Evidence-based approaches to contract cheating

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Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond, Brno
24 May 2017

contract cheating and assessment design

EXPLORING THE CONNECTION

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Outline of presentation

- 2015-2017 context
- Defining contract cheating
- The Assessment Design Myth
- Research questions and design
- Student Survey: Preliminary results
- Staff survey: Preliminary results
- What can be done? Using the evidence to respond to contract cheating

2015-2017 context

- MyMaster scandal (2015)

- Fake Diploma Mills (2015)

- Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) investigation of corruption in higher education (2015)
  - TEQSA (Australia's national HE regulator) request to Higher Education Providers for 'assurance of academic integrity'

- *More* scandals: ghost students, fraudulent recruitment practices, low standards, exam impersonation (Documentary 'Pens for Hire')

- 'Airtasker' scandal (Feb 2017)

- These Australian 'scandals' were matched by similar ones across the globe.

Contract cheating

...where a student gets someone – a third party – to complete an assignment or an exam for them. This third party might be a friend, family member, fellow student or staff member who assists the student as a favour. It might be a pre-written assignment which has been obtained from an assignment 'mill'. The third party may also be a paid service, advertised locally or online.

(As defined in staff survey)

The assessment design myth

Assessment design is widely advocated as the solution, whereby we can 'design out' opportunities to cheat

Invigilated exams	Decreased turnaround times	Personalised, sequential and original assessments
• Paid impersonation • Outsourcing of whole degrees • Exam focus leads to other cheating problems	• 24% of procurement ads on 'Freelancer' & 'Transtutors were for a turnaround time of one day or less (Wallace & Newton, 2014)	• Employment portfolios, reflective journals, presentations, research proposals, and even complete doctoral dissertations can all be bought like any other commodity

contract cheating and assessment design

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?

Research design

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
   - 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 contract cheating has 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

Student survey

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS

Respondents

- Eight universities from six states - NSW, VIC, QLD, TAS, SA, WA

- N = 14,086
  - **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; 9.3% External (online only)
  - **79% English speaking;** 21% Language Other than English (LOTE)
  - 50% Go8; 50% non-Go8

Prevalence of outsourcing behaviours

Sharing	Bought, sold or traded notes	15.3%
	Provided assignment (for any reason)	27.2%
Cheating	Obtained assignment (to submit as own work)	2.2%
	Provided exam assistance	3.1%
	Received exam assistance	2.4%
	Taken exam for other	0.5%
	Other taken exam	0.2%

Cheating group

6% of respondents (n= 814 students) reported engaging in one or more of the 5 contract cheating behaviours

- Analysed as a subset and compared against 'non-cheating' students
- Students who reported 'sharing' behaviours not included

Nature of cheating behaviours

Survey items		Obtained assignment (to submit)	Provided exam assistance	Received exam assistance	Taken exam for other	Other taken exam
% Cheating students engaged		37%	53.2%	41%	7.9%	4.2%
	% who submitted as own work	68.5%	-	-	-	-
Provider/ receiver	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%
	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%
Money exchanged	Yes	13.3%	3.4%	2.8%	16.7%	10%

Sharing behaviours

	Bought, sold or traded notes		Provided assignment (for any reason)	
	Cheating group	**Non-cheating**	**Cheating group**	**Non-cheating**
Engaged in behaviour	28.1%	14.5%	52.1%	25.6%
Provider/receiver				
Another/former student	74.2%	73%	74.3%	69%
Friend/family member	46.3%	51.6%	68.4%	67.4%
File-sharing website	31%	21.3%	2.8%	1.1%

The Cheating Group

Demographic	All respondents (n = 14,086)	Cheating subset (n = 814)
Gender		
Female	57.4%	44.0%
Male	41.1%	54.2%
Language spoken at home		
English	78.8%	59.8%
Language other than English ^	21.2%	40.2%
Domicile		
Domestic	84.7%	67.0%
International	15.3%	33.0%
Discipline		
Engineering	13.1%	24.6%
Type of institution +		
Group of 8 (Go8) university	50.0%	55.2%
Non-Go8 university	50.0%	44.8%

Attitudes towards outsourcing behaviours

- Compared across Domestic/International respondents and English/LOTE student
- **No significant difference**

