

Findings from a large Australian research project

Project Co-Leaders
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Department of Education and Training



contract cheating and
assessment design

EXPLORING THE
CONNECTION

Project team

Lead institution

- University of South Australia (Project co-leaders: Tracey Bretag & Rowena Harper)

Partner institutions

- Griffith University (Karen van Haeringen)
- University of NSW (Cath Ellis)
- University of Sydney (Pearl Rozenberg)
- Swansea University, UK (Phil Newton)

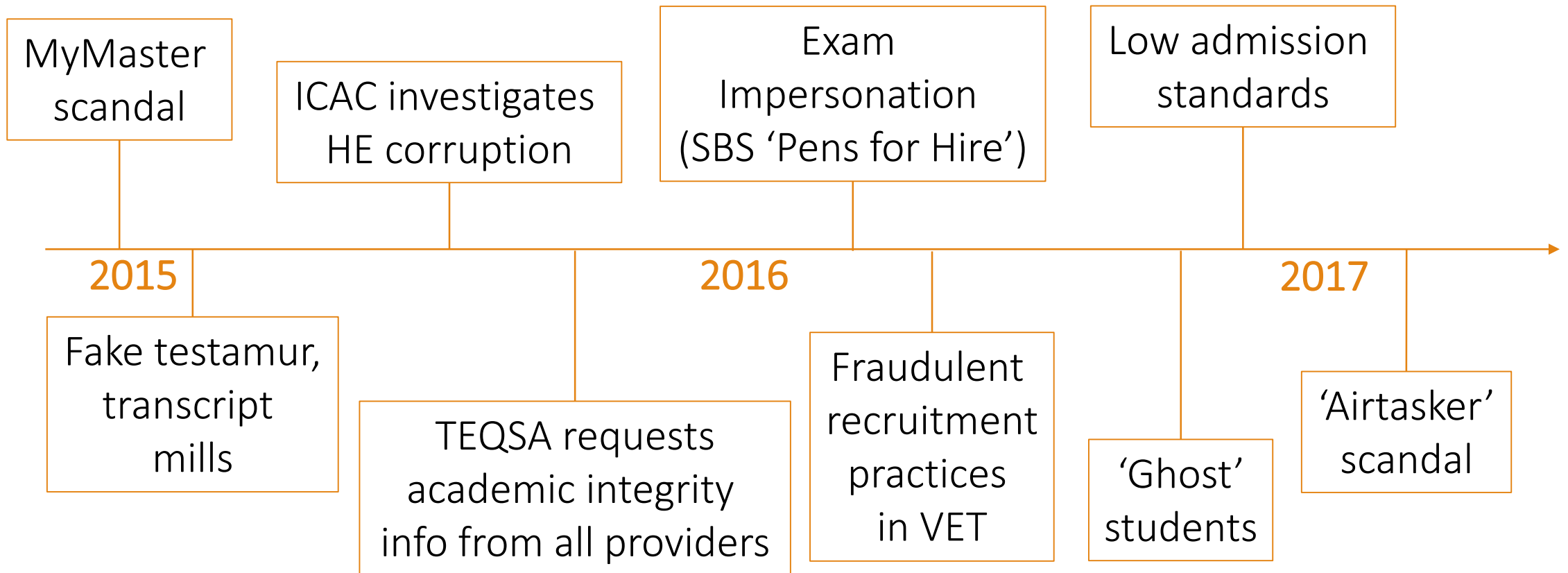
Data analyst

- Michael Burton (University of Western Australia)

Project Manager

- Sonia Saddiqui (University of South Australia)

2015-2017 context



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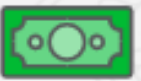

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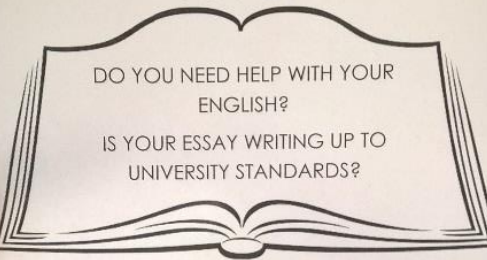
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Contract cheating

“Contract cheating occurs when a student submits work that has been completed for them by a third party, irrespective of the third party’s relationship with the student, and whether they are paid or unpaid.”

