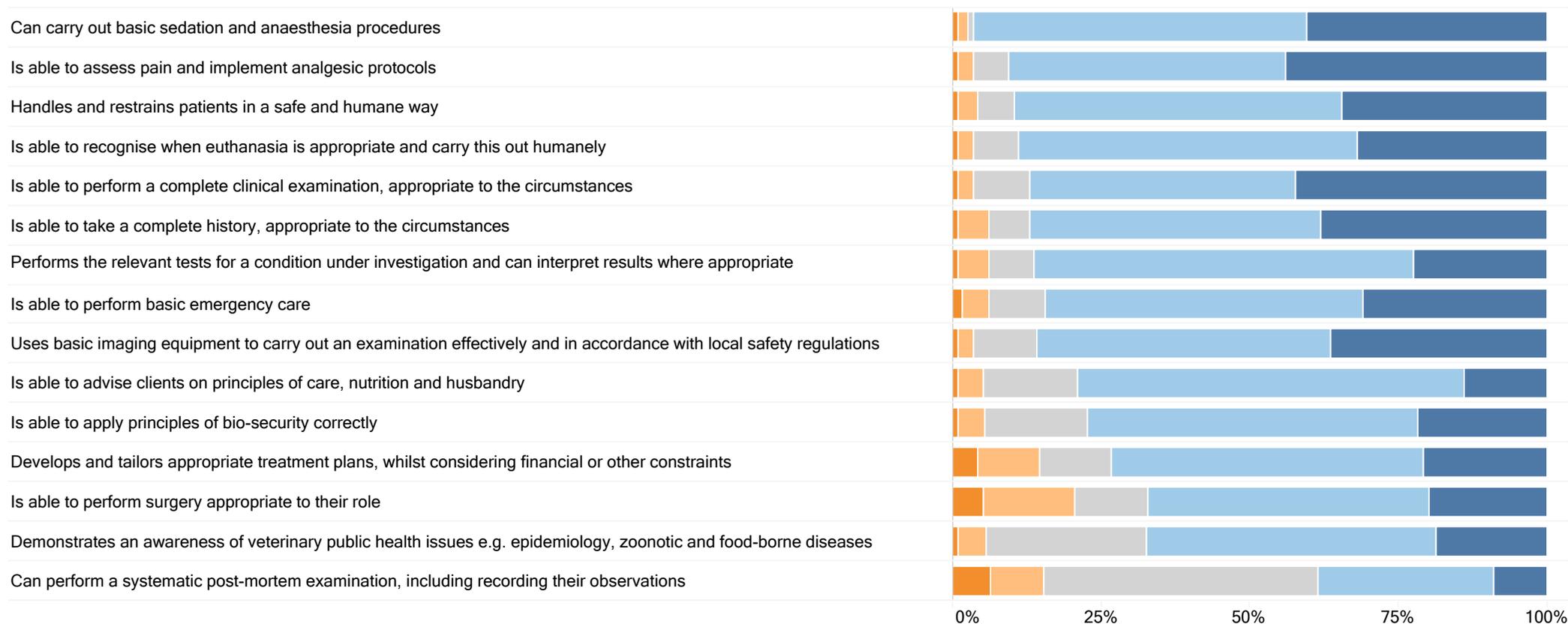
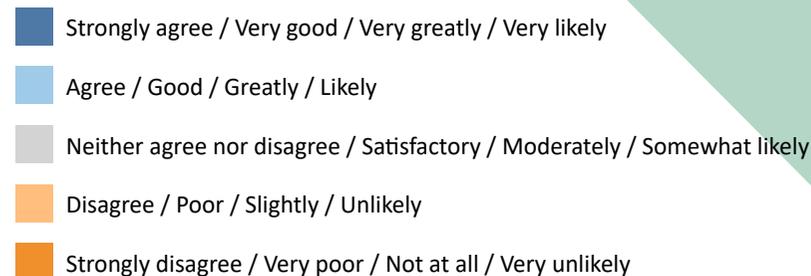
Graduates



While 96.5% of surveyed graduates agreed or strongly agreed they could take a complete history, graduates were less sure of their knowledge of relevant public health issues. 27% of graduates disagreed or strongly disagreed that they can perform a systematic post-mortem exam.