- However, there was a difference between Cheating and Non-cheating groups

Cheating group vs Non-Cheating group: Attitudes towards sharing and cheating behaviours

	Bought, sold or traded notes	Provided assignment (for any reason)	Obtained assignment (to submit)	Provided exam assistance	Received exam assistance	Taken exam for other	Other taken exam
Cheaters	48.3	85.0	91.7	70.6	76.3	93.7	94.6
Non-Cheaters	54.1	96.3	98.0	98.3	94.8	98.0	98.3

Y-axis: % of students who Strongly Agreed or Agreed behaviour is wrong

Perceptions of T&L environment

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

Perceptions of T&L environment

- Cheating students reported the *lowest levels of agreement* when compared to Non-Cheating students on three key items:
  - My lecturers and tutors ensure that I understand what is required in assignments
  - I receive sufficient feedback to ensure that I learn from the work I do
  - I have opportunities to approach my lecturers and tutors for assistance when needed

This has been labelled the **'personalised teaching and learning relationship',** because of its focus on individualised, learning-related interactions between students and educators.
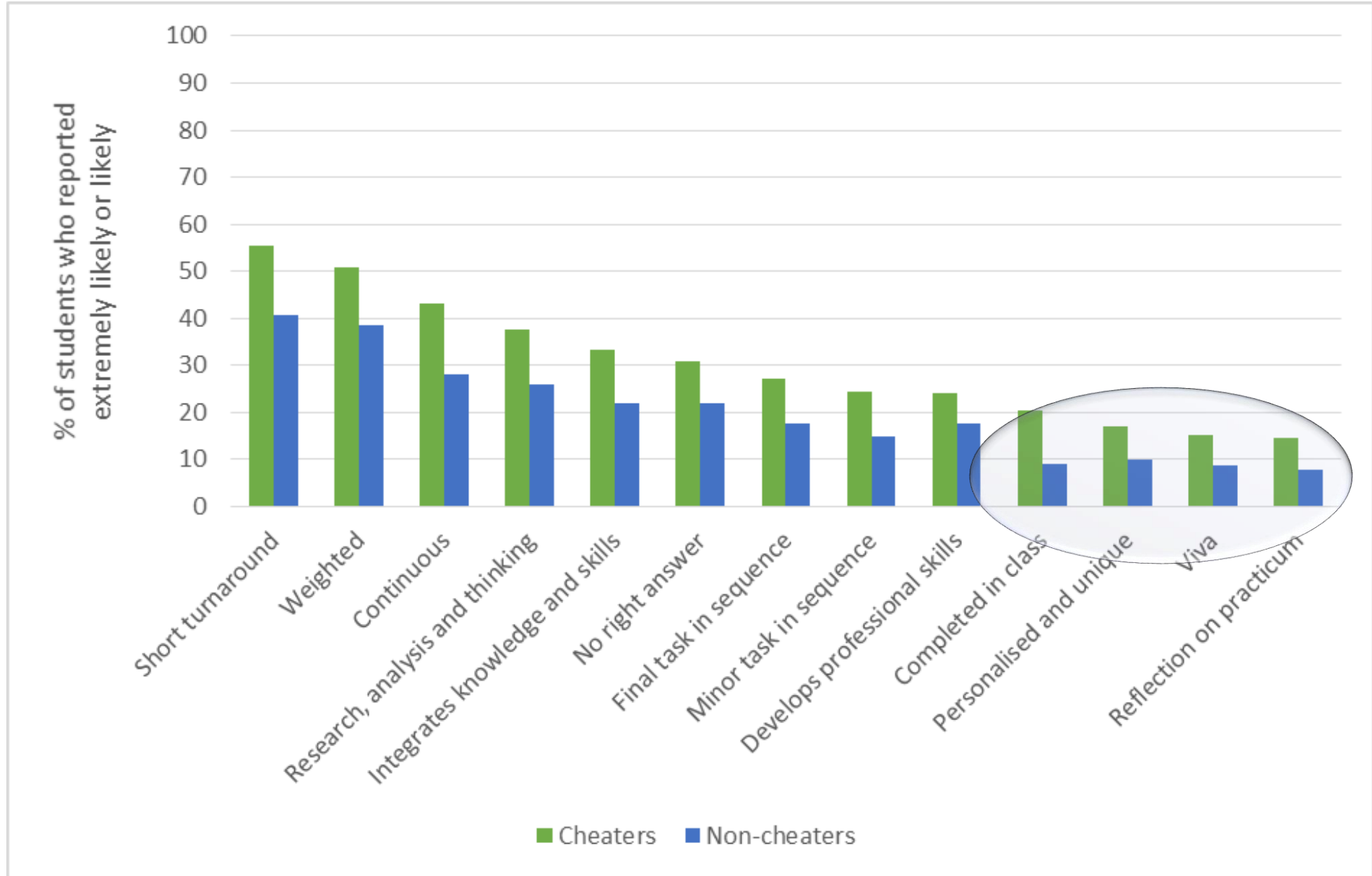
Assessment design

