

# Contract cheating in Higher Education

Findings from a Survey of Australian  
Students and Staff

Project Co-Leaders  
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Dr Rowena Harper

This Strategic Priority Project (SP16-5283) is supported by the Australian Government  
Department of Education and Training



contract cheating and  
assessment design

EXPLORING THE  
CONNECTION



# Project team

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## 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

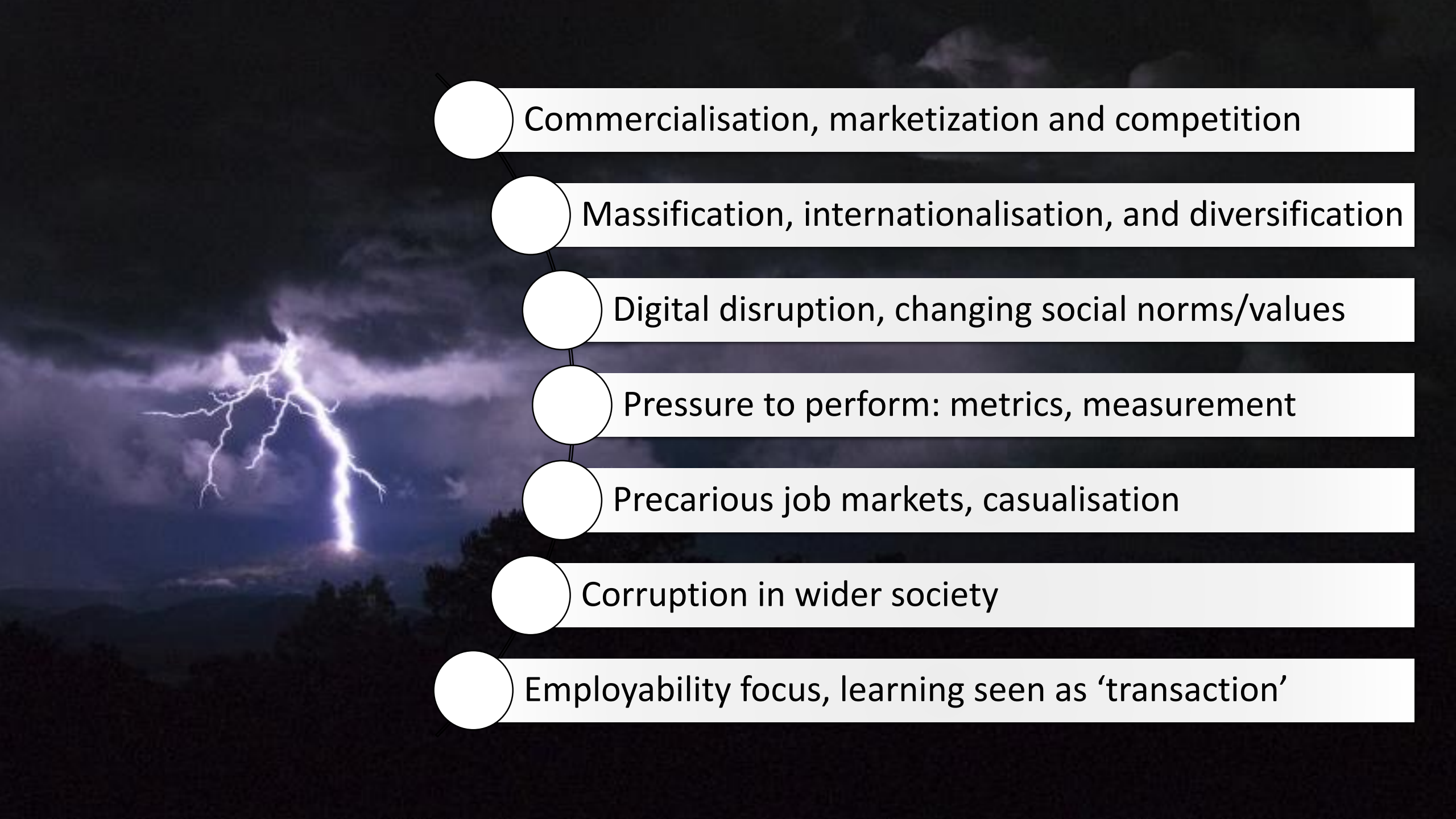
- Sonia Saddiqui (University of South Australia)



# Overview

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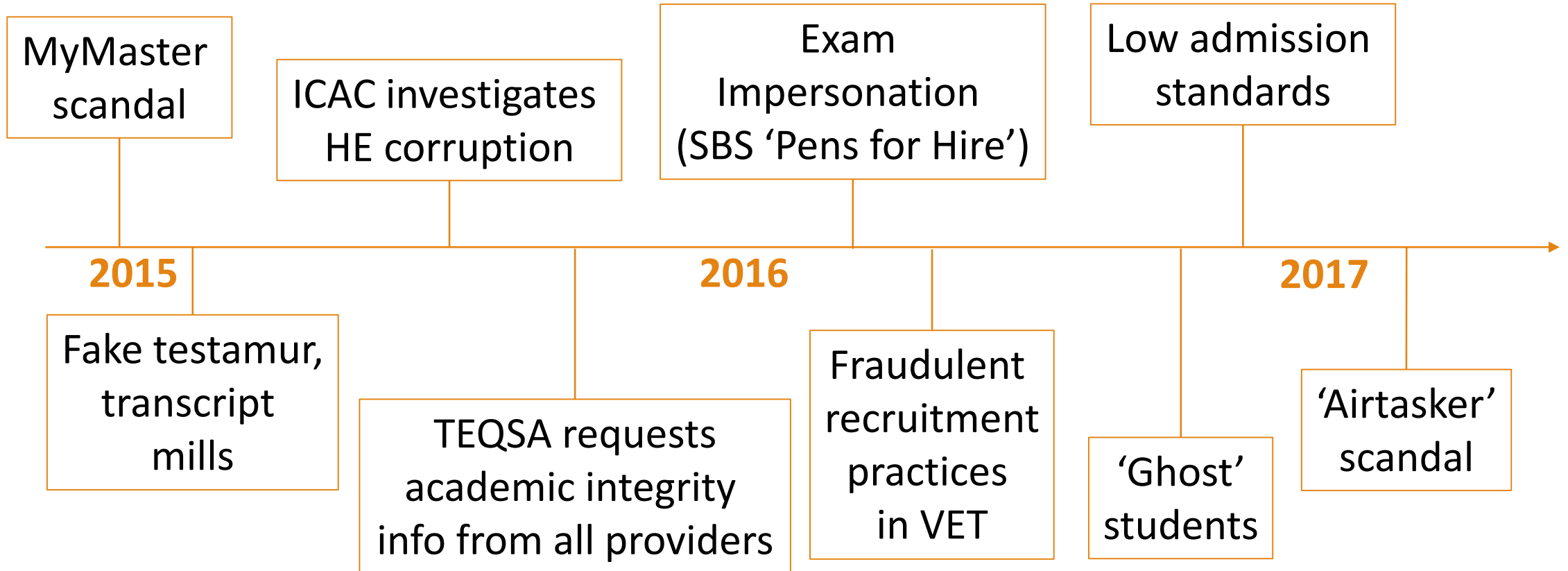
1. Background to project
2. Research questions and approach
3. Student survey findings
4. Staff survey findings
5. Assessment design findings