Clinical skills

Employers

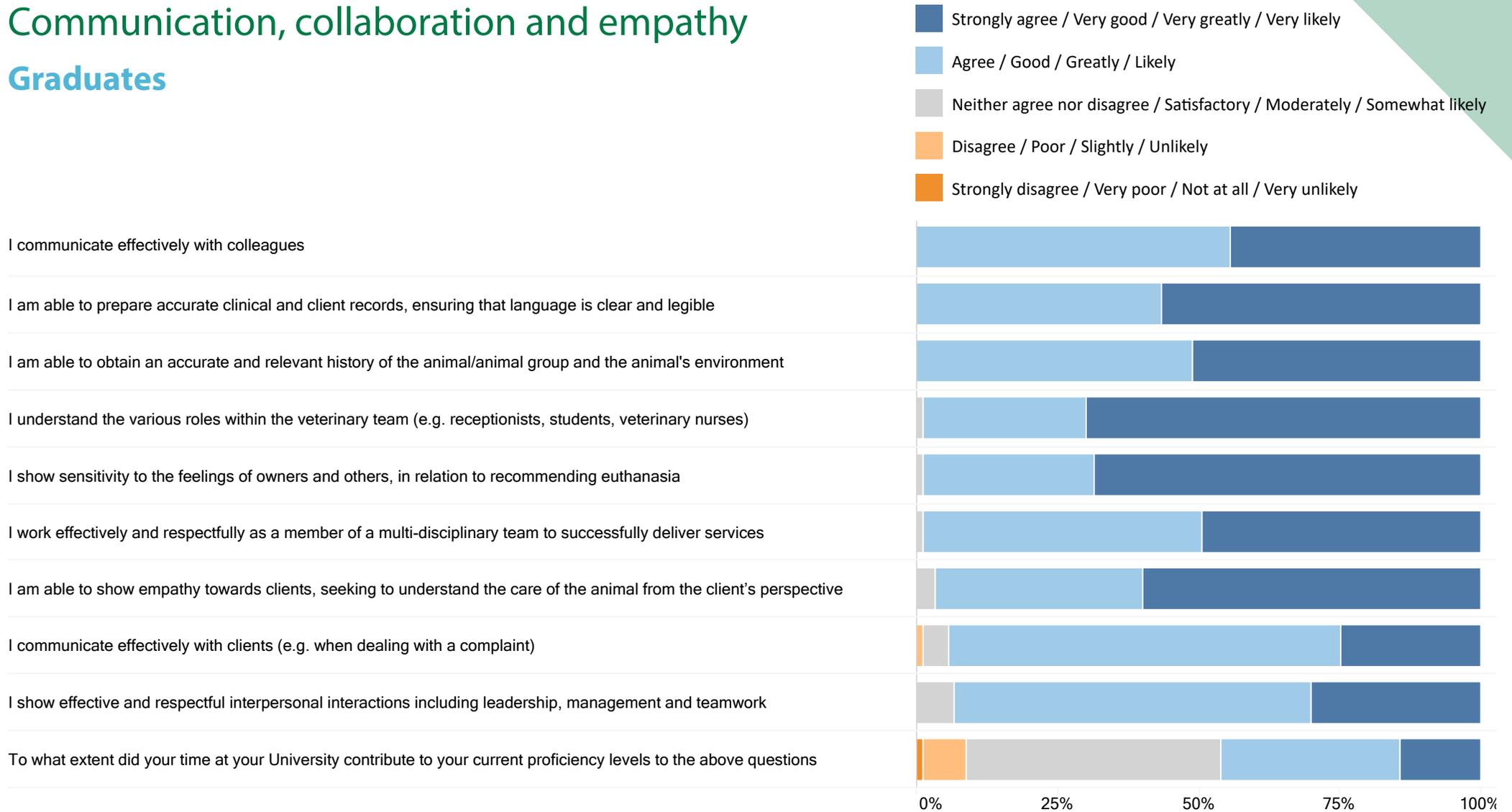


Employers were very confident of their graduate's sedation and anaesthetic skills.

On graduates' skills in surgery, more than 20% of employers disagreed or strongly disagreed that their graduate had appropriate skills. This was also reflected in the free text responses where several employers mentioned spaying and neutering as of particular concern.

Communication, collaboration and empathy

Graduates

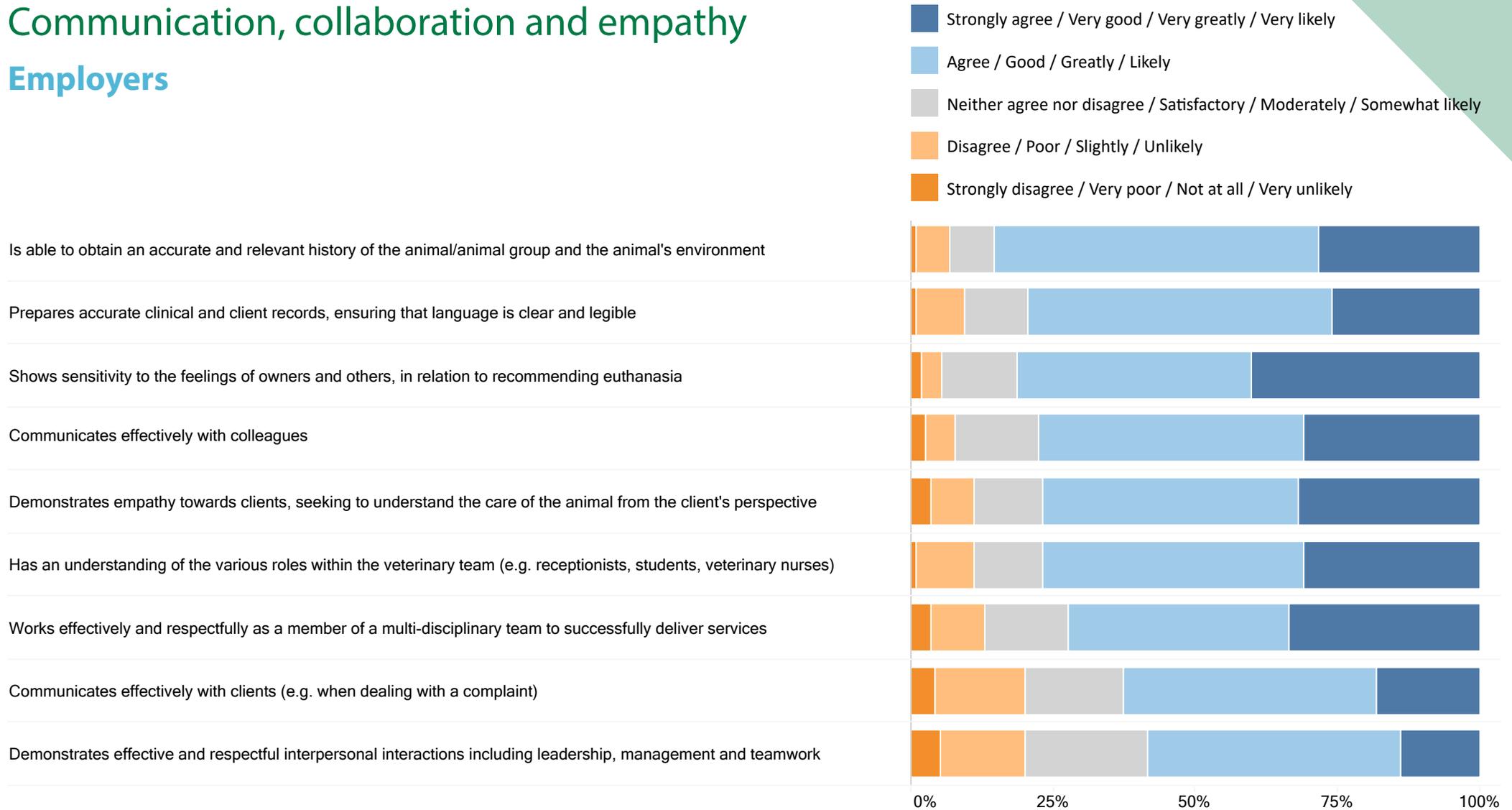


Graduates are confident of their communication abilities in relation to their colleagues. While still rating their skills highly, the graduates in our survey were less certain of their more complex professional communication skills including leadership management and teamwork.

