Contract cheating in Australian universities

Implications for assessment, integrity and review of quality and standards

Project Co-Leaders
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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)
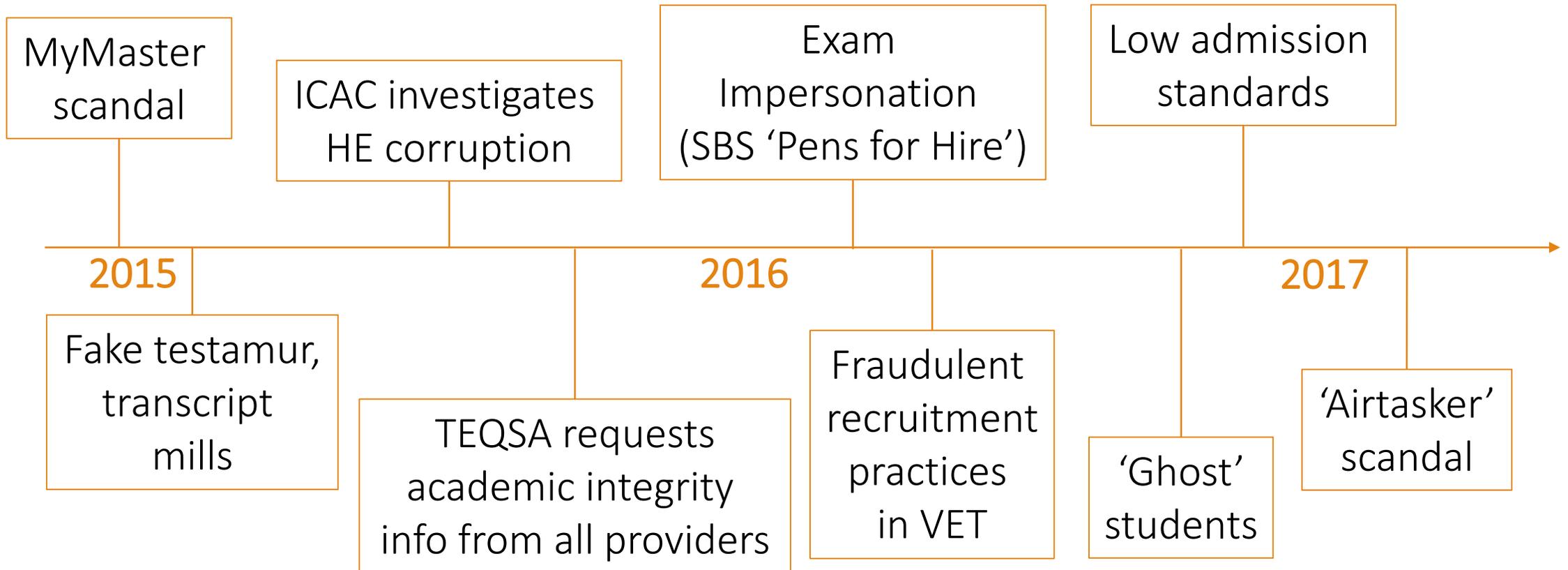- Swansea University, UK (Phil Newton)

Data analyst

- Michael Burton (University of Western Australia)

Project Manager

- Sonia Saddiqui (University of South Australia)

contract cheating and
assessment design

2015-2017 context

MyMaster scandal

ICAC investigates HE corruption

Exam Impersonation (SBS 'Pens for Hire')

Low admission standards

2015

2016

2017

Fake testamur, transcript mills

TEQSA requests academic integrity info from all providers

Fraudulent recruitment practices in VET

'Ghost' students

'Airtasker' scandal

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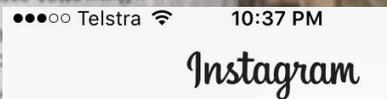
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Contract cheating

"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

Sharing behaviours   Cheating behaviours

Eight 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

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).*

![contract cheating and assessment design]

2. Students share their work a lot…

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

Sharing behaviours

6% have engaged in one or more of the 5 'cheating' behaviours (with exam cheating 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) |