- Commercialisation, marketization and competition
- Massification, internationalisation, and diversification
- Digital disruption, changing social norms/values
- Pressure to perform: metrics, measurement
- Precarious job markets, casualisation
- Corruption in wider society
- Employability focus, learning seen as 'transaction'



# 2015-2017 context



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# Contract cheating

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“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, under review)

Third party:

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





# Research questions

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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?





# Research design

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1. Parallel staff and student surveys
  - 8 Universities
  - 4 Non-University Higher Education Providers (NUHEPs)
2. Large dataset of procurement requests posted to multiple cheat sites
  - Show the types of assessment commonly contracted out to third parties
3. Data from two universities' longitudinal academic integrity databases
  - Show 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



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# Student survey

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AN ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS



# Respondents

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N = 14,086

- Eight universities from six states – NSW, VIC, QLD, TAS, SA, WA
- **57% Female**, 41% Male
- 29% 17-20 years old, **37% 21-25**, 12% 26-30, 12% over 30
- **69% Undergraduates**, 21% Postgraduate Coursework, 9% Postgraduate Research
- **85% Domestic**, 15% International
- **65% Internal students**, 26% Blended mode, 9% External (online only)
- **79% English speaking**, 21% Language Other than English (LOTE)
- 50% Group of Eight, 50% non-Group of Eight



# Prevalence of outsourcing behaviours

<b>Sharing</b>	Bought, sold or traded notes	15.3%	<b>'Cheating' group</b>  <b>6% of students</b> (n=814)
	Provided completed assignment (for any reason)	27.2%	
<b>Cheating</b>	Obtained assignment (to submit)	2.2%	
	Provided exam assistance	3.1%	
	Received exam assistance	2.4%	
	Took exam for another	0.5%	
	Arranged for another to take exam	0.2%	

		Obtained assignment (to submit)	Provided exam assistance	Received exam assistance	Taken exam for other	Arranged for other to take exam
<b>% of Cheating Group who reported engaging in each behaviour</b>		37%	53.2%	41%	7.9%	4.2%
<b>% who submitted as own work</b>		68.5%	-	-	-	-
<b>Provider/ receiver</b>	Student or former student	60.2%	66.7%	78.9%	40%	50%
	Friend or family member	51.2%	69.6%	52.8%	71.6%	56.3%
	File-sharing website	4.2%	-	-	-	-
	Professional service	10.4%	1.5%	5.3%	6.7%	18.8%
	Partner or girl/boy friend	9%	6.1%	7.5%	16.7%	15.6%
<b>Money exchanged</b>	Yes	13.3%	3.4%	2.8%	16.7%	10%

		Bought, sold or traded notes		Provided assignment (for any reason)	
		Cheating Group	Non-Cheating Group	Cheating Group	Non-Cheating Group
<b>% of each group who reported engaging in behaviour</b>		28.1%	14.5%	52.1%	25.6%
<b>Provider/ receiver</b>	Student or former student	74.2%	73%	74.3%	69%
	Friend or family member	46.3%	51.6%	68.4%	67.4%
	File-sharing website	31%	21.3%	2.8%	1.1%
	Professional service	25.8%	11.5%	16.1%	9.2%
	Partner or girl/boy friend	14%	8.4%	19.6%	14.9%
<b>Money exchanged</b>	Yes	-	-	6.4%	1.6%