45% of graduates reported that they were unsure of the extent to which their degree had aided their communication, collaboration and empathy skills. At the same time, graduates may not fully realise or remember the teaching of soft skills within courses.

Communication, collaboration and empathy

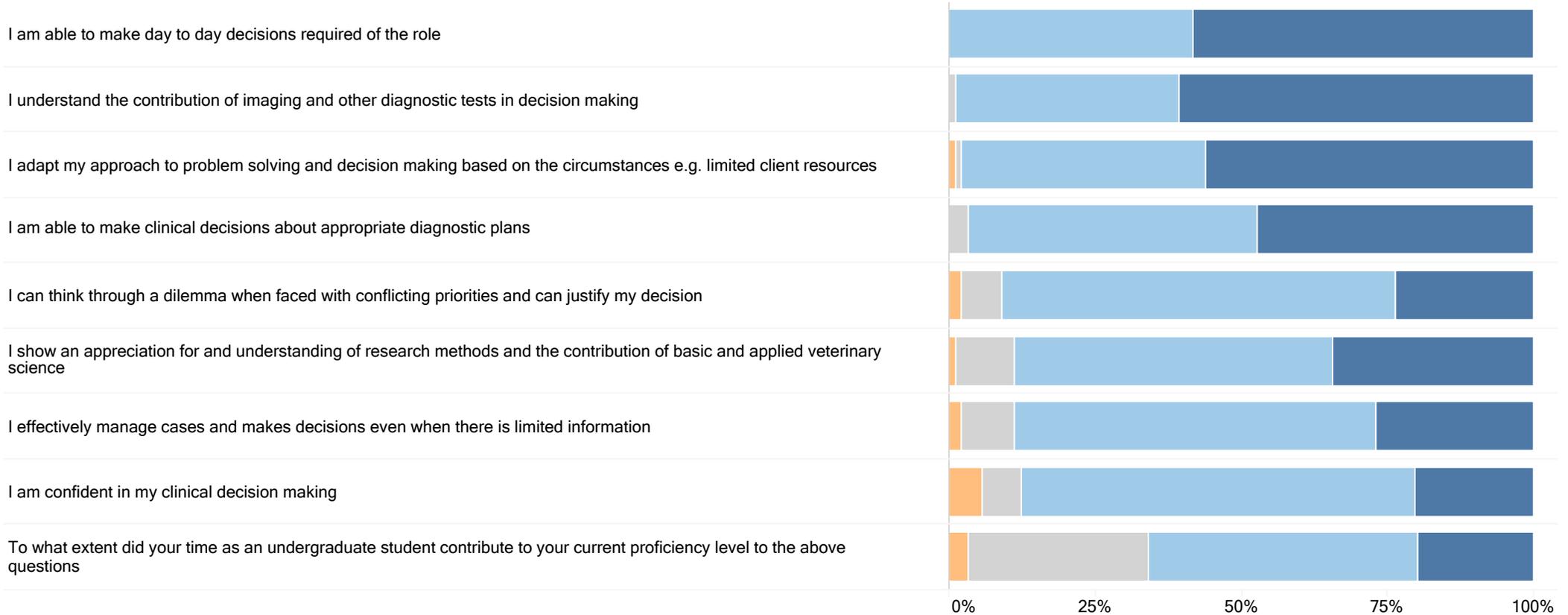
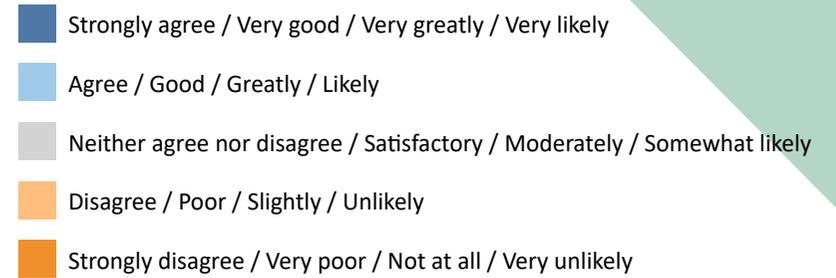
Employers



Employers surveyed were impressed by graduates' client records but identified issues with their communication with clients and their interactions within the veterinary team, with 20% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that their new employee demonstrated effective and respective interpersonal interactions.

Decision making

Graduates

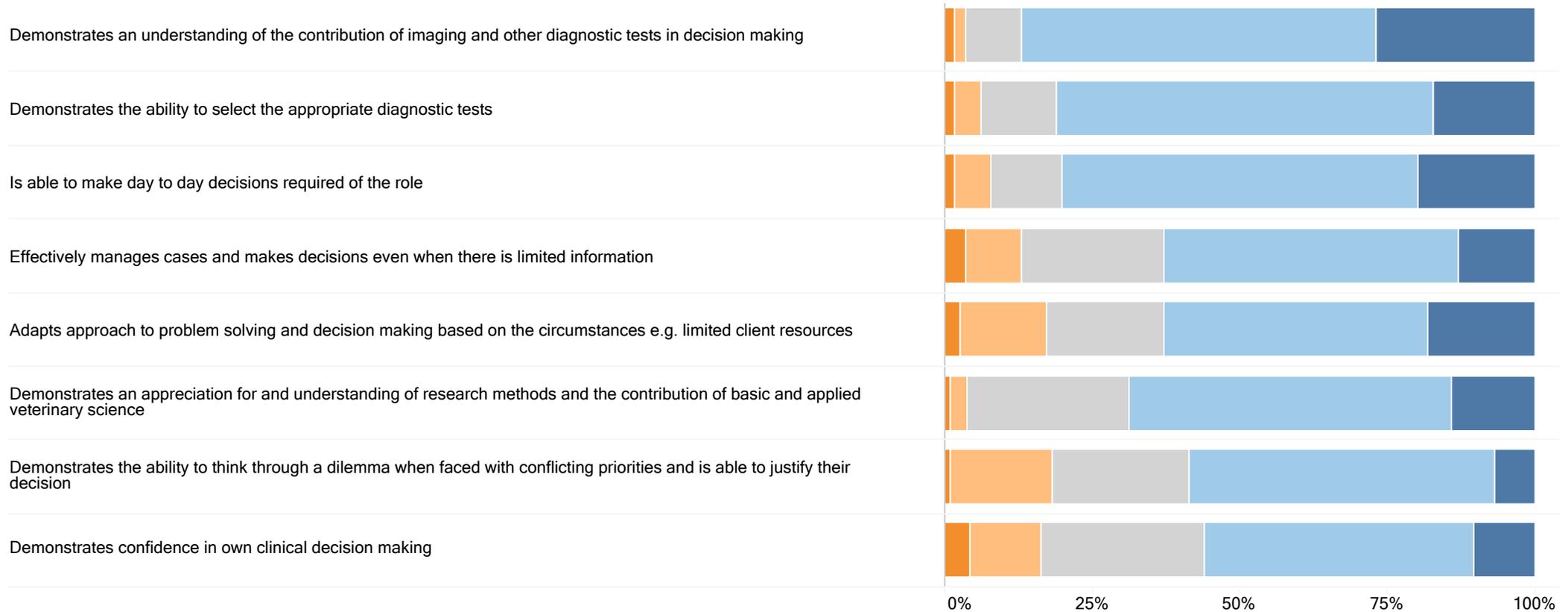
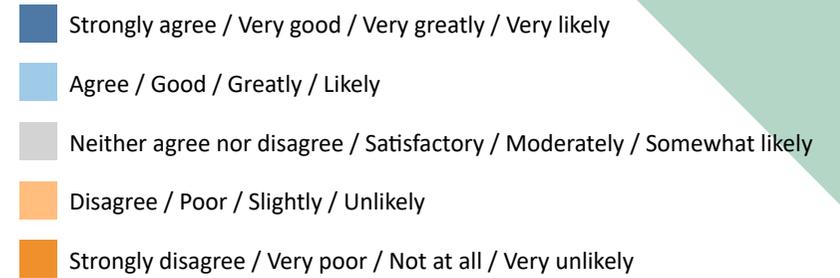