Students were asked to imagine being required to submit a range of assessment types and, on a five point Likert scale:

rate the likelihood that a student "would consider getting someone else to complete this kind of assignment for them".

Likelihood of outsourcing assignments
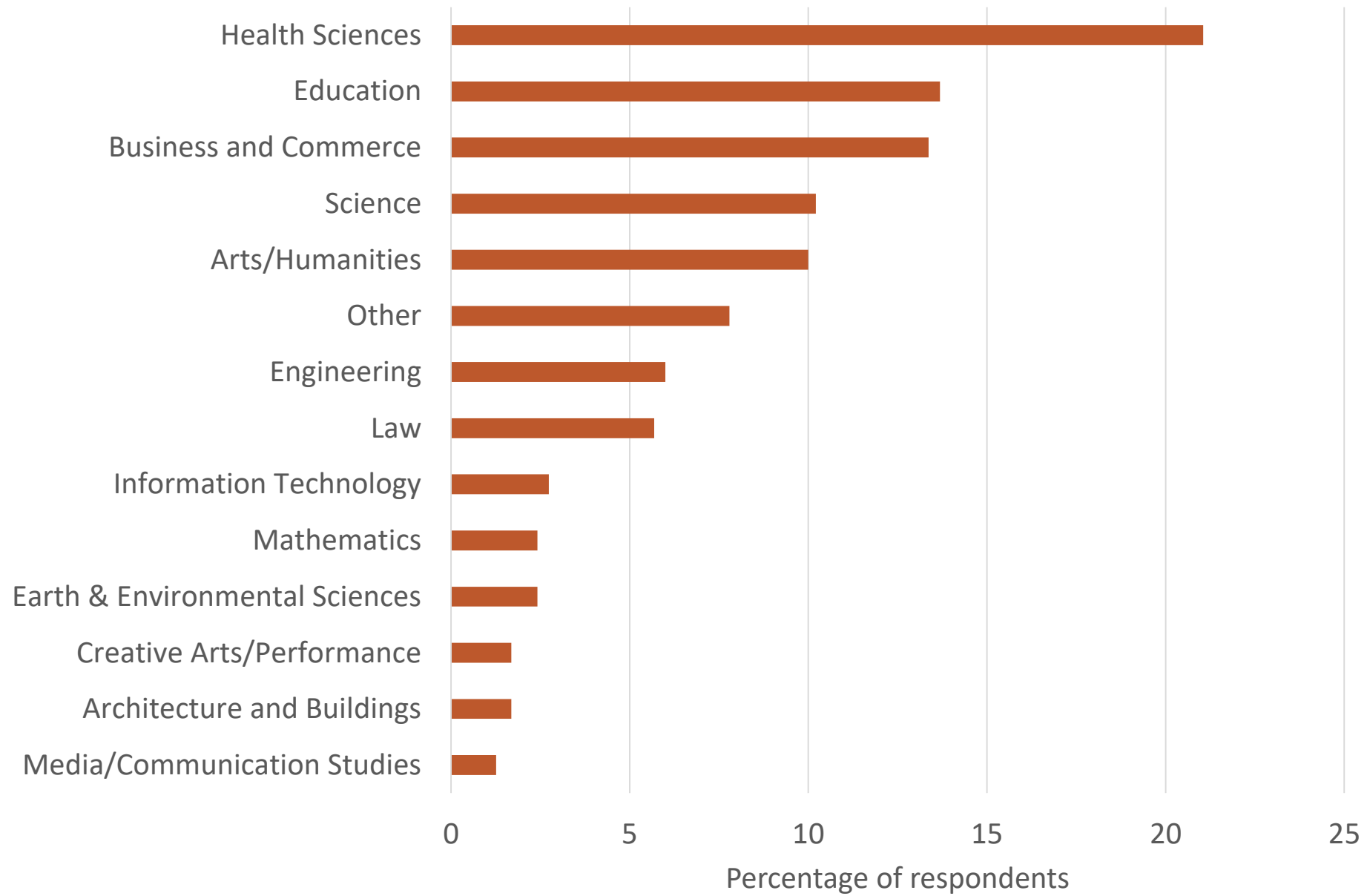
Staff survey