(Harper & Bretag et al, 2018)

Third party:

- friend or family
- fellow student or staff member
- commercial service

Research questions

1. How prevalent is contract cheating in Australian higher education?
2. What are student and staff attitudes towards and experiences with contract cheating?
3. What are the individual, contextual and institutional factors that are correlated with contract cheating?
4. What kinds of assessments are associated with contract cheating?
5. Can 'authentic' assessment solve the problem of contract cheating?

Research design

1. Parallel staff and student surveys at 8 universities
 - Student respondents = **14,086** (incl. sample of 925 qualitative responses)
 - Staff respondents = **1,147** (incl. 315 qualitative responses)
2. Large dataset of procurement requests posted to multiple cheat sites
 - Shows the types of assessment commonly contracted out to third parties
3. Data from two universities' longitudinal academic integrity databases
 - Shows the assessment items in which purchased assignments have been detected

Seven 'outsourcing' behaviours

Buying, selling or trading notes	Providing a completed assignment (for any reason)	Obtaining a completed assignment (to submit as one's own)	Providing exam assistance	Receiving exam assistance	Taking an exam for another	Arranging for another to take one's exam
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Sharing behaviours



Cheating behaviours



contract cheating and
assessment design

Nine key findings



1. Contract cheating is a symptom, not the problem

One-third of staff described contract cheating as a *systemic* problem, created or made worse by government and institutional policy and practice.

*The upsurge in third-party cheating is due to students' perception of university degrees as a commercial transaction due to university management's focus on **the business of education**, such that marketing of university 'products' becomes more important than the education process itself (Staff 167).*





1. Contract cheating is a symptom, not the problem

Government and institutional policy and practice then constrain what is possible in teaching and assessment.

*The use of a range of assessments is helpful, however we are under increasing pressure to **reduce the number of assessments** to manage the marking resources available to us. **Large class sizes** and **increasing use of sessional markers** with little or no knowledge of individual students and their capabilities is likely to impact on this issue as well (Staff 298).*





1. Contract cheating is a symptom, not the problem

Students also discussed *systemic* problems in higher education, and used this to rationalise the existence of various forms of cheating.

with education now a 'business' and degrees sold as a 'product' - there is less connection and understanding that University is about acquiring knowledge. It is seen as a user-pays system to get the degree. The degree will get the job, or the extended visa for the Masters, the job, etc. [...] It's about getting passes, getting through the process - hence, little attachment to the ethics of cheating (Student 753, non-cheating).





1. Contract cheating is a symptom, not the problem

Students also drew a range of links between cheating and assessment approaches designed for efficiency rather than pedagogy.

*Many courses nowadays **try to save money on tutors by putting students into groups of say six students to complete projects** that can be worth more than 50% of the course marks. Usually there is only one student who does most/all of the work, and yet all students receive the same group mark. In my opinion **this is the same as cheating, but is condoned by the institution** (Student 292, non-cheating).*





1. Contract cheating is a symptom, not the problem

Sector

- Commercialisation, marketisation and competition
- Internationalisation, massification and diversification

Institution

- 'Efficiencies' in teaching and learning
- Large classes, less contact, shrinking resources

Educator

- 'We make do': expedient assessment design
- Don't/can't get to know students

Student

- No one cares about me and my learning
- Financial/social pressure to get through





2. Students share their work a lot...

Buying, selling or trading notes	Providing a completed assignment (for any reason)
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Sharing behaviours

6%

have engaged in one or more of the 'cheating' behaviours – exam cheating was by far the most common

15%

have bought, traded or sold notes

27%

have provided someone with a completed assignment



... and this may lead to contract cheating

Buying, selling
or trading
notes

Providing a
completed
assignment
(for any
reason)

Cheating students were **2x** more likely than Non-cheating students to engage in sharing...