Two thirds of students agreed or strongly agreed that their degree had helped them to their current proficiency in decision making.

Graduates and employers (see next page) both reported that they were competent in using imaging and other diagnostic tests to aid decision making.

Decision making

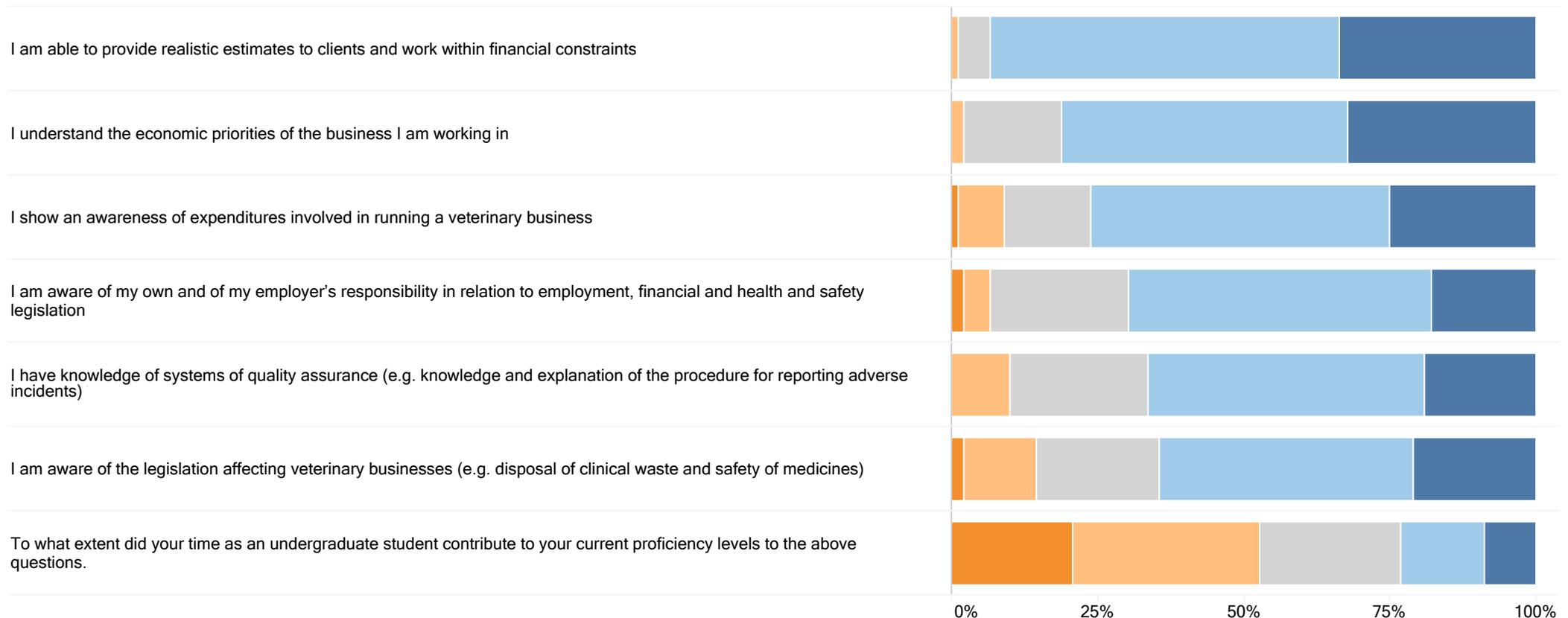
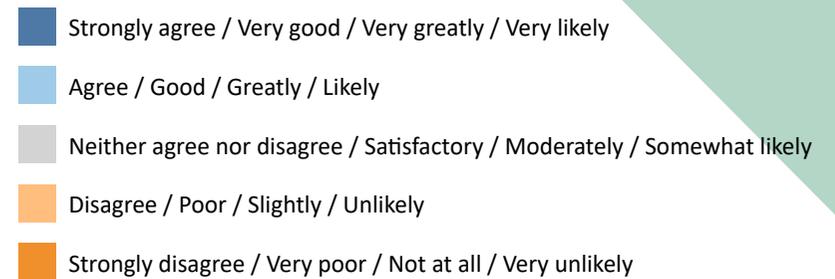
Employers



Over 15% of the employers disagreed or strongly disagreed that their employee was able to contextually fit a decision to a client. In the free text responses both employers and graduates noted that they struggled with providing cost-limited treatment that compromised the gold standard, fully investigative model taught at university.