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF KEY FINDINGS

Respondents

N = 1,147

- 59% female, 39% male

- 36% born overseas, 90% speak English at home

- 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%

Percentage of respondents

Category	
Health Sciences	
Education	
Business and Commerce	
Science	
Arts/Humanities	
Other	
Engineering	
Law	
Information Technology	
Mathematics	
Earth & Environmental Sciences	
Creative Arts/Performance	
Architecture and Buildings	
Media/Communication Studies	

Outsourced assignments

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

- Of those, **40%** have suspected this more than 5 times

- Educator's knowledge of student 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

- 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

- What is the *typical* penalty/outcome? [staff could select a combination of items]
  - **30% Warning/counselling**
  - 27% Zero for assignment
  - 21% Reduced mark for assignment
  - **3% Suspension**
  - 2% Expulsion
- Penalties seem far more lenient than those recommended in the literature

Exam assistance

- 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**
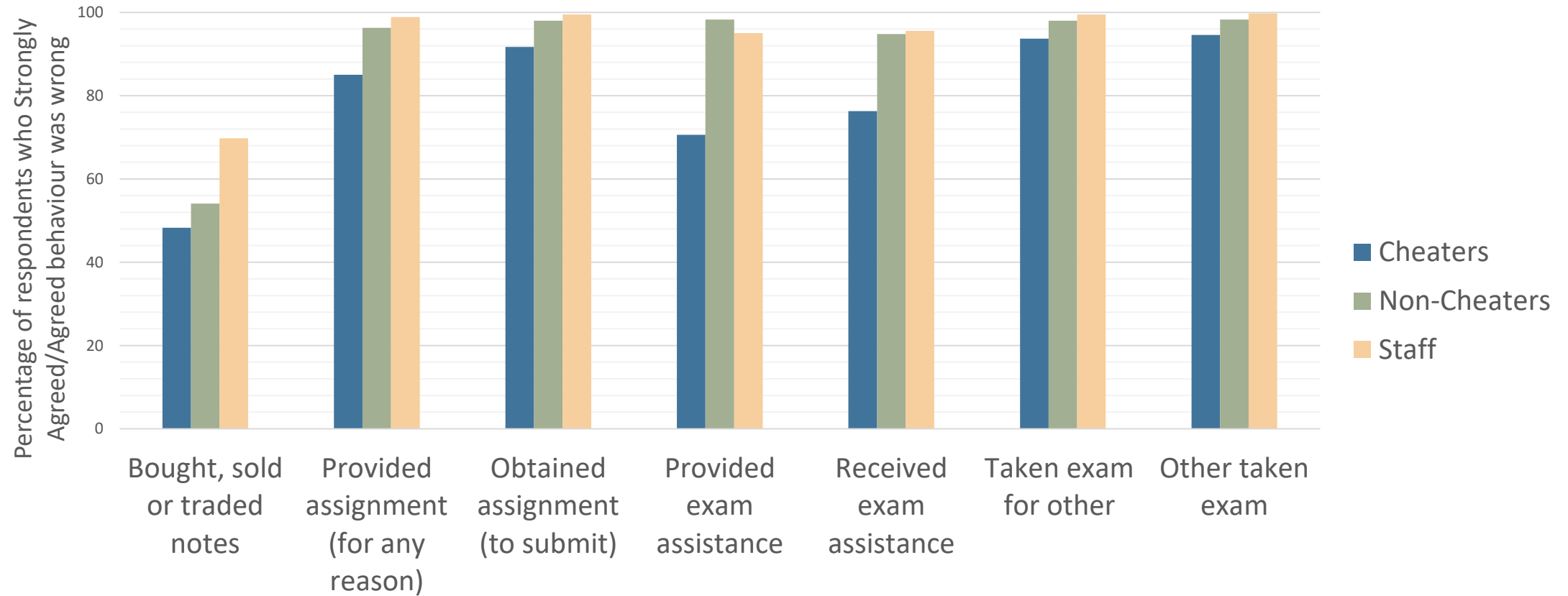 - 11% Resit the exam
  - 4% Expulsion