... and more likely to pay money or use a file sharing website or professional service for this purpose



Sharing behaviours



3. It's who you know

Despite the spread of file-sharing websites and online cheating services,

students still primarily engage in
outsourcing with people they know

current students, former students, friends, and family



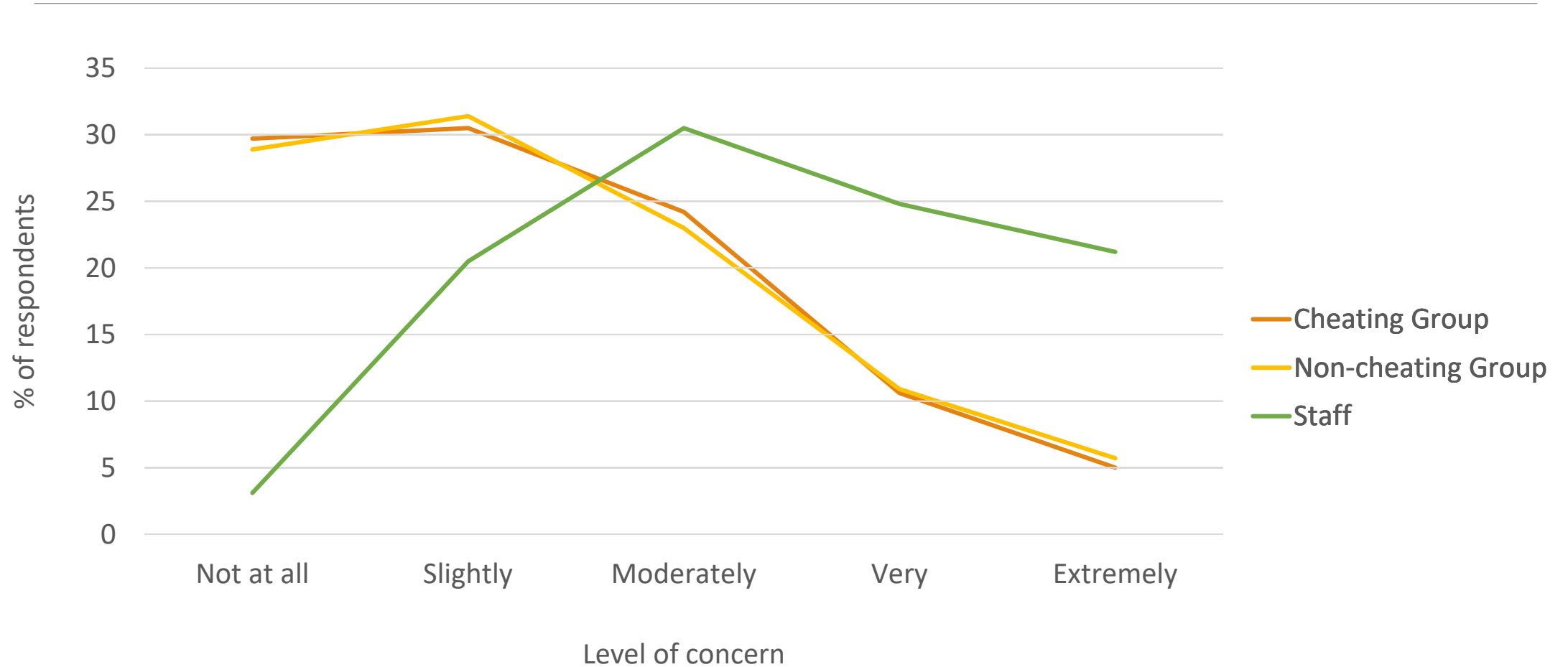
4. Three factors contribute to contract cheating

Gender?
Discipline?
Language?
Study mode?
Domicile?