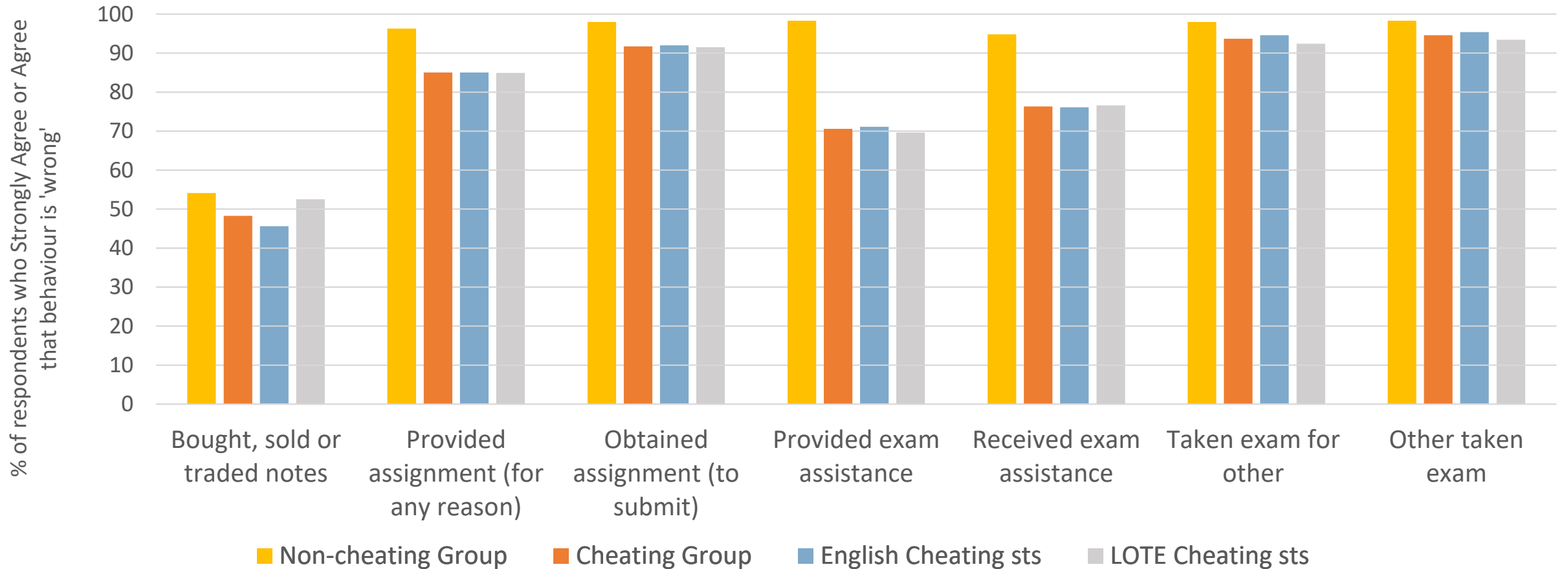


# The Cheating Group

	All respondents (n = 14,086)	Cheating group (n = 814)		All respondents (n = 14,086)	Cheating group (n = 814)
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Type of institution</b>		
Female	57.4%	44.0%	Group of 8 (Go8)	50.0%	55.2%
Male	41.1%	54.2%	Non-Go8	50.0%	44.8%
<b>Discipline</b>			<b>Mode of study</b>		
Health Sciences	20.7%	15.6%	Internal	64.9%	68.6%
Business and Commerce	17.0%	17.2%	Blended	25.8%	27.1%
Engineering	13.1%	24.6%	External (online only)	9.3%	4.3%
<b>Language spoken at home</b>			<b>Domicile</b>		
English	78.8%	59.8%	Domestic	84.7%	67.0%
Language other than English	21.2%	40.2%	International	15.3%	33.0%