Financial and business management

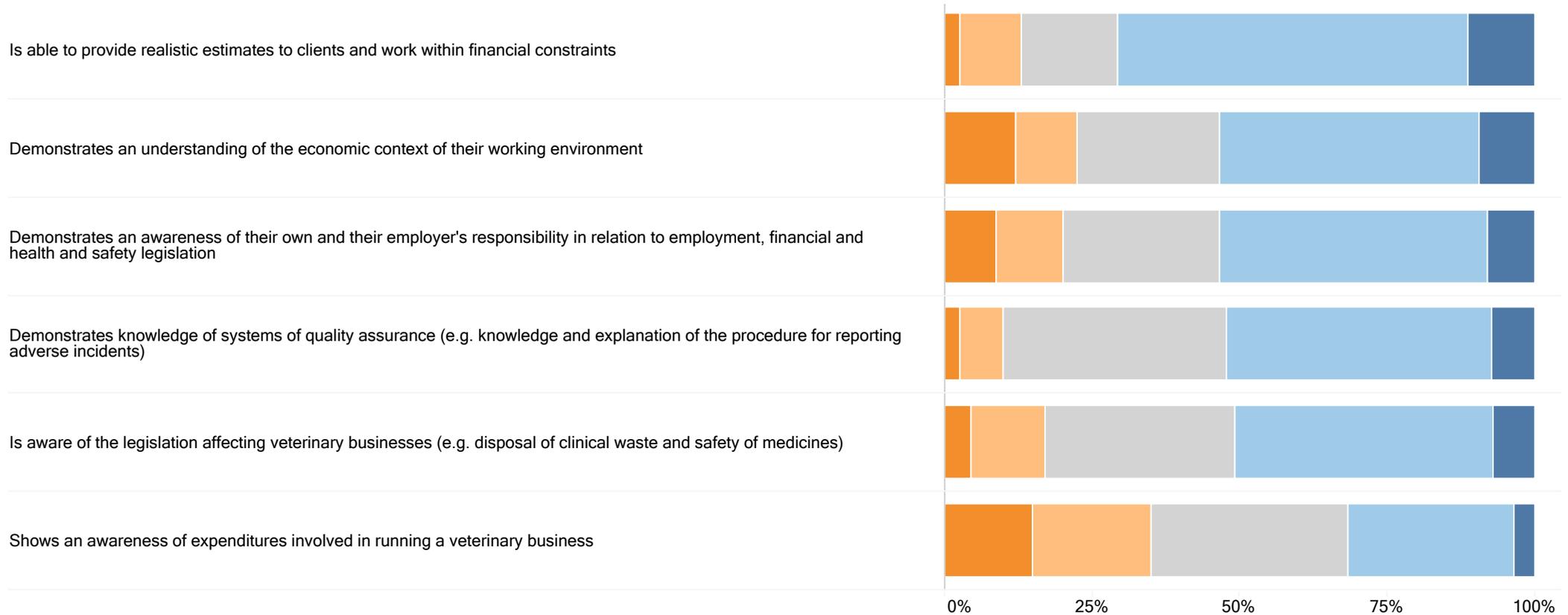
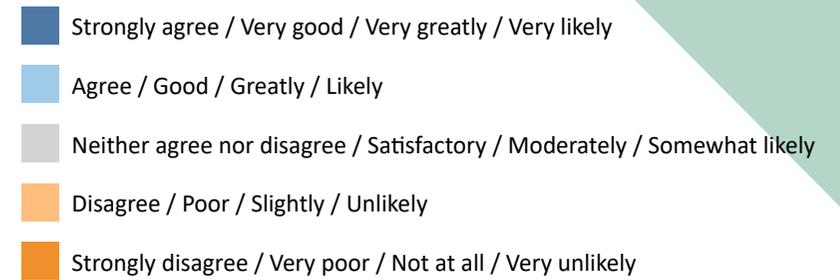
Graduates



Over 50% of graduates surveyed responded that their time at veterinary school had 'not at all' or 'slightly' contributed to their current proficiency in finance and business skills. This is consistent with the 2017 survey and could be addressed with increased sharing between veterinary schools of teaching related to finance and business management. In addition, schools could encourage students to seek finance and business teaching at their EMS placements.

Financial and business management

Employers



Most employers thought their graduate was able to work within financial constraints. However, their knowledge of relevant legislation was not universally praised. Likewise, knowledge of the cost of running the veterinary business was doubted by 35% of respondents.

Professionalism and professional identity

Graduates

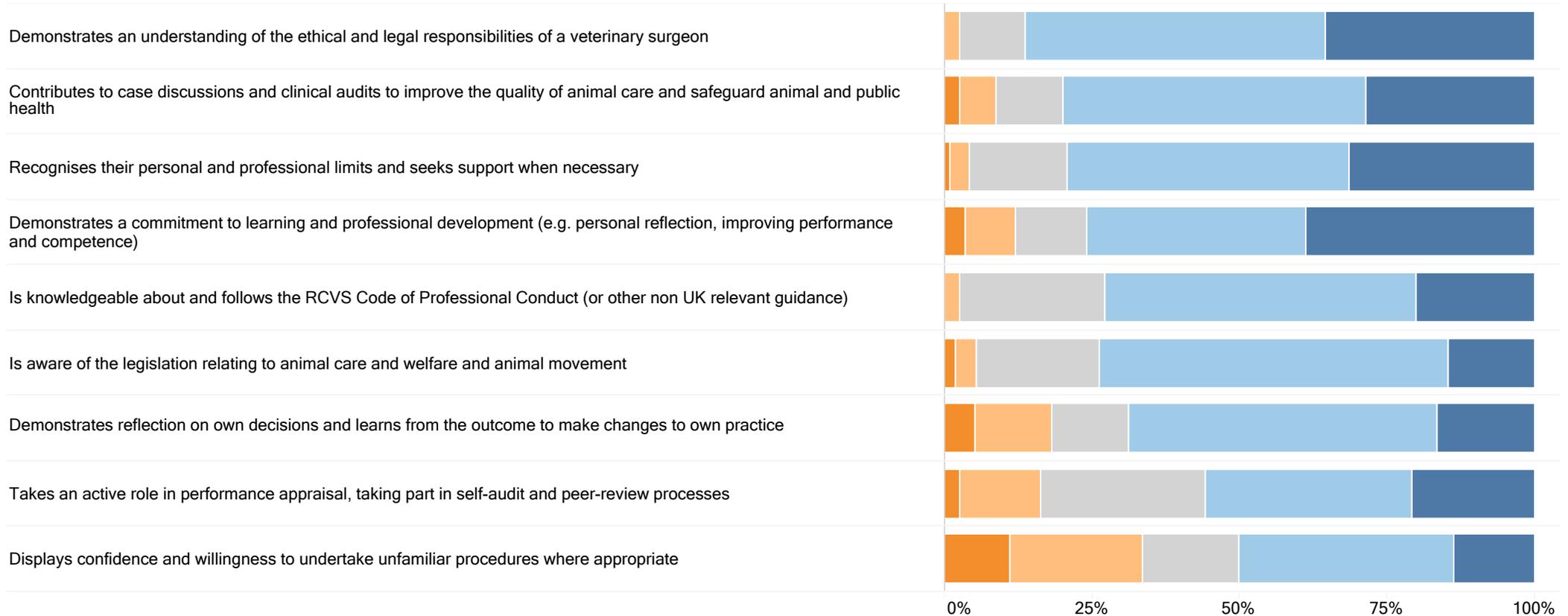
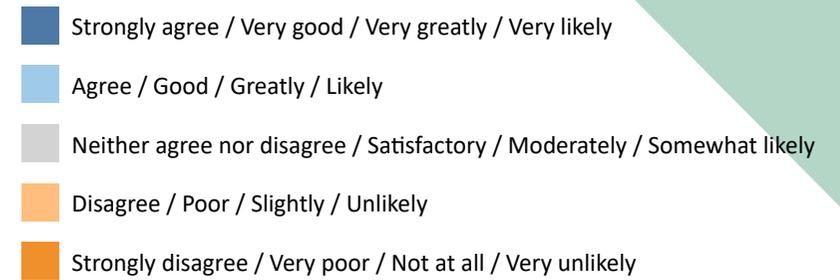