Sharing behaviours

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

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
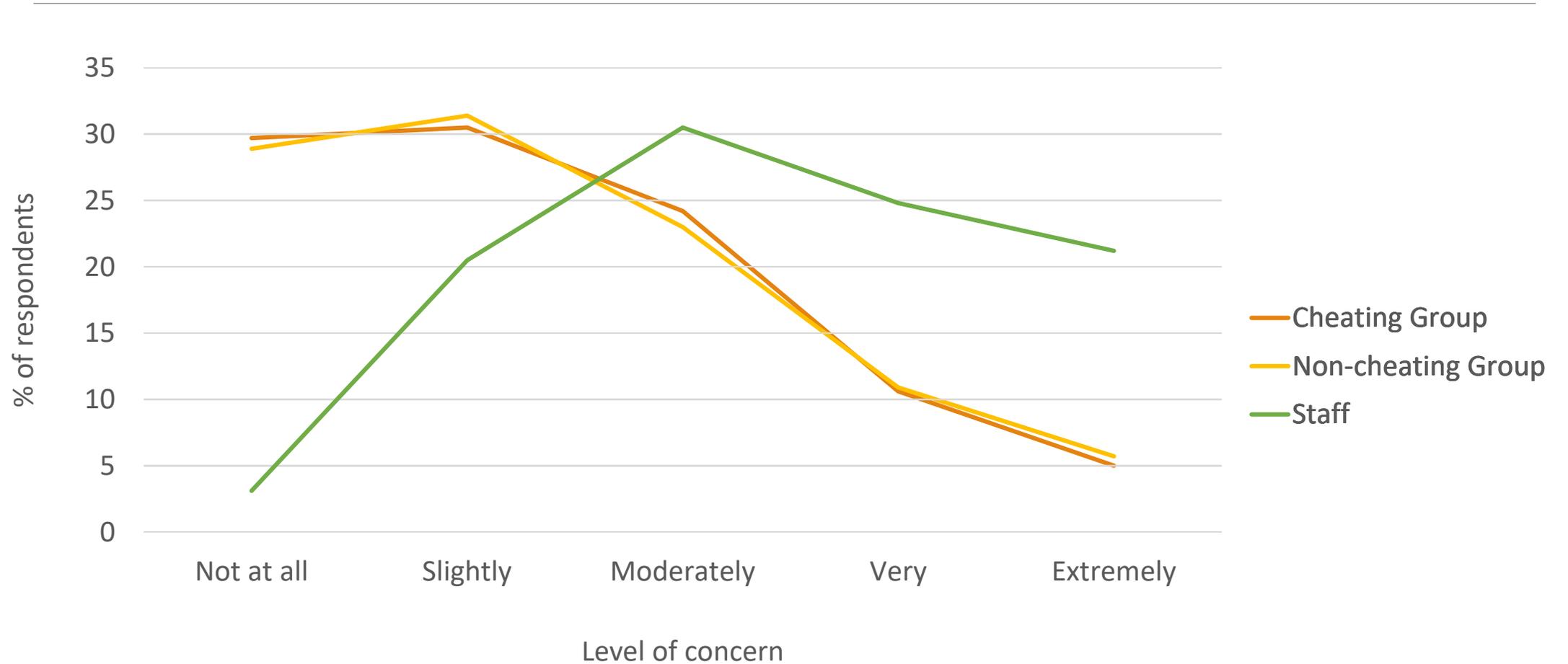
4. Three factors contribute to contract cheating

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'