# Attitudes towards outsourcing

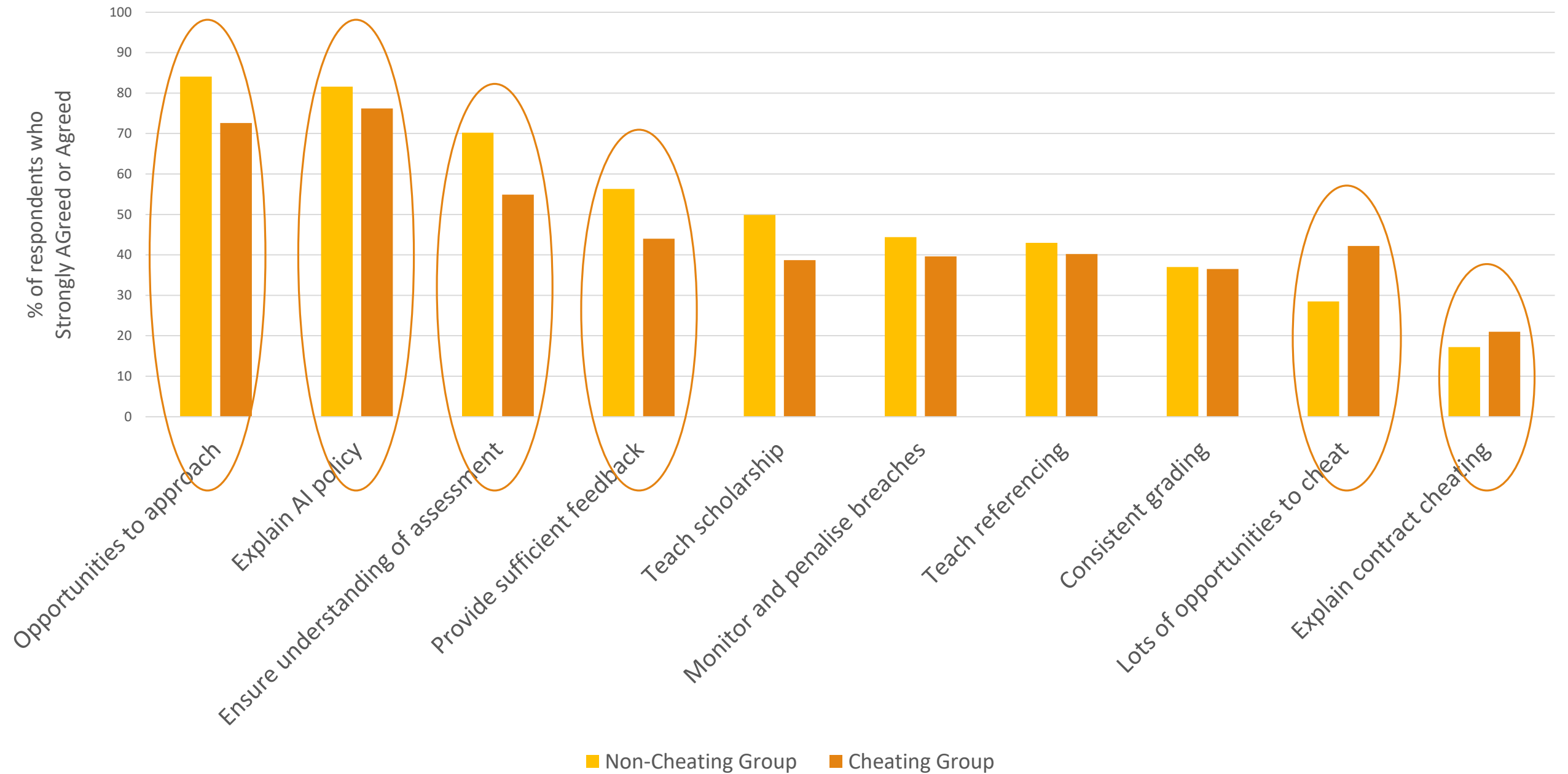




# Perceptions of T&L environment

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1. I have **opportunities to approach** my lecturers and tutors for assistance
2. My lecturers and tutors ensure I **understand what is required in assignments**
3. There are lots of **opportunities to cheat** in my subjects
4. My lecturers and tutors have **explained my institution's academic integrity policy**, and the consequences for breaching it
5. My lecturers and tutors spend class time **teaching me how to reference**
6. My lecturers and tutors spend class time **talking about 'contract cheating'**
7. My lecturers and tutors spend class time teaching me **how to engage in scholarship** in my discipline
8. My lecturers and tutors **consistently monitor and penalise** academic integrity breaches in line with my institution's policy
9. My lecturers and tutors are **consistent with each other** in grading
10. I receive **sufficient feedback** to ensure that I learn from the work I do





# Key findings

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## **Prevalence and nature of contract cheating**

- Relatively few students (6%) have engaged in contract cheating
- Lots of students are sharing... and sharing is twice as common among students who have cheated
- Despite the widespread availability of file-sharing websites and commercial cheating services, students still primarily engage in outsourcing with people they know: students, friends, and family



# Key findings

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## **Individual, contextual and institutional factors correlated with contract cheating:**

- Dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning items
- Perceptions that there were lots of opportunities to cheat
- Speaking a language other than English at home (for arranging for someone to assist with or complete an exam)
- Domestic student status (both exam impersonation behaviours)



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# Staff survey

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AN ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS



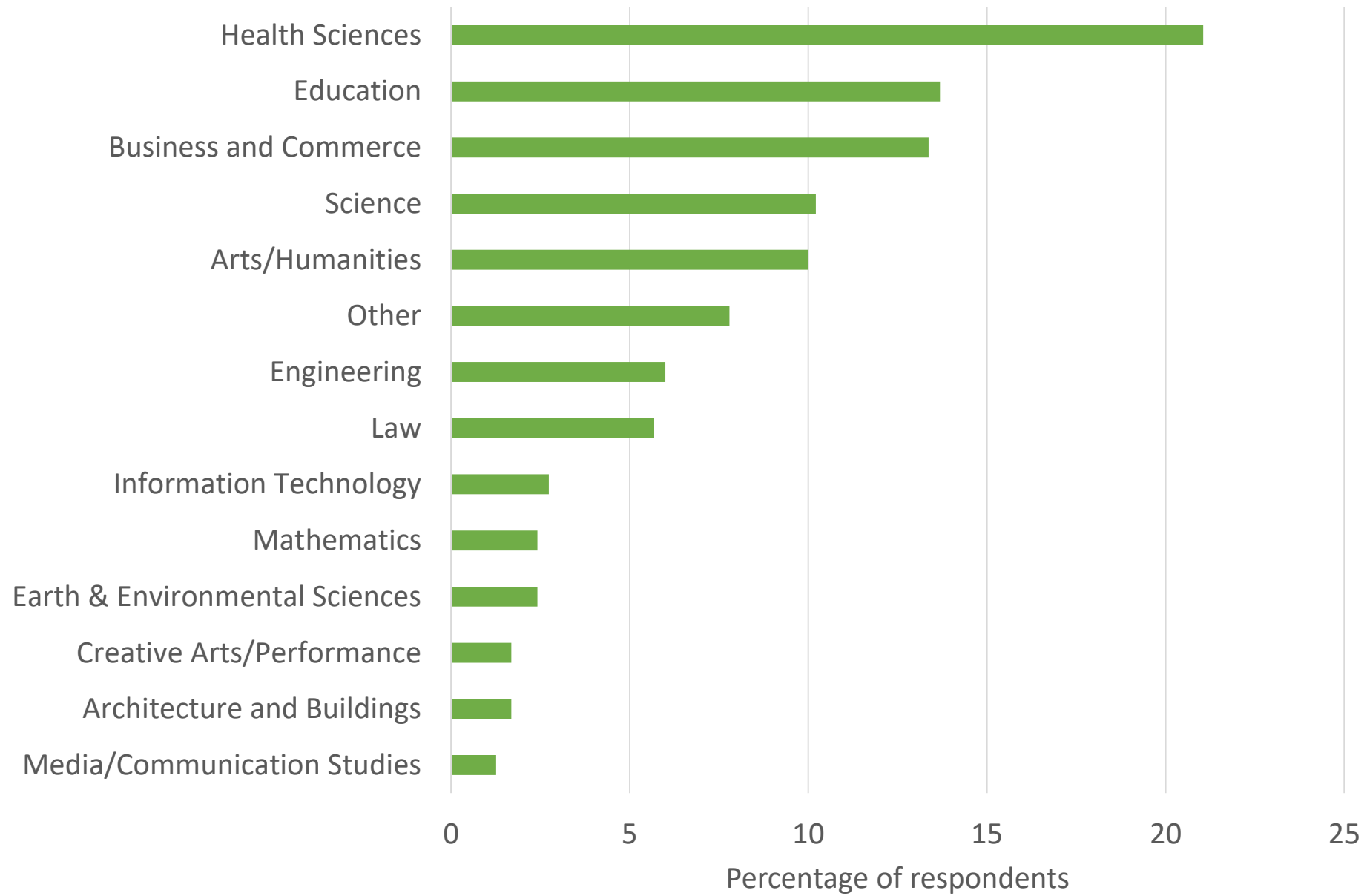


# Respondents

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N = 1,147

- Eight universities from six states – NSW, VIC, QLD, TAS, SA, WA
- 59% female, 39% male
- 90% speak English at home, 36% born overseas
- Primary work location: 83% metropolitan campus, 9% rural/regional, 8% home
- Employment type: 49% continuing, 30% casual/sessional, 21% Fixed-term contract
- Years employed in HE: 33.7% (1-5), 23.6% (6-10), 16.1% (11-15)
- Employment level:
  - Level A 12%, Level B 22%, Level C 19%, Level D 8%, Level E 6%
  - Non-academic 16%, Not sure 17.5%