It is interesting that so many graduates surveyed were ambivalent (with one third answering neutrally) about their skills in self-auditing despite the introduction of PDP.

Graduates were confident they were familiar with the professional and legal requirements for their responsibilities as a veterinary surgeon.

Professionalism and professional identity

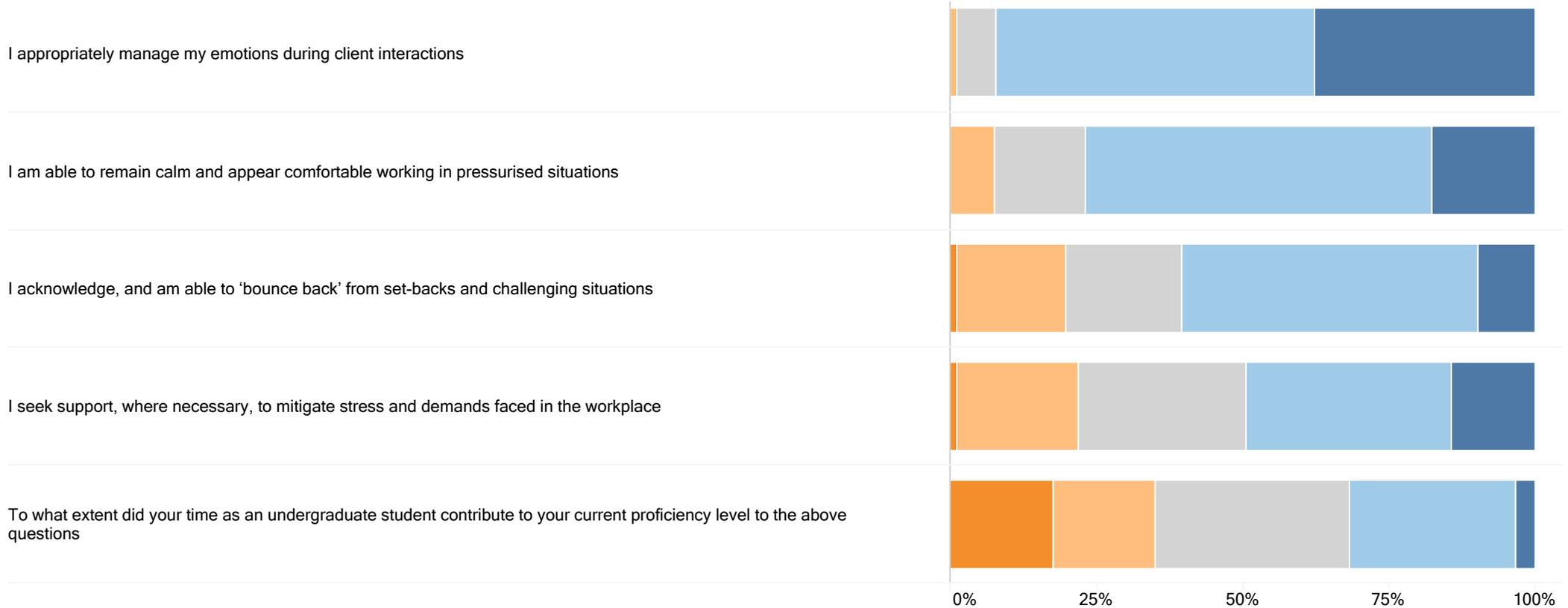
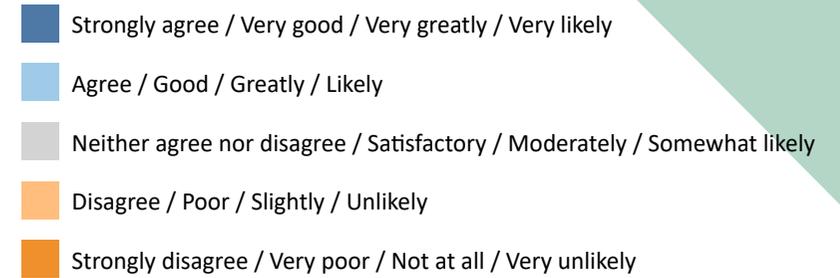
Employers



Both the graduates and the employers surveyed raised doubts about their attitude to performing unfamiliar procedures, although this is perhaps unsurprising given the early stage of their career.

Employers generally agreed that the graduates they hired understood their legal duties.