Exam impersonation

- **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
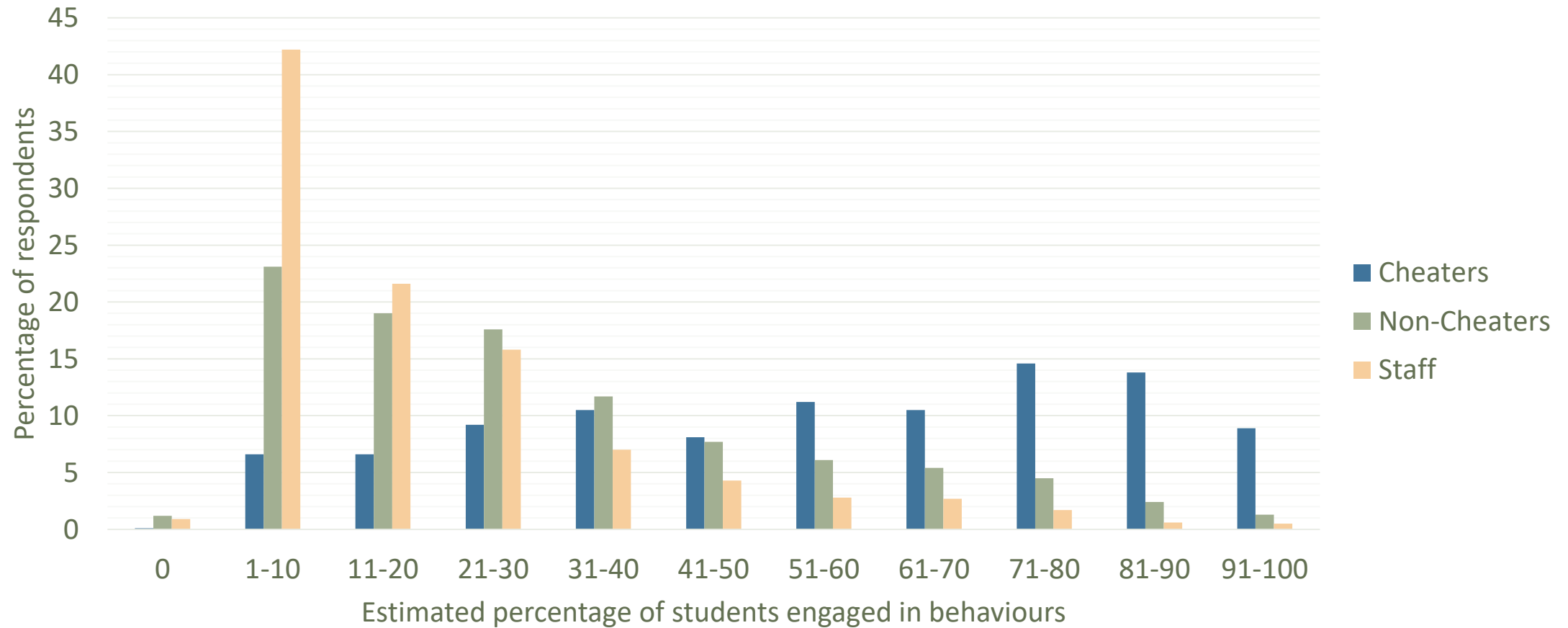 - 16% Suspension
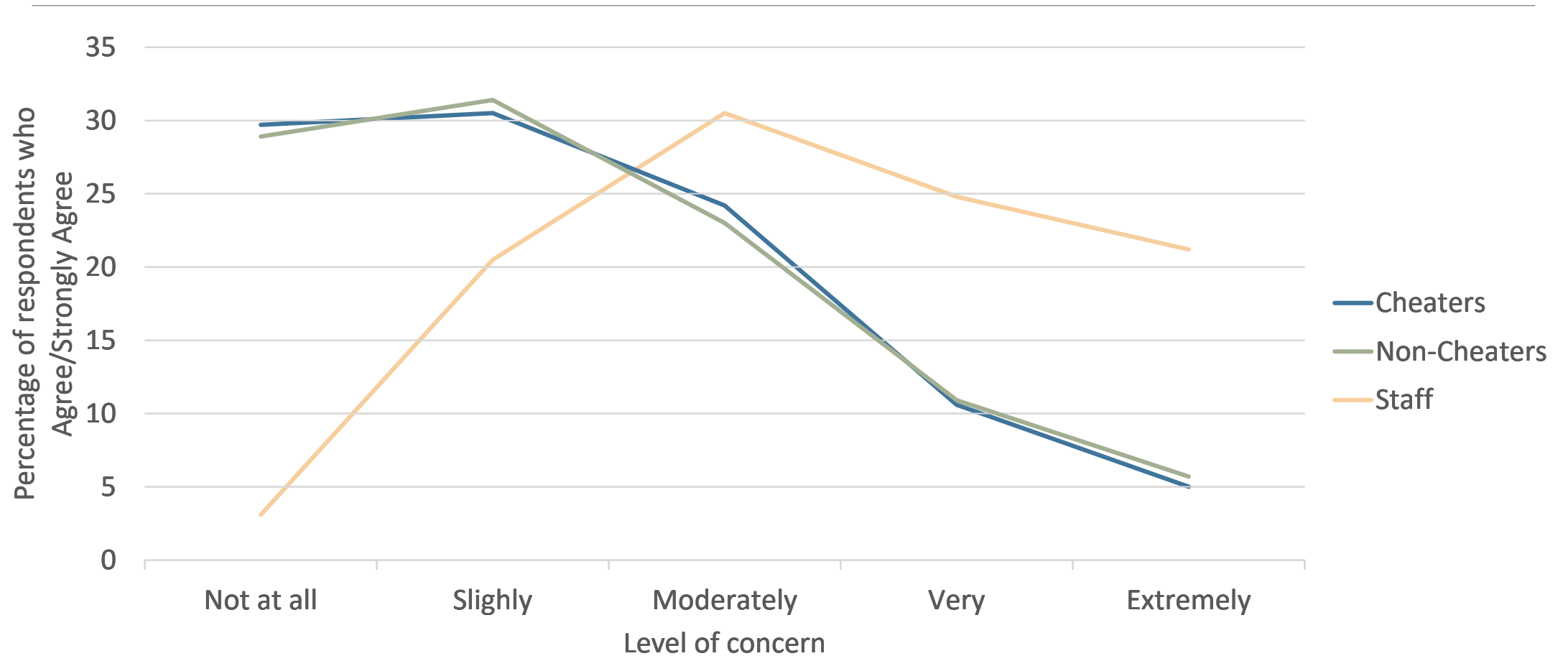 - 12% Expulsion

