

To introduce and implement the role of a Social Work Clinical Practice and Innovation Lead (CPIL) to improve clinical outcomes, patient care, staff development, and evidence-based practice across social work in a healthcare organization

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Background

In November 2023, under the leadership of the Head of Social Work and Spiritual Care, Adult Allied Health Inpatient Social Work (SW) introduced a new role, a Clinical Practice and Innovation Lead (CPIL) who is an experienced and Senior Social Worker with broad experience across the health and social work sector. A key trigger for this was the pandemic and post pandemic response which saw significant workforce and skills shortages and the need to enhance professional practice in the health setting. This role was designed to upskill and mentor inpatient hospital social workers with their quality assurance, clinical audit and research activities, and support education and training opportunities within the teams. The role reports directly to the Head of Social Work in order to ensure it is positioned at a senior level, meets strategic and operational priorities and can also influence the leadership team across the sites.

Project Aim

To oversee the roll out of Workforce Clinical Educator role within inpatient and ambulatory social work teams to implement a tailored, needs-led Professional Development (PD) program for social workers especially the junior social workers namely Grade 1 and Grade 2 social workers.

- To evaluate the impact of a tailored, needs-led PD program on Grade 1 and Grade 2 social workers self-reported knowledge, confidence, and skills.
- To foster a culture of evidence-based practice (EBP) within the social work teams, promoting qualitative research and initiatives within inpatient and ambulatory social work teams.
- To evaluate the impact of CPIL's role in fostering a culture of evidence base practice with increased uptake in qualitative initiative/research projects within Adult Allied Health Inpatient Social Work teams.

Methods

A mixed methods approach, inclusive of focus groups, comparison data of the post and pre survey in relation to PD program, and comparison data of the number of qualitative initiative/research projects within inpatient and ambulatory social work teams.



Figure 1. Different phases of the project.

Results

1. Impact on Professional Development and Skill Enhancement

CPIL oversees roll out of a pioneering initiative in the form of a Social Work specific Workforce Clinical Educator role and implemented below 3 step programs:

- Watching Others Work in Environment (WOWIE):** 4 hours "hands on" "1:1" teaching model at the bedside for Grade 1 SW within first 12 months of clinical practice.
- Monthly Professional Development Workshops:** 2.5 hours targeted skill rather than knowledge based workshops delivered face-to-face for junior workforce.
- Drop in Sessions:** Drop-in clinic weekly at each site; bookable 45 or 90 minute sessions delivered 1:1 either face-to-face or online to discuss a pre-identified clinical or non-clinical learning need.