1. Speaking a language other than English at home
2. Perceptions that there are 'lots of opportunities to cheat'
3. Dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment

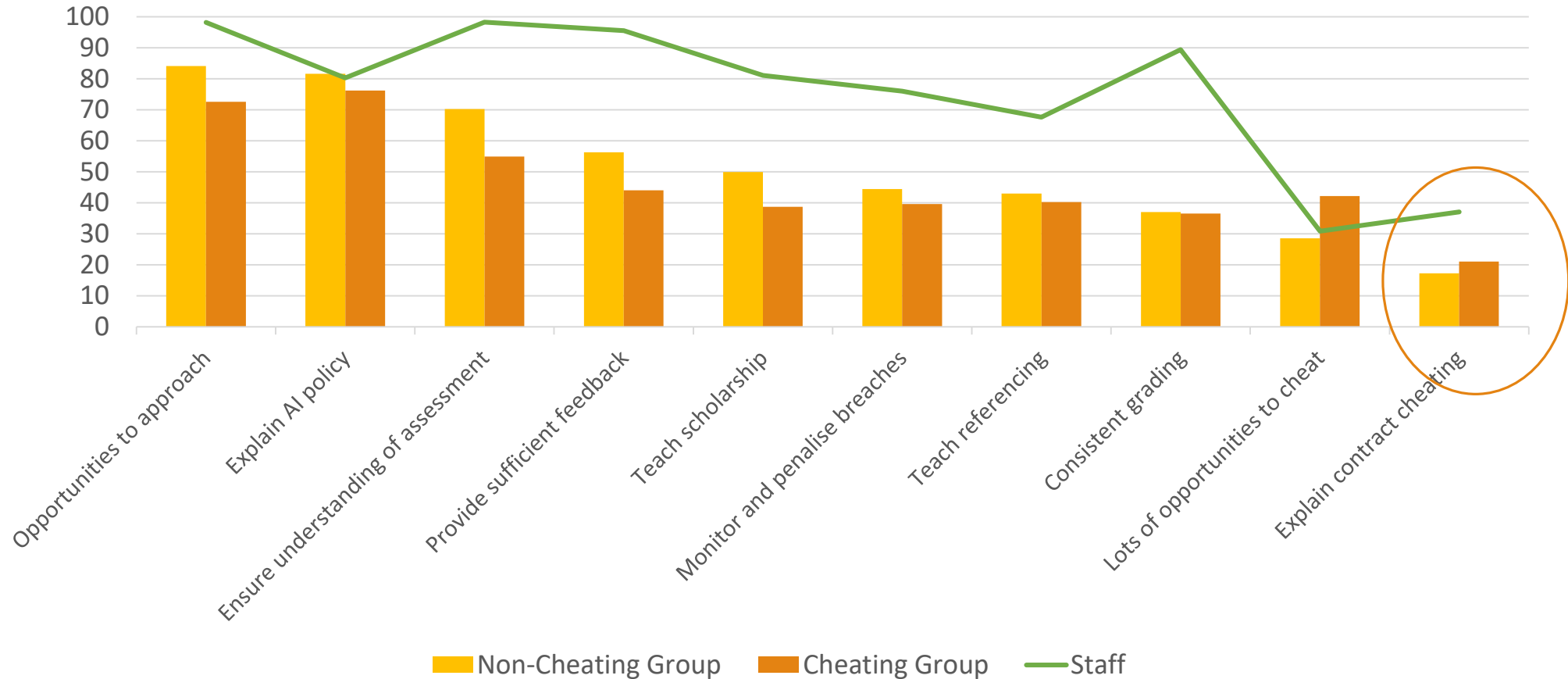


5. Students aren't concerned ...





... and we're not talking to them about it



6. Suspected cheating often goes unreported...



Three reasons:

1. Perceptions it's 'impossible to prove'
2. Too time consuming
3. Staff don't feel encouraged to report



... and penalties are lenient

Staff were asked what a *typical* penalty includes.

Outsourced assignment

- 30% Warning/counselling
- 27% Zero for assignment
- 21% Reduced mark for assignment
- **3% Suspension**
- 2% Exclusion/expulsion

Exam impersonation

- 23% Zero for the exam
- 23% Warning/counselling
- 16% Zero for the subject
- **16% Suspension**
- 12% Exclusion/expulsion



7. Authentic assessment is a good thing to do...

Many students rationalised cheating in ‘trivial’, inauthentic assessments, or justified unauthorised learning practices because they reflect the ‘real world’.