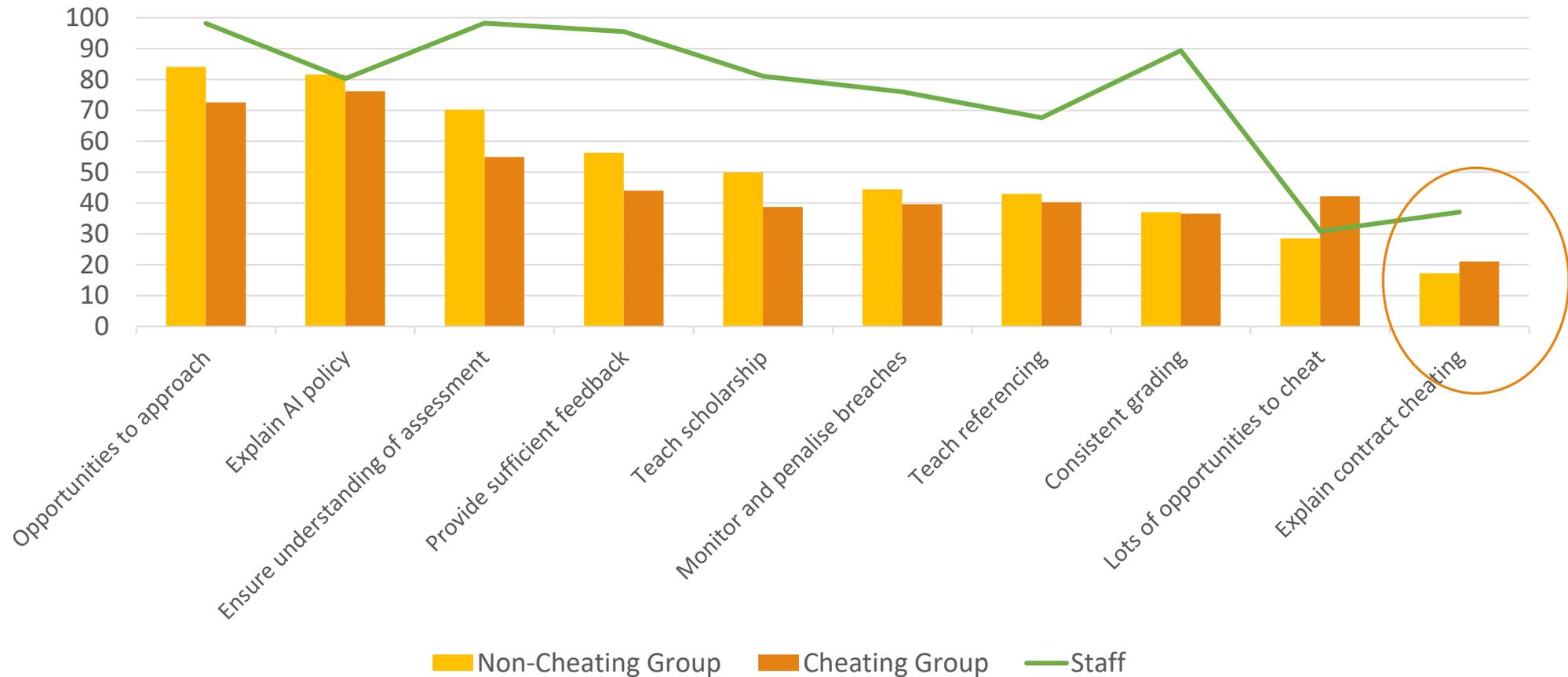3. Dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment

5. Students aren't concerned ...

… and we're not talking to them about it

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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' assessments, or justified unauthorised learning practices because they reflect the 'real world'.

*In engineering, the worst possible student would love to try hard and do design work; however, **"useless assignment" like weekly quizzes are very unwelcome** (Student 46, non-cheating).*

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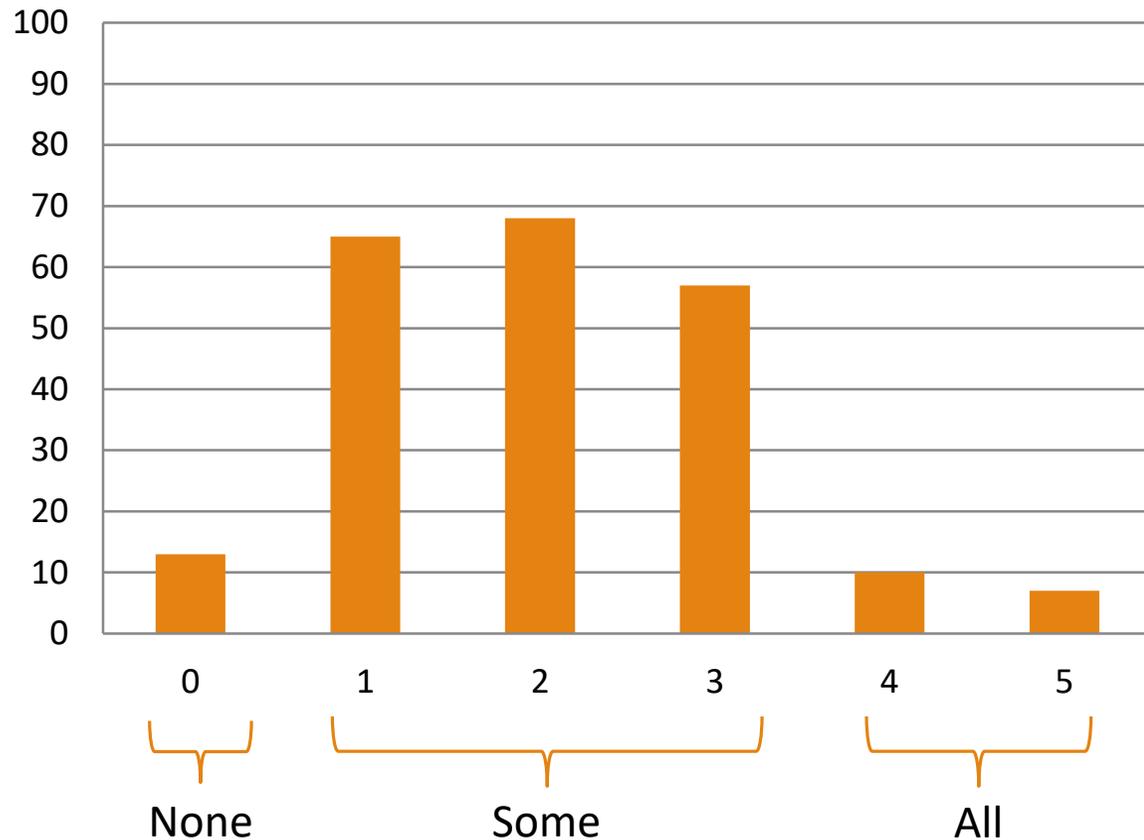
7. ...but authentic assessment isn't a solution