# Attitudes about 'wrongness'

Level of concern

Teaching and learning practice

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
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10. I receive **sufficient feedback** to ensure that I learn from the work I do

Assessment design
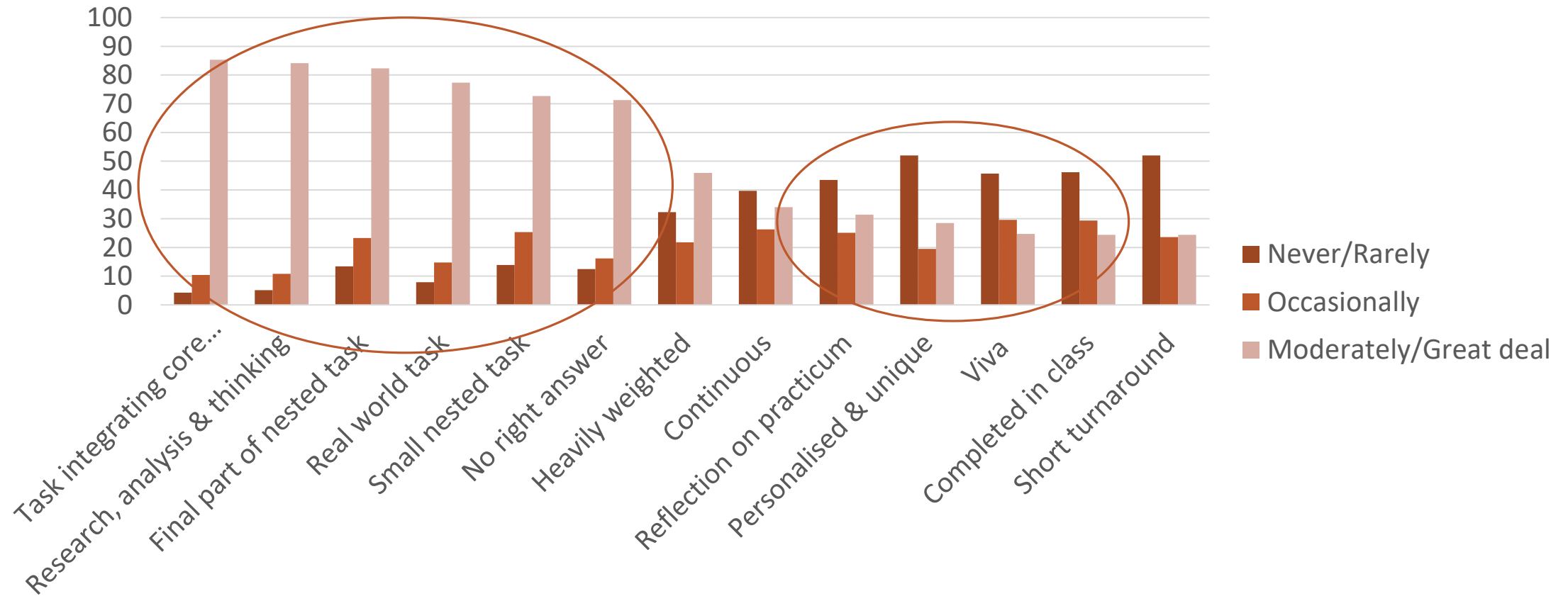
Engagement in third party cheating

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

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

- **10%** said yes

Evidence-based approaches to contract cheating

contract cheating and assessment design

What we now know:

- 6%-10% of students engage in contract cheating in one form or another

- International, LOTE, male and Engineering students are over-represented in the cheating group

- Use of commercial providers is relatively rare

- There are NO assessments which will prevent contract cheating, but students report that some types are *less likely* to be outsourced.

- Cheating students don't cheat because they think it's less 'wrong'. Rather, they are struggling with academic/linguistic requirements and don't feel supported by the T&L environment.

- Staff and students reported vastly different levels of concern about contract cheating.

- Staff and students reported inconsistent & lenient outcomes when contract cheating is detected.

Evidence-based approaches to contract cheating
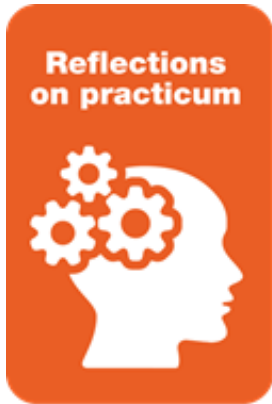
- Assessment design is not the answer, but it matters, nonetheless!
- Although any assessment can be outsourced, this doesn't absolve teachers from using original, innovative, engaging assessments which aim to ensure the identity of the student.

Evidence-based approaches to contract cheating

Students want and need a personalised T&L relationship:

- The opportunity to approach teaching staff for assistance
- Clarification about assessment requirements
- Individualised and meaningful feedback

Evidence-based approaches to contract cheating

Despite our best efforts, some students will choose to outsource their work.

We therefore need:

- Support for staff to ensure consistent detection
- Well documented and consistent processes for reporting of cheating
- Training for teachers & decision-makers to substantiate cases of contract cheating
- Communication between all stakeholders (teachers, decision-makers, students) so that outcomes for contract cheating are known

Conclusion

- Contract cheating is a symptom of an education system under stress
- Commercial providers inundate vulnerable students with offers of 'help'
- Our preliminary findings have identified these vulnerable students
- More analysis of the data is needed to assist with practical solutions
- Three key areas have emerged as potential places to start:
    - Use of 'less likely to be outsourced' assessment tasks
    - Fostering 'personalised teaching and learning relationships'
    - Supporting a process of detection and reporting
        - For this to happen, staff need much more training, professional development and assistance.

Acknowledgements