*Students are more likely to cheat with take home exams or online exams/quizzes. With the internet readily available at most jobs now, **having to memorize material for exams is becoming more and more irrelevant.** Universities would do well to **remember the resources available to students once they enter their profession** and spend time testing/quizzing/ examining students in a more relevant manner (Student 148, non-cheating).*

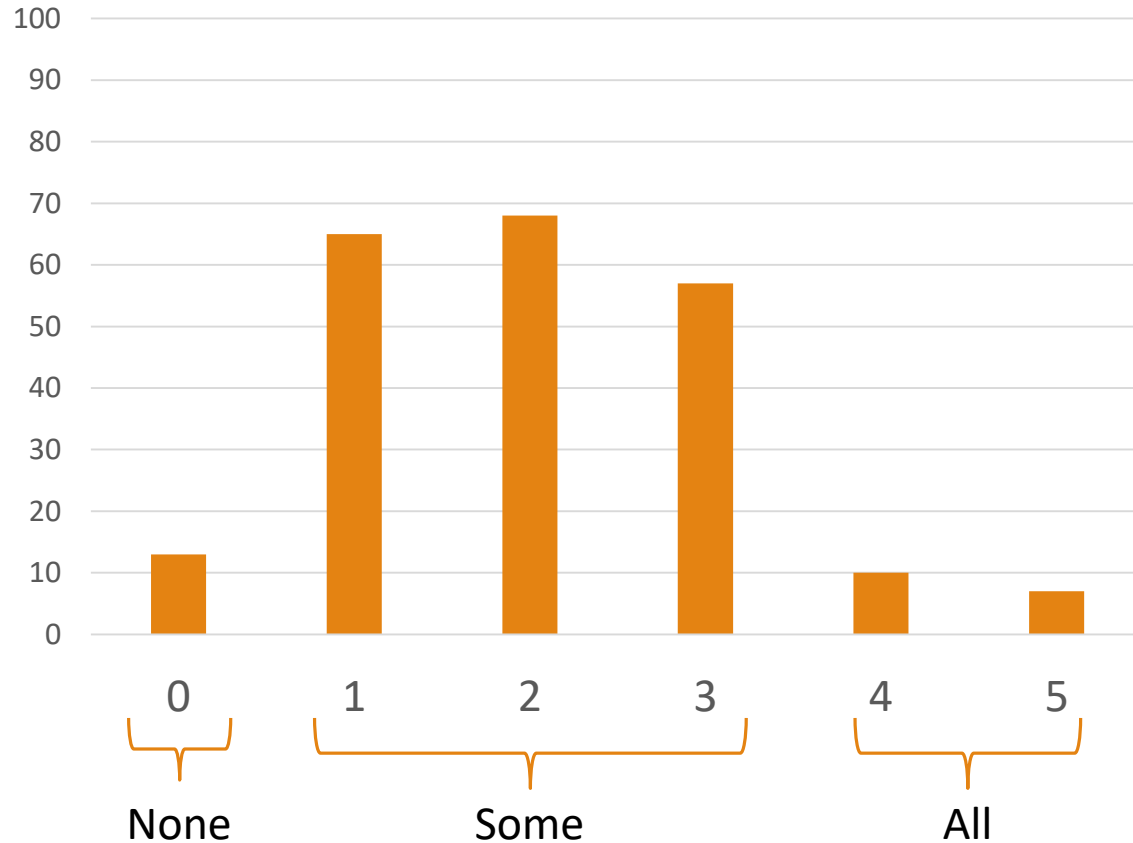
7. ...but authentic assessment isn't a solution

We identified 5 factors of authenticity possible in any assignment

Using these, we then rated (out of 5) the authenticity of:

1. over 200 assignment orders made to multiple cheat sites
2. assessments identified and penalised by two universities as contract cheating