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
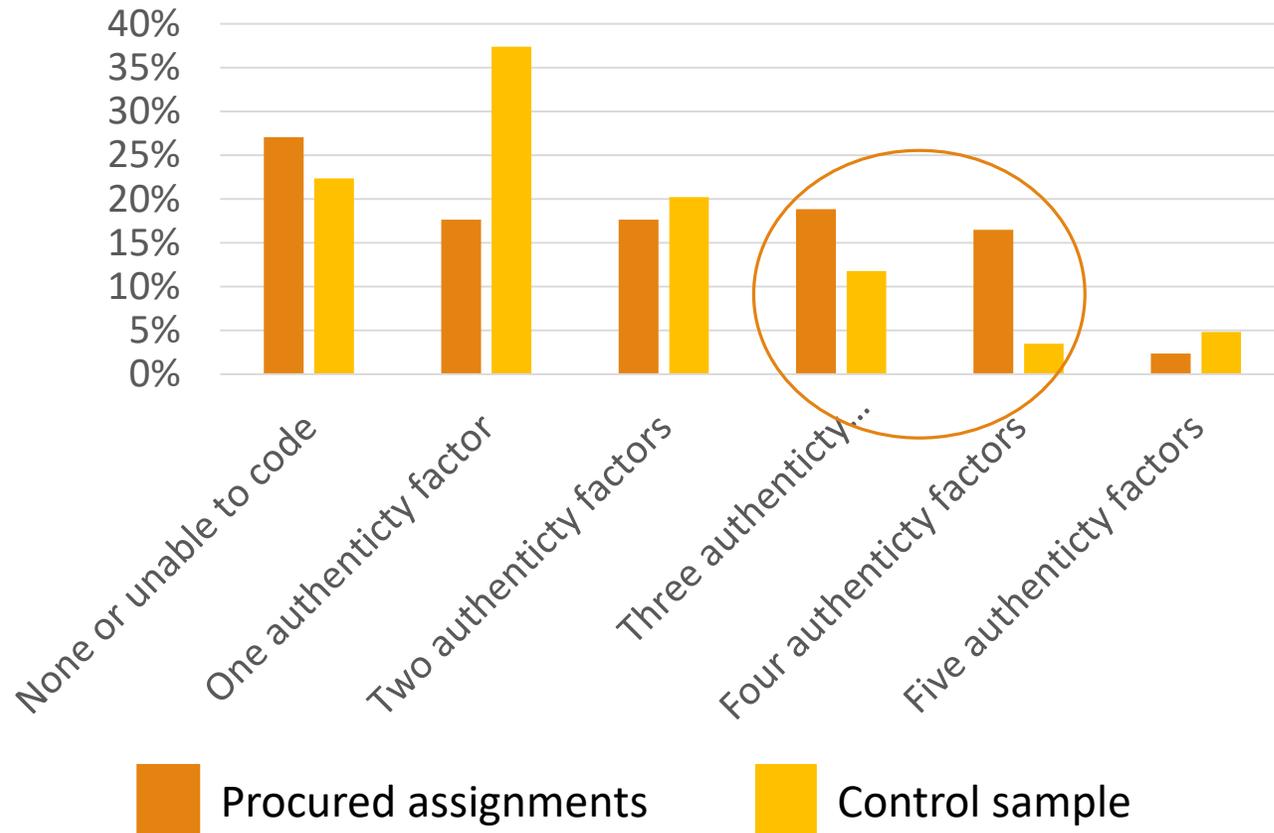2. assessments identified and penalised by two universities as contract cheating