# Outsourced assignments

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**68%** of staff have suspected assignments of being outsourced

- Of those, **40%** have suspected this more than 5 times
- Educator's knowledge of student was the most common signal
  - Knowledge of academic ability 71%, Knowledge of language ability 62%
  - High text match via software 49%
- Only **56%** of staff refer such cases to AI decision maker
  - Approximately 8% of staff ignore them
  - The remaining 36% handle it themselves, from giving warnings through to giving zero



# Outsourced assignments

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For those who do not refer such cases to AI decision makers, why?

- 32% Impossible to prove
- 14% Too time consuming
- 12% Not supported by senior management to pursue these matters

For those who *do* refer cases

- 33% are not typically informed about what happens
- 35% report their cases are ***substantiated 90-100% of the time***
- This counters perceptions that contract cheating is impossible to prove...
- BUT staff must be informed of this to increase referral rates



# Outsourced assignments

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What is the *typical* penalty? [staff could select a combination of items]

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

Penalties seem far more lenient than those recommended in the literature



# Exam assistance

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Only **7%** of staff said exam assistance had occurred in their courses

- Of those, most (61%) had seen it 1-2 times
- However, 9% had seen it **more than 10 times**

**23%** were not informed of the outcome

- 36% Zero for the exam
- **46% Warning/counselling**
- 11% Resit the exam
- 4% Exclusion



# Exam impersonation

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**5%** of staff said exam impersonation had occurred in their courses

- Of those, most (77%) had seen it 1-2 times
- However, 13% had seen it **more than 10 times**

**35%** were not informed of the outcome

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





# Recording of breaches

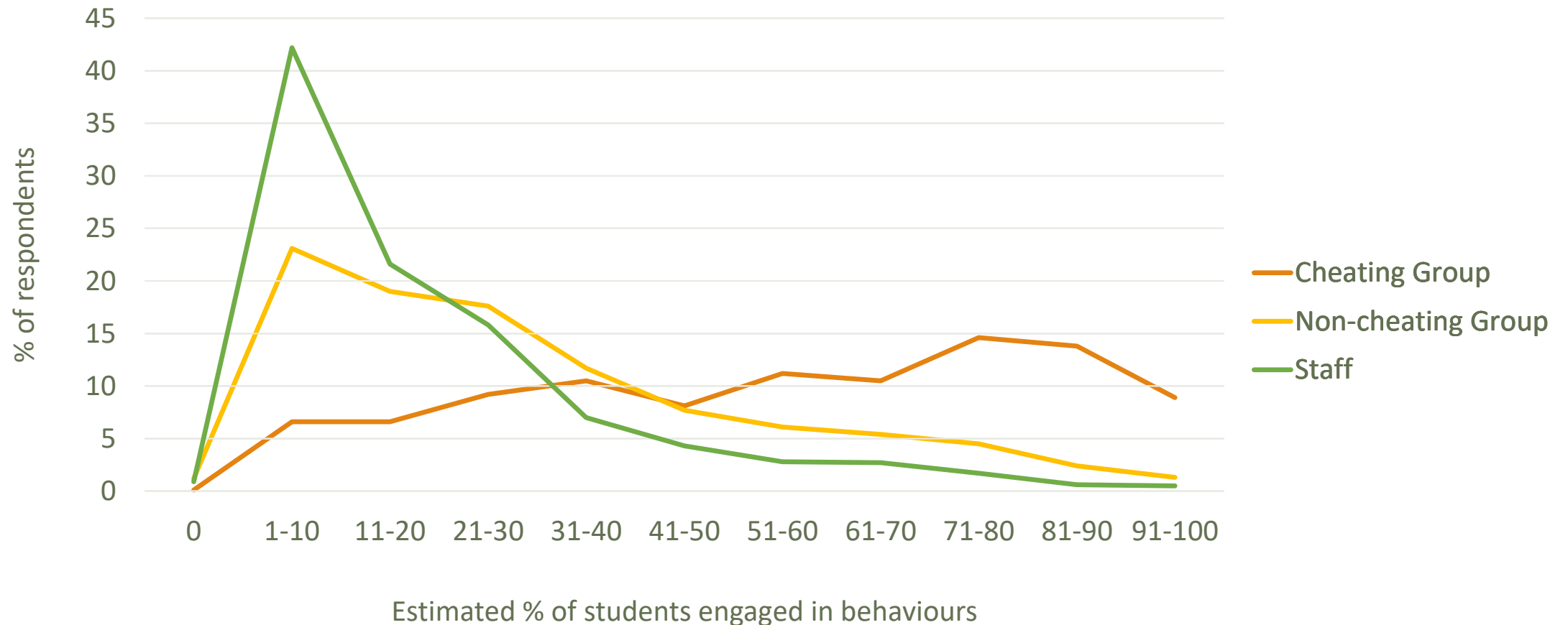
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As part of the ‘typical’ response for each breach type, how many staff reported that an **official database record** is created?