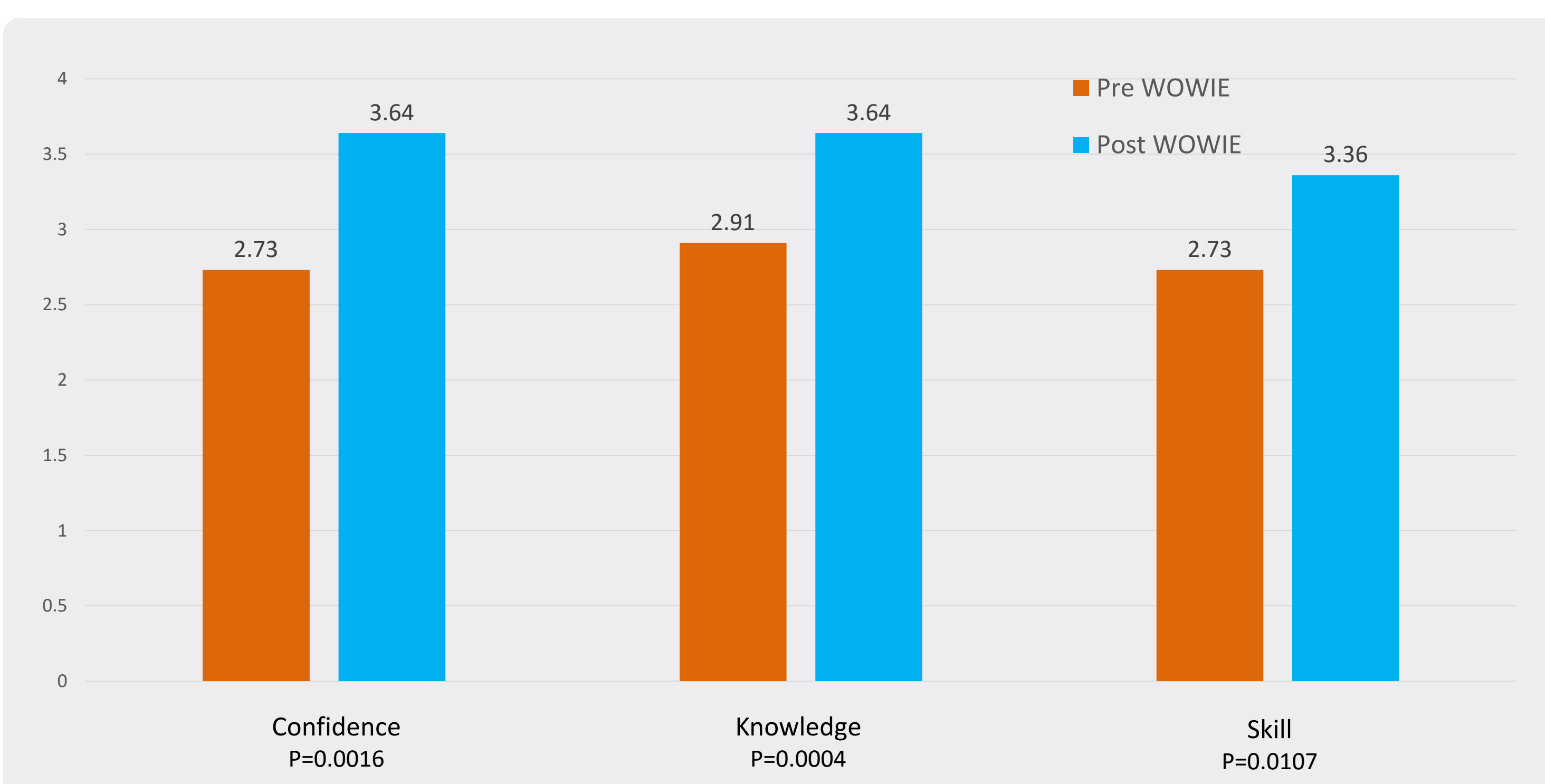


Figure 2. Evaluation of Grade 1 WOWIE Program.