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

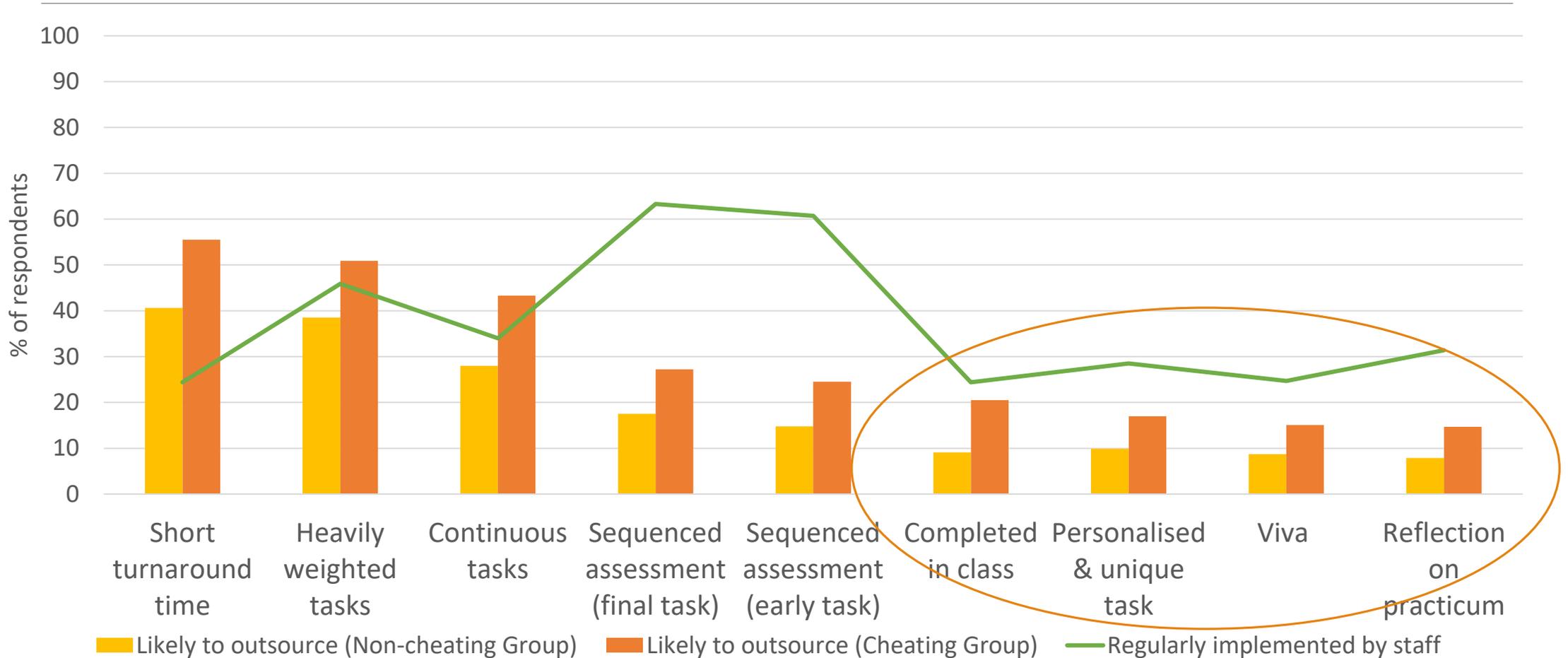Assessment tasks with no, some, or all authenticity factors are routinely ordered by students

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 (ie. more authentic) appear **more often** in the procured breaches than in a control sample

Legend:
- **Procured assignments** (orange)
- **Control sample** (yellow)

Chart categories:
- None or unable to code
- One authenticty factor
- Two authenticty factors
- Three authenticty...
- Four authenticty factors
- Five authenticty factors

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

Legend: Likely to outsource (Non-cheating Group) · Likely to outsource (Cheating Group) · Regularly implemented by staff

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 should be done?

We need *over*view, resourcing and review to promote and enable quality and standards:

- **Overview**
  - Quality assurance agencies, accreditation and leadership bodies to use evidence-based approaches to provide direction and oversight of quality and standards

- **Resourcing**
  - Federal funding to sustain a long-term vision for Australian higher education
  - Institutional funding for quality teaching and learning *as well as* research

- **Review**
  - Higher education providers to review all aspects of programs, courses and assessment to ensure integrity of the learning process and outcomes
  - Educators to reflect on and review their own practices to meet the needs of students

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References

Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Saddiqui, S., Rozenberg, P & van Haeringen, K. (2018). Contract cheating: A survey of Australian university students, *Studies in Higher Education,* https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788

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Project website: www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au

Questions?

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)