7. ...but authentic assessment isn't a solution

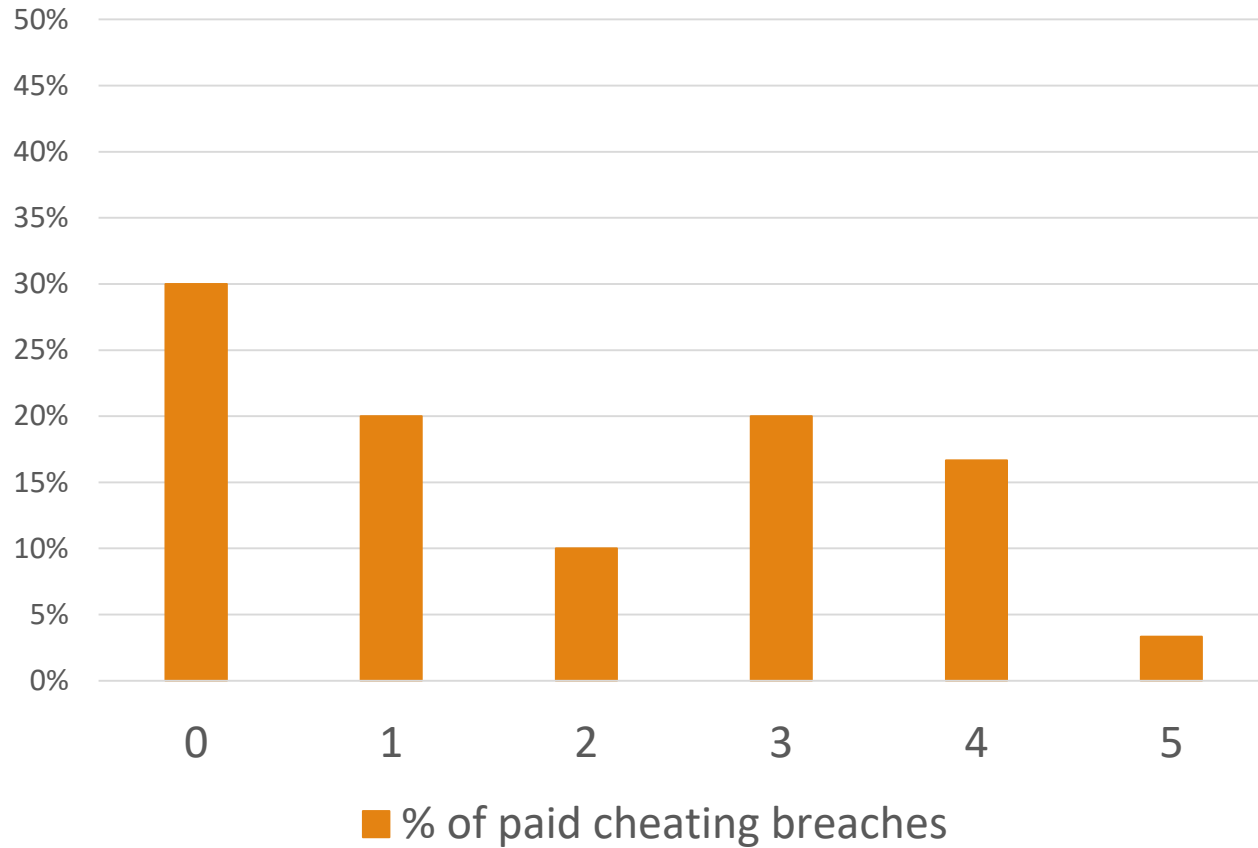


Assessment tasks with no, some, or all authenticity factors are routinely ordered by students

In one discipline (Education) ALL the orders were for highly authentic assignments (4 or 5)