Resilience Graduates



Stress and resilience are major concerns within the veterinary community, with campaigns raising awareness and providing support. It is therefore disappointing that only 50% of graduates agreed or strongly agreed that they can seek support to mitigate stress and demands in the workplace.

However, in their client-facing responsibilities the newly qualified vets largely reported managing their emotions appropriately.

Resilience

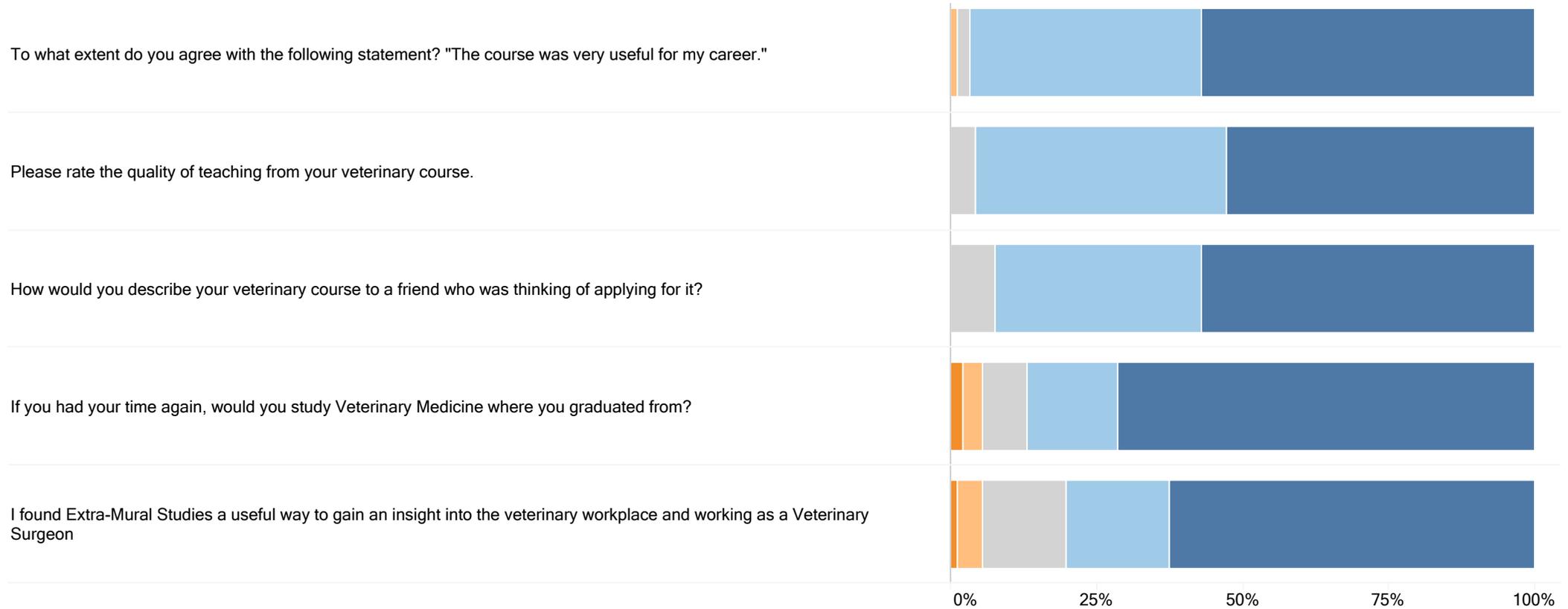
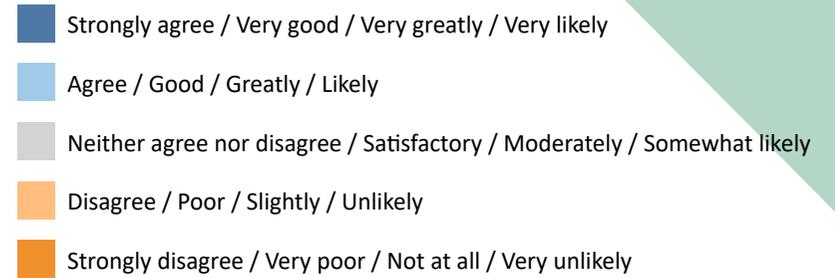
Employers



Employers were concerned by graduates' resilience but for the most part believed that the graduates they employed sought their support where necessary. The surveyed new employees who graduated in 2013, 2014 and 2015 themselves largely reported being less or unable to ask for help, whereas the employers surveyed (who employed graduates who graduated in 2017 and 2018) were more positive about the willingness of graduates to approach them with stress issues. If these perceptions are comparable, this could mean that graduate resilience has improved in recent years; or it may mean that employers view their graduates' resilience more favourably than the graduates themselves.

Overall satisfaction

Graduates



Graduates who responded to the survey were very positive about and satisfied with the veterinary school and course they attended, with only 5% reporting they would have chosen to go elsewhere. 80% agreed or strongly agreed that EMS helped to prepare them for entering the workforce.

Free text responses

Note on free text method

The surveys included opportunity for free-text responses on each topic. For the following analysis, themes were identified in the responses and the occurrences of each theme were tallied. Some responses were coded under multiple themes: these are not mutually exclusive. This provides a broad measure of the sentiment for each theme.

It should be noted that the coding of the themes is subjective and the sample size is not large. Its value is in offering background context to the quantitative analysis, highlighting issues and attitudes in the sector that were not measured elsewhere in the questionnaire.

Clinical skills (Employers)

Respondents were asked: “Please provide any additional comments that you have in relation to clinical skills generally or any of the skills and behaviours outlined above within your graduate.”

Number of responses: 49

Positive	
Good clinical skills	16
Negative	
Specific skills lacking	9
Low overall clinical ability	7
Lacking confidence	3
Other	
Did not answer	65

The most common response from employers was that they were satisfied or impressed by their new graduates’ clinical abilities. Employers reported high standards of work, competence and ‘excellent clinical knowledge’ in the new graduates. Some employers were less impressed, reporting of their graduates: ‘no desire to do anything’, ‘unwilling to learn’, ‘does not seem prepared to put in the work required to improve’.

Impressive clinical skills were sometimes identified by employers to have downsides. Some noted frustration at their graduates’ thoroughness: ‘writes far too much in medical records’, ‘attempts to achieve a referral standard of work’ [leading to stress

and poor time management]. Some employers noted that it was difficult for graduate vets to adapt to non-gold standard treatment regimes when limited finances had to be accommodated in treatment plans, a sentiment shared by some graduates themselves in their survey.