- Outsourced assessment: 18%
- Exam assistance: 13%
- Exam impersonation: 16%

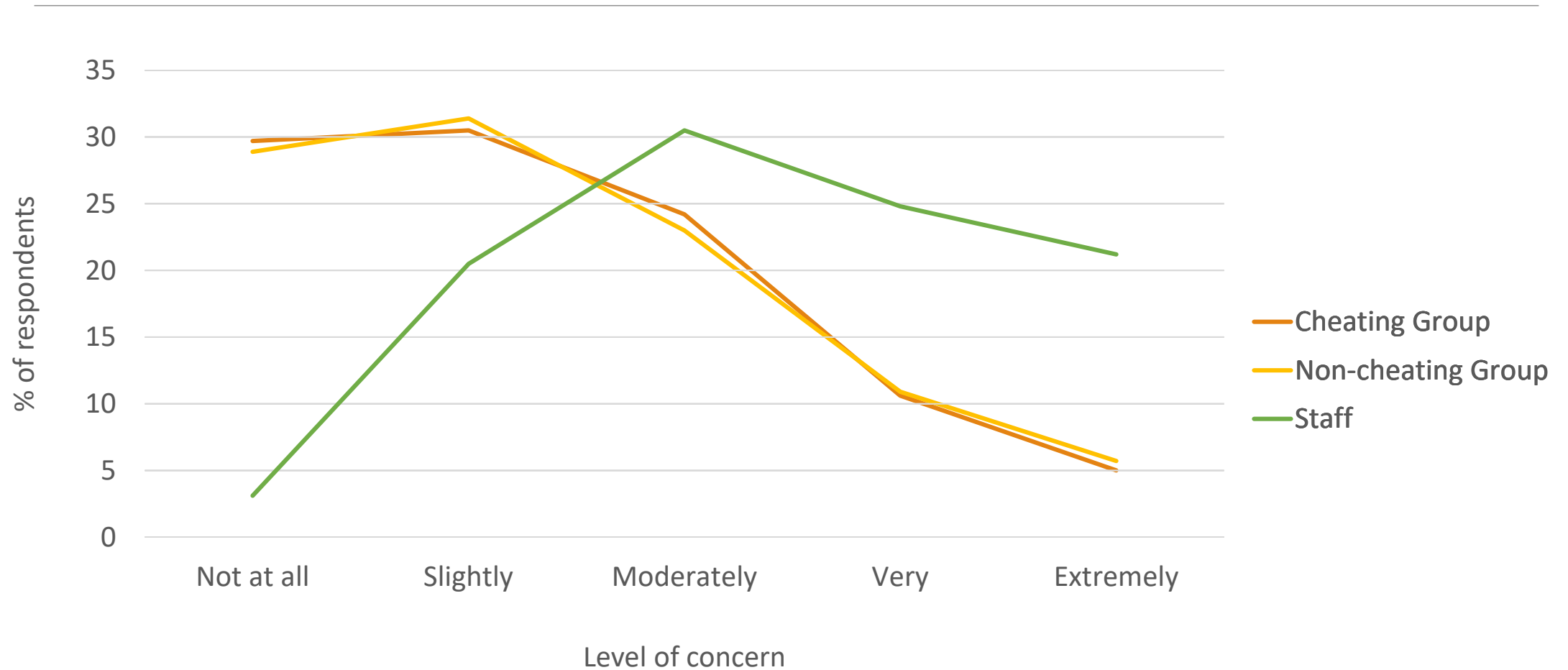


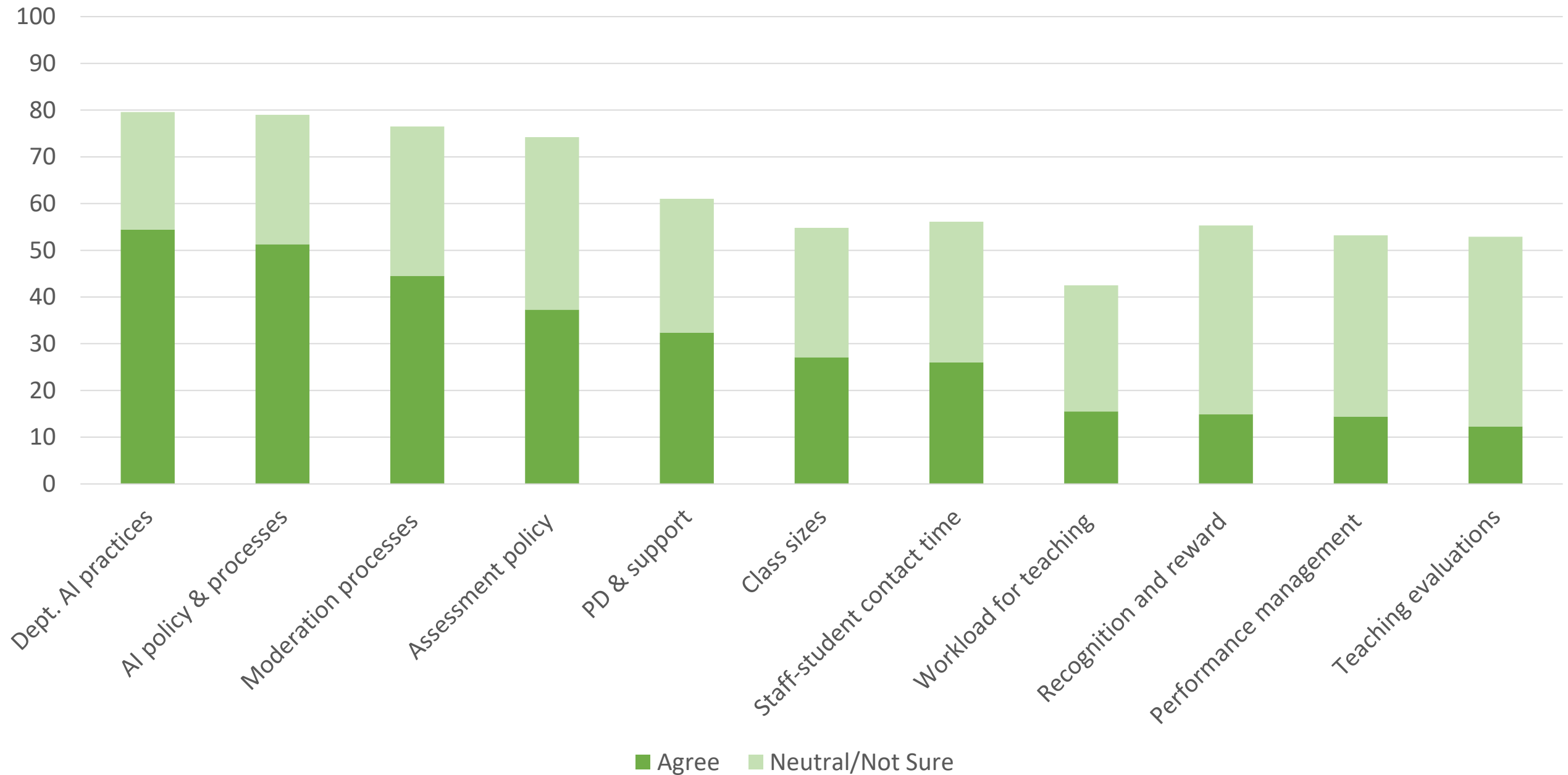
# Perceived prevalence





# Level of concern







# Engagement in contract cheating

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In their role as *staff*, had respondents ever provided materials to a student that allowed them to gain an unfair advantage?