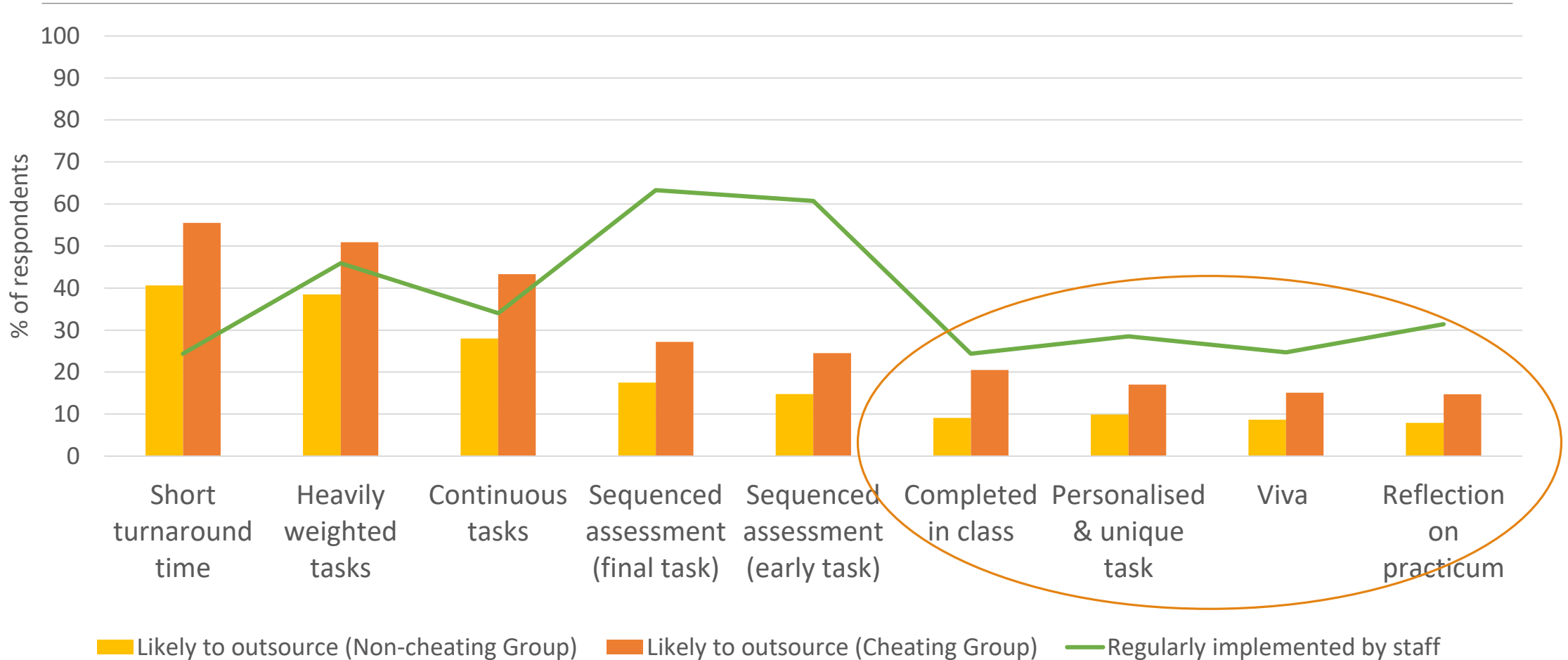
7. ...but authentic assessment isn't a solution



In the university breach data, 3 and 4 factor tasks appear more often than in the online orders.