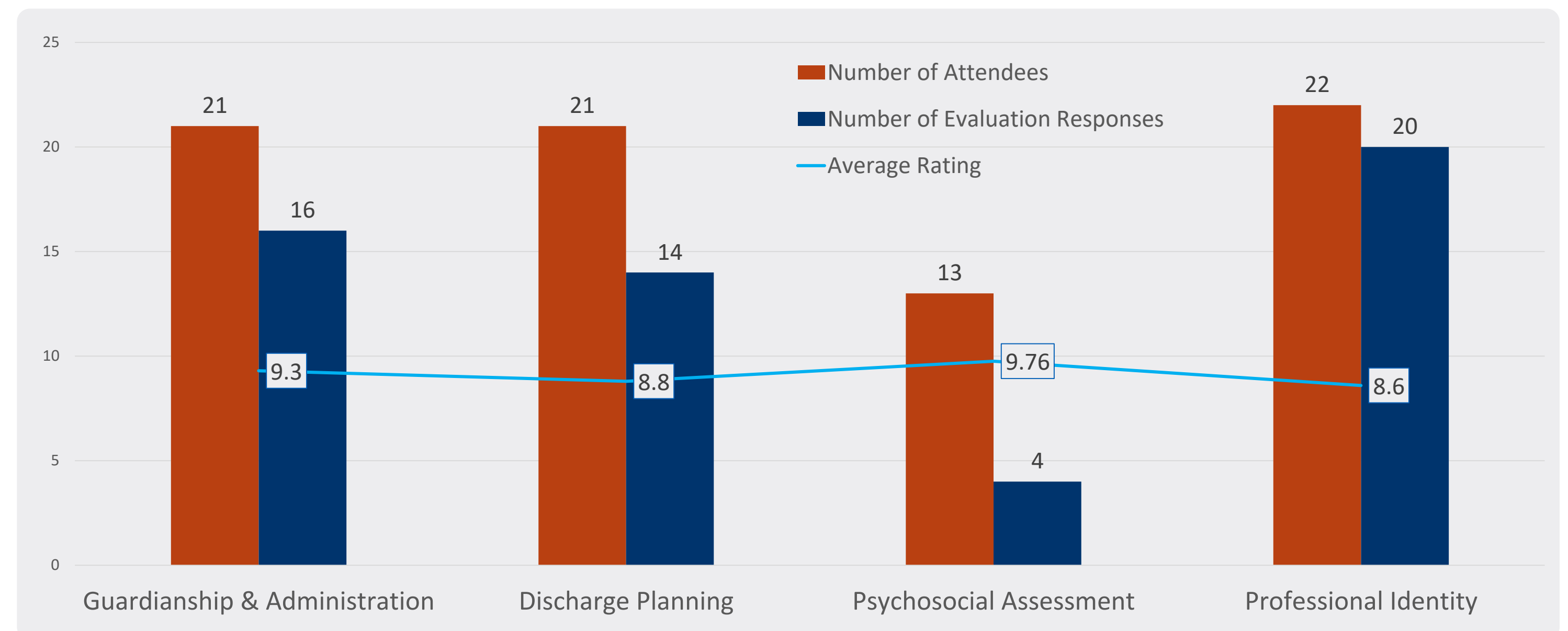


Figure 3. Attendance of Evaluation of Grade 1 PD Workshops (Dec 2024 to May 2025).

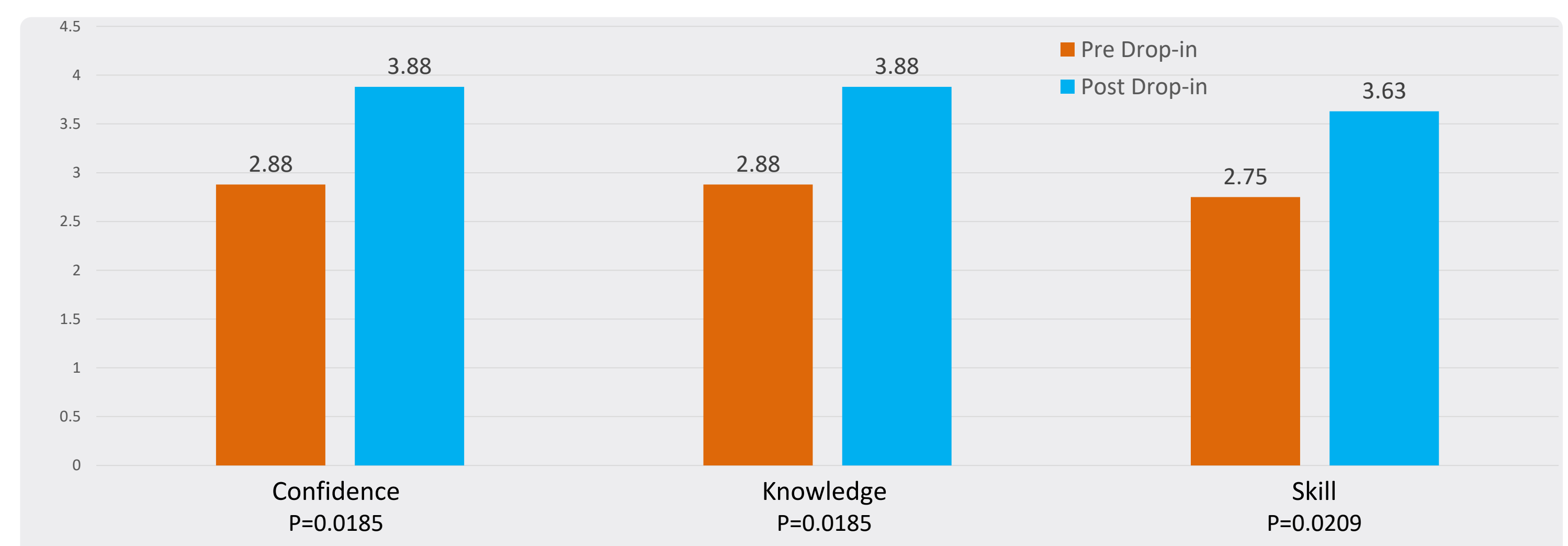


Figure 4. Evaluation of Drop-in Sessions.