- Only 0.5% (n=4/783) said yes
  - one was paid money
  - two had been detected, with the most serious penalty being non-renewal of contract

As *students*, had respondents ever engaged in behaviour that would be classified as third-party cheating?

- **10%** said yes



# Key findings

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## **Staff experiences with contract cheating**

- Almost 70% of teaching staff have suspected outsourced assignments at least once
- Knowing the student is an important signal
- Although most referred cases are substantiated and penalised, many staff do not pursue suspected breaches
  - misperceptions it is 'impossible to prove'
  - not informed about outcomes
  - concerns about penalties



# Key findings

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## **Staff and student attitudes towards contract cheating**

- Staff consider contract cheating to be a serious matter
- Although students tend to believe cheating is ‘wrong’, most are not concerned that students are engaging in it
- Staff and students alike are ambivalent about note-sharing



# Key findings

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## **Individual, contextual and institutional factors correlated with contract cheating**

- Departmental and institutional academic integrity policies and practices are perceived to help minimise contract cheating
- Practical conditions of teaching (workload, contact time, class sizes) are perceived barriers to minimising contract cheating
- The performance review and reward environment is not perceived to incentivise minimisation of contract cheating



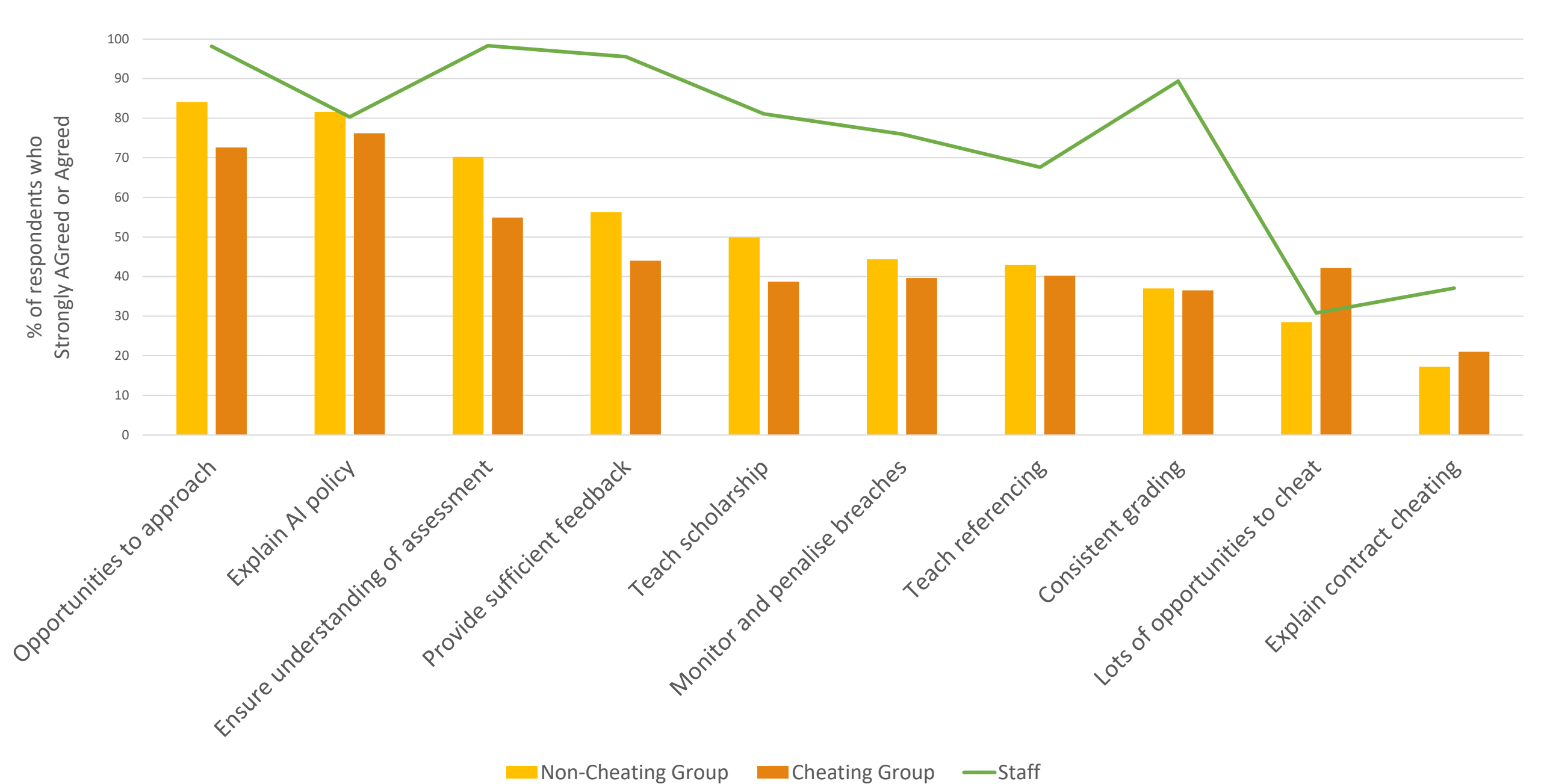


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# Teaching & Assessment Design