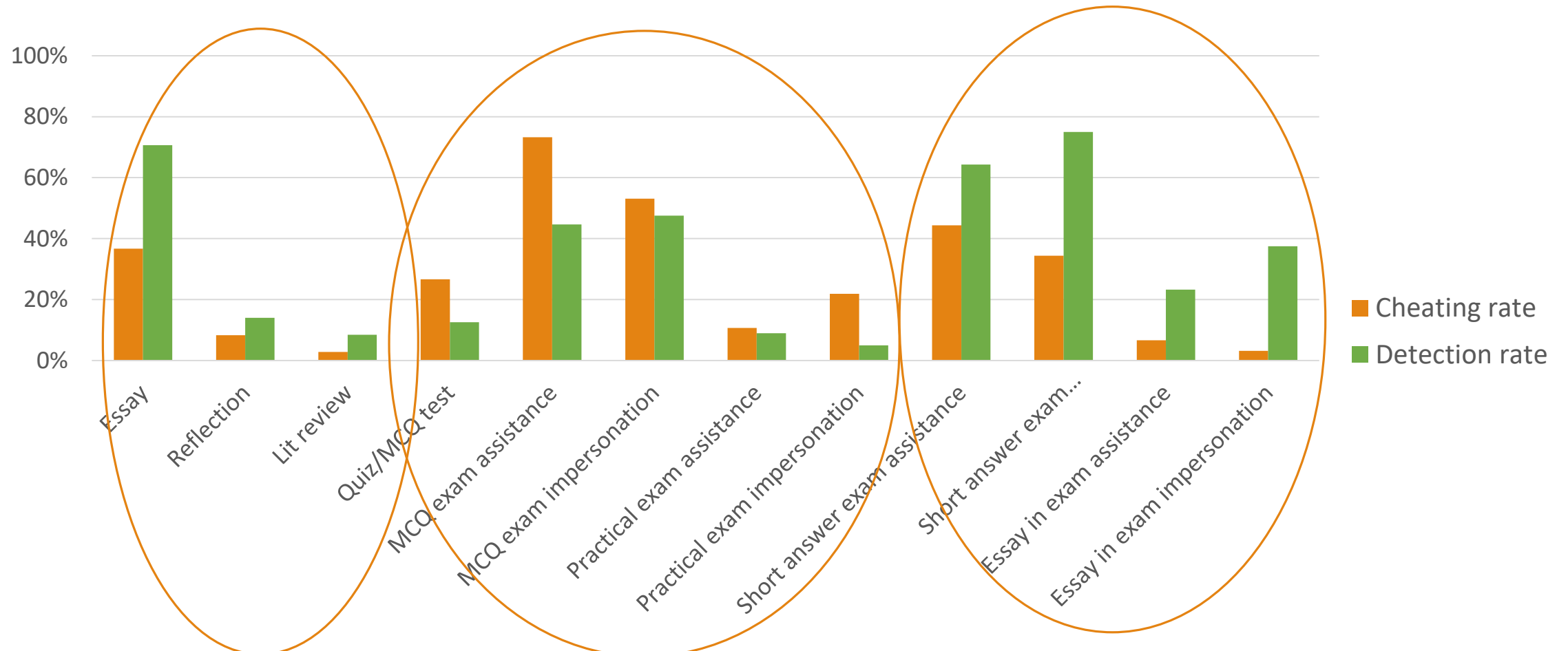
Is cheating easier to detect in more authentic assessments?

8. Assessments 'less likely' to be outsourced are rarely used





9. Most cheating is in exams/tests, but we're not detecting it





So what does this all mean?

- Contract cheating is a systemic problem: the causes are multiple and complex
- Responsibility does not rest solely with students, or educators
- Simplistic solutions (e.g. assessment design) are on their own ineffective
- Staff and student decisions are enabled and constrained by institutional and sector conditions



So what does this all mean?

Government and institutions must provide adequate resourcing and support for:

- Relevant and meaningful curriculum and assessment design
- Teaching that builds relationships with students
- Improving the language and learning of LOTE students
- Implementation of assessment
- Systematic detection and management of breaches



So what does this all mean?

Learning Advisers:

- Use the LOTE findings to lobby for better language development
- Use the sharing findings to advocate for using exemplars in teaching
- Incorporate information about contract cheating into academic integrity programs





contract cheating and
assessment design

Questions?

Acknowledgments

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Project website: www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au



Authentic assessment

- Commonly described as assessment tasks that reflect the ‘real world’
- Five features of authentic assessment identified:
 1. Frequency – task is common or fundamental to discipline or profession
 2. Fidelity – task reflects *how* something is done in discipline or profession
 3. Complexity – task reflects the ‘messiness’ of real-world problems
 4. Impact – task has real impact, shared with or delivered in the real world
 5. Feed forward – task directly, meaningfully informs future practice

(Based on work by Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Iverson, Lewis & Talbot, 2008)