2. Impact on Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) and Quality Assurance (QA)

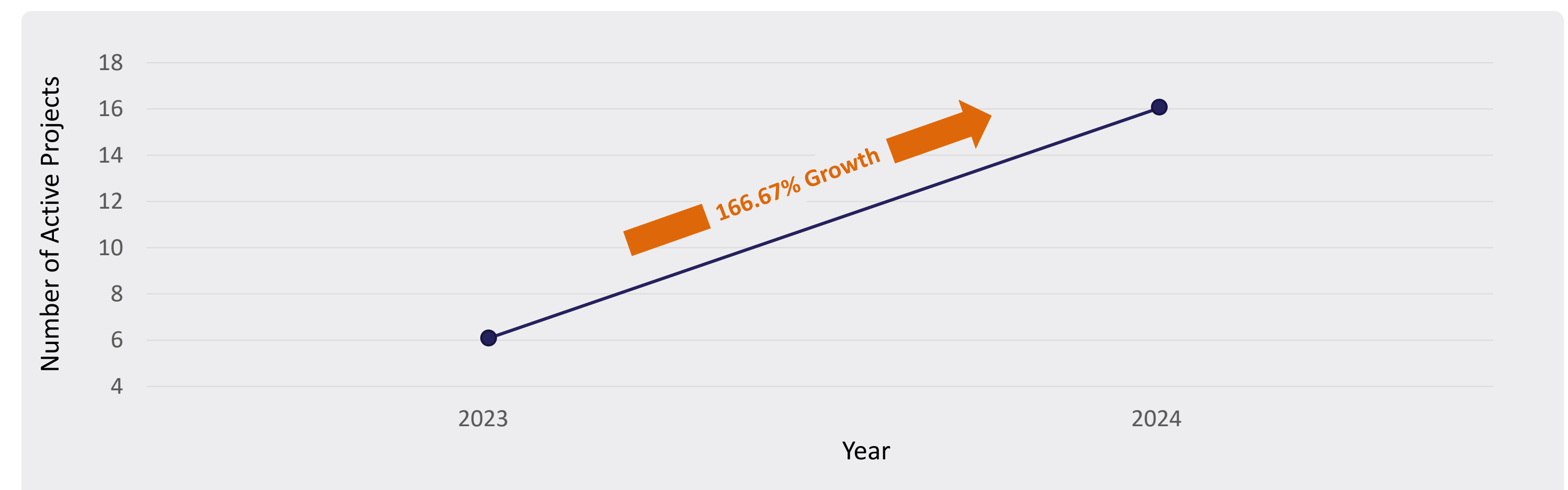


Figure 5. Growth in active projects from 2023 to 2024.