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AN ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS



■ Non-Cheating Group   ■ Cheating Group   — Staff



# Assessment design

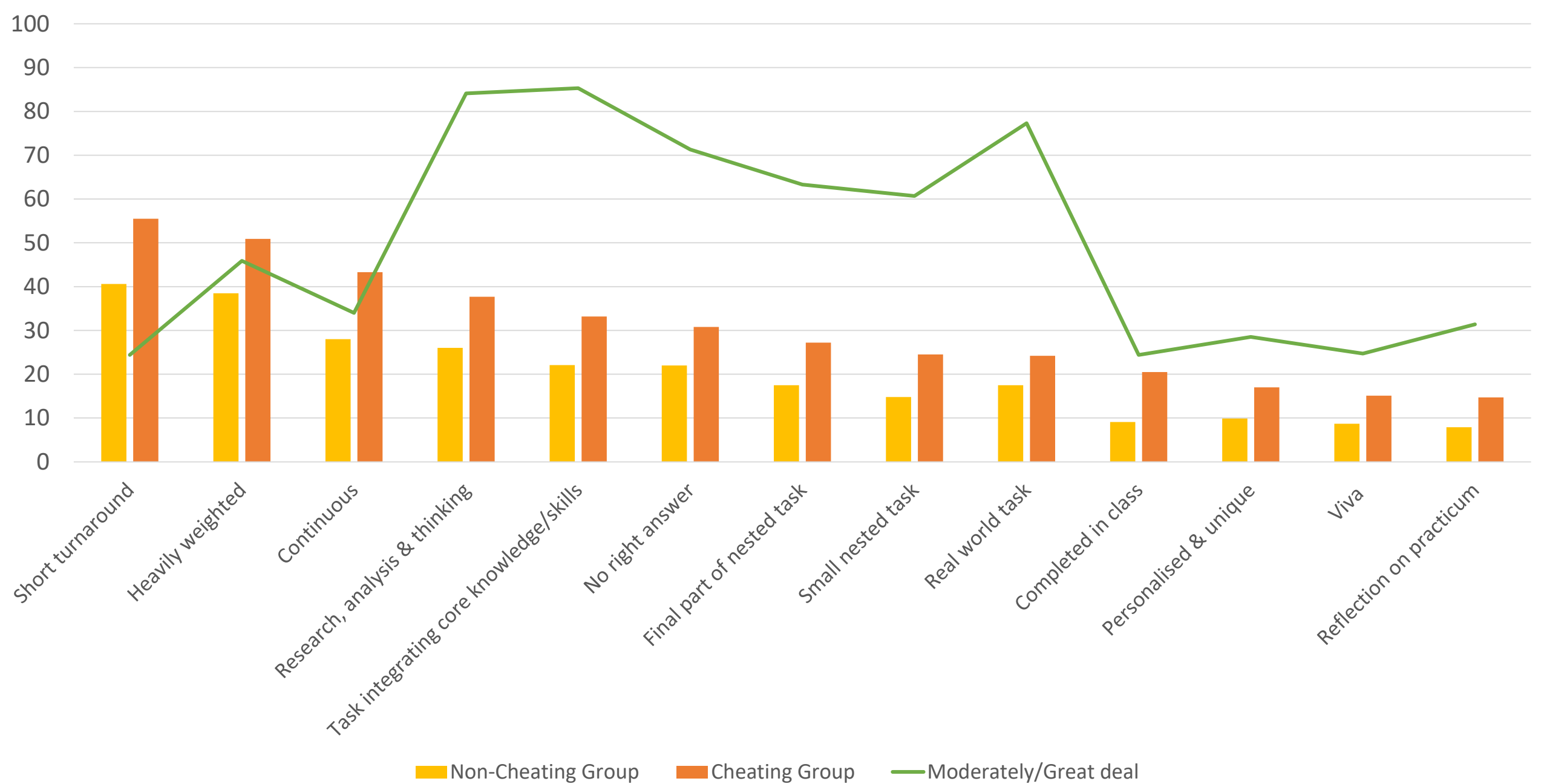
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Students asked:

Rate the likelihood that a student “would consider getting someone else to complete this kind of assignment for them”

Staff asked:

“How often do you implement the following curriculum and assessment features in your teaching role?”





# Conclusions

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- Assessment design alone cannot eradicate contract cheating
- We need to look holistically at the teaching and learning environment, and the way it is enabled and constrained by organisational conditions
- Cheating can be minimised by:
  - encouraging students to get more concerned about this problem
  - recognising the particular needs of LOTE students
  - improving the teaching and learning environment
  - reducing opportunities to cheat through course and assessment design
  - supporting educators to know their students
  - ensuring processes of breach detection, reporting, substantiation, penalisation and communication



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# Stay in touch

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Website:

[www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au/resources](http://www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au/resources) (register for updates)

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# Procurements notices and detected breaches

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A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS





# Research question and design

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Does authentic assessment design ‘solve’ contract cheating?

## **Procurement notices**

- Harvested orders from 85 feeds from 1 Oct to 30 Nov, 2016 (N= 111,958)
- Randomised selection of 250 orders taken
- Coded using authenticity schema, and FOE code (4 or 6 digit) ascribed
- Inter-coder and intra-coder reliability validation
- Of the 250 orders, 29 unable to be coded: n=221



# Research question and design

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Does authentic assessment design ‘solve’ contract cheating?

## **Institutional breach data**

- Reported and substantiated *procured assignment breaches* from two universities
- Gathered from semester 2 2013 to semester 2 2016
- All available cases coded using authenticity schema, and FOE code (4 or 6 digit) ascribed
- Inter-coder and intra-coder reliability validation
- Approximately 60 cases initially examined (a further 200 undergoing analysis)



# Research findings

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Authentic assessment design does not eliminate contract cheating

- There is evidence that assessment tasks designed with no, some or *all factors of authenticity* are routinely procured by students, and detected by universities' internal processes

Engineering appears to be *under* represented in cases of purchasing bespoke assignments



# Next steps