More than a fifth of respondents identified gaps in graduates' clinical skills, mostly referring to their surgical skills and knowledge, including spaying and neutering.

Non-clinical skills (Employers)

Respondents were asked: "Please provide any additional comments that you have in relation to non-clinical skills generally or any of the skills and behaviours outlined above with respect to your graduate."

Number of responses: 55

Positive	
Good non-clinical skills	18
Negative	
Difficulties with teamwork	10
Required extra support	7
Lacking confidence	7
Overconfident	5
Difficulties with communication	4
Difficulties with self-directed learning	4
Difficulties with business skills	4
Anxiety concerning litigation	2
Other	
Did not answer	59

The most commonly held attitude about graduates' non-clinical skills was positive: they were regarded as professional colleagues. Employers praised their 'good enthusiasm', their 'medical knowledge', their 'level of maturity', and their 'fantastic communication' abilities. Employers also highlighted shortcomings in specific skills. High levels of stress and anxiety were noted, and some employers raised a negative attitudes towards learning and teamwork. Concern over stress and anxiety is echoed in the graduate survey, where some of the cohort identifies these as central to their experience of starting work.

Some employers mentioned that they provided extra training to fill identified gaps in

their recent graduates' non-clinical skills.

Areas of low preparation (Employers)

Respondents were asked: "Please list any areas or skills (other than those commented on above) where the level of preparation affected (impeded) your recent graduate's ability to do the job."

Number of responses: 54

Positive	
No deficiencies	5
Negative	
Lacking certain technical skills	18
Lacking confidence	13
Attitude problem	9
Difficulties with communication	8
Difficulties with stress and anxiety	5
Time management	4

Many employers (27% of respondents) commented on their graduates lacking certain technical skills, especially surgical abilities including spaying and neutering. Almost as many identified confidence as an attribute lacking upon graduation, noting uncertainty when undertaking new procedures and self-criticism following unexpected clinical outcomes. Communication was identified by 12% of respondents as an area of weakness: respondents sought improvements in both graduates' rapport with colleagues and their interactions with owners.

Some responded to the question by assessing the attitudes of their new employees, rather than suggesting areas for improved training. Five employers praised graduates for being 'bright', 'generally good' and 'clinically well prepared'. Conversely, some employers noted reluctance to take on overtime work and an unwillingness to engage with colleagues.

Areas of commendation (Employers)

Respondents were asked: "Please list any areas or skills where you would particularly like to commend your recent graduate's skills, knowledge and/or abilities"

Number of responses: 60

Positive	
Knowledge	24
Good attitude	14
Communication	14
Teamwork	7
Surgery skills	7
Business and finance	3

40% of respondents applauded their graduates for retaining substantial knowledge since graduation, or for remaining informed by reading papers. 46% of respondents were impressed by graduates' communication skills, enthusiasm and empathy, noting their 'passion for animal welfare'. Some used this free text response to recognise graduates' surgery skills or their teamwork.

Professional Development Phase (Graduates)

Respondents were asked: "If you are undertaking the Professional Development Phase or have completed it, how might the RCVS improve the PDP to better prepare you for

Positive	
Good	7
Negative	
The range of possible answers is too narrow	15
Box-ticking exercise	15
Should have more employer input	12
Serves no purpose	11
The concept needs reform	11
Should focus on quality over numbers	5
There should be time allocated for inputting	4
Should be of greater consequence	3
Other	
No comment made	43

A third of respondents noted box-ticking and suggested that the PDP is a formality, perhaps partly because they felt that its focus on the number of times a procedure had been undertaken is not an effective means of measuring confidence or ability. One student noted that the PDP's comprehensiveness was good. However, others noted that despite efforts to support graduate mental health, professional skills were not covered.

Ten percent of respondents suggested that specially allocated time for inputs within the working day would improve their use of the PDP platform.

Over a quarter of graduate responders sought increased employer involvement with the scheme. Some suggested strengthening the role of the mentor by providing specific training so that support was consistently high-quality. One student noted that they had joined a graduate scheme which had provided excellent and structured support by a trained mentor, for which they felt lucky in comparison with graduates supported less formally by an allocated senior vet. One mentioned that they felt PDP reinforced hierarchies, as students' work was effectively 'marked' by their superiors.

Some graduates noted that had they been externally incentivised to use the platform then they would have been more motivated to complete it.

Two responders noted inaccuracies in the items listed, including horse diabetes appearing under endocrine diseases and a box missing on ear infections in farm animals.

Areas of good preparation (Graduates)

Respondents were asked: "Are there any areas of practice of your current role for which you felt particularly well prepared by your school's veterinary curriculum?"

Number of responses: 41

Positive	
Specific subjects covered	14
Communication skills	12
Medical/scientific knowledge	10
Thoroughness	9
Other	
No response	50

Over a third of graduates mentioned specific skills they drew on from their university curriculum, such as radiography and farm work. A quarter mentioned that a good grounding in veterinary medicine and science had been beneficial. More than a fifth of participants reflected that conducting a full clinical examination on an animal

was a skill they learned at university which was serving them well. Over a quarter of respondents said lectures and training on communications had been useful.

Areas of weakness (Graduates)

Respondents were asked: “Please think about areas of practice or skills where you felt weak as a new graduate.”

Number of responses: 60

Surgery	16
Everyday work	13
Spaying and neutering	7
Dealing with stress	4
Decision-making	3

“How did you fill those gaps?”

Direct assistance from seniors	14
Advice from seniors	9
CPD/ additional training	9
Reading and revising	8
Had been fortunate with EMS	7

Areas of self-perceived weakness included everyday work and decision-making, mostly referencing worries of balancing economic considerations, time pressures, and clinical possibilities. Spaying and neutering animals was specifically mentioned (12%). Surgery was identified by over a quarter of participants as an area of difficulty. Seven participants believed that they had been fortunate in their EMS placements to have been prepared for veterinary skills required on graduation, particularly neutering and spaying.

Participants recognised that having assistance (23%) and advice (15%) from more experienced vets had helped them acquire necessary professional skills. Reading through guidance and university materials (13%), and undertaking additional training (15%) were also strategies to manage those demands for which graduates felt under-prepared.