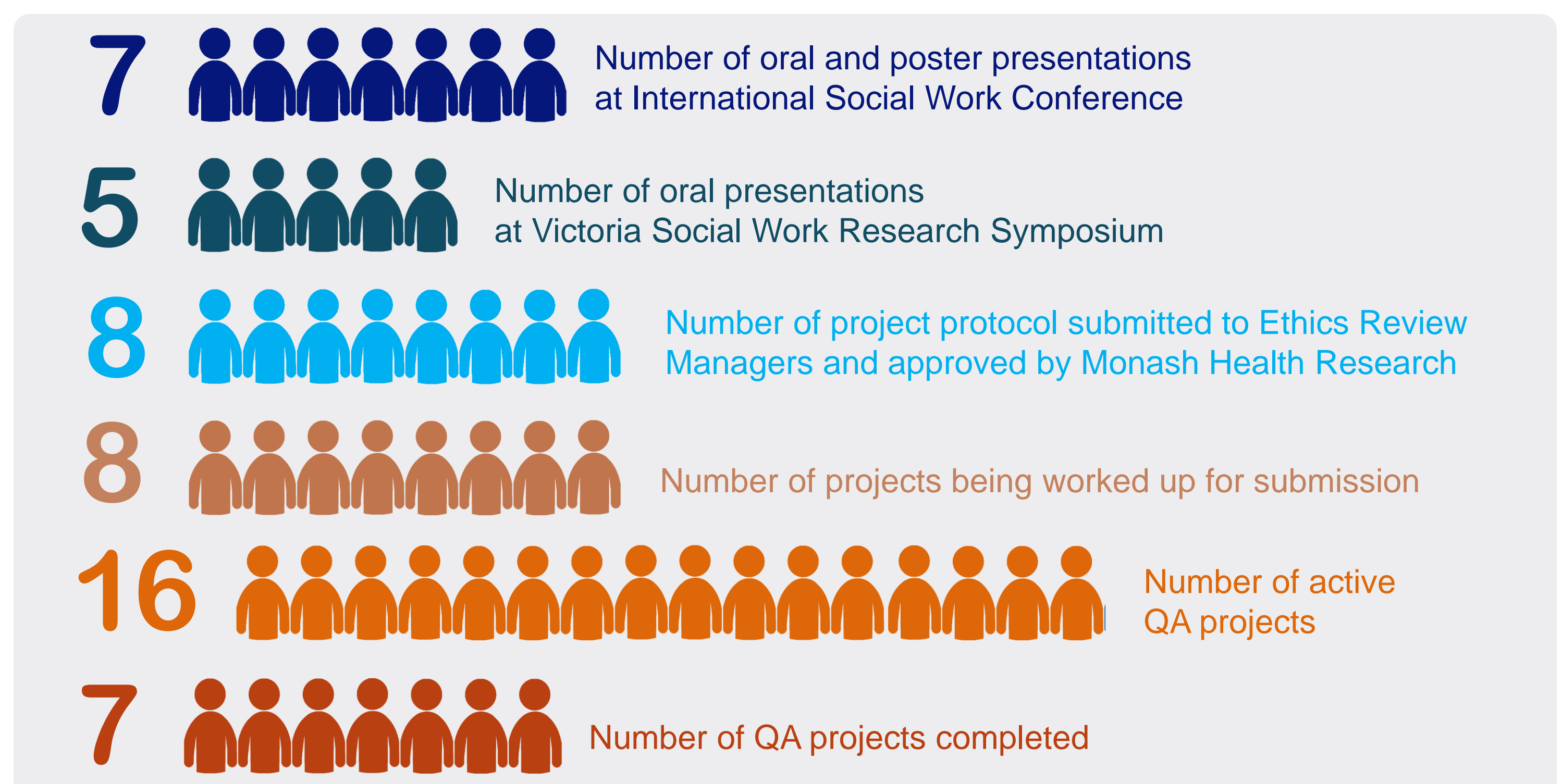


Figure 6. Milestones achieved in 12 months.

Discussion

Social workers are inherently action-oriented learners, often working in high-pressure crisis intervention settings. While SW are routinely engaging in small scale change in their daily work such as responding to policy reforms that affect daily practice; systematic challenges like demanding work environments and limited access to dedicated time or expertise continue to hinder the integration of EBP.

The CPIL role has emerged as a pivotal enabler in embedding EBP into routine clinical practice. This role not only strengthens professional accountability but also enhances the quality of care provided to clients. Additionally, the project's emphasis on qualitative research aligns with core social work values; emphasizing lived experience and contextual understanding.

This project also highlighted the effectiveness of a tailored, needs-driven professional development (PD) program in meeting the unique learning requirements of early-career social workers (Grades 1 and 2). By enhancing participants' knowledge, confidence, and clinical competencies, the initiative contributes meaningfully to workforce capability and retention.

Collectively, these outcomes underscore the CPIL role's potential to cultivate a sustainable culture of learning, critical reflection, and innovation within social work teams.