

Contracting to Cheat

Survey on the Impact of QAA's Guidance

November 2019



Exclusively for QAA Members

Background

In late September 2019, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) circulated a survey on its 2017 guidance: [Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education](#).

Contracting to Cheat was created in response to a request from Jo Johnson, the then Universities Minister. The Minister wanted QAA to work with UUK, GuildHE and the NUS to create clear guidance for the sector on detecting and deterring contract cheating - an assessment offence where a student commissions a piece of work from a third party and then submits it as their own.

Underpinning this was the Government's desire to exhaust all non-legislative measures against contract cheating before considering whether legal prohibition on essay mills was necessary.

Two years after the guidance was published, we wanted to review the impact it has had. The survey sought opinions from higher education institutions on a range of questions regarding the impact and usefulness of the guidance, and asked for examples of good practice and areas for improvement. This analysis summarises the responses and draws out some key themes QAA will use to improve the guidance and inform other activities we can do to help the sector meet the challenge of contract cheating.

Profile of respondents

64 people responded to the survey, with 17 responses from individuals and 47 from organisations. Organisation responses were mainly from HEIs (37), with nine from FECs and one from a sixth-form college.

24 responses came from quality staff, 12 from senior leadership, 11 from academics and four were from people in policy roles. 11 respondents had mixed roles. The three 'other' respondents included an academic registrar and head of student conduct. One respondent was from Canada.

Executive summary

The questions asked in the survey were structured around the main sections of the guidance. The responses indicated a good level of interaction with, and use of, the guidance by the sector. Overall, between 84 and 88% of respondents had engaged with the guidance, and between 72 and 75% had implemented at least some of the recommendations, to some or a great extent. The proportions changed depending on the aspect of the guidance in question – staff training, support for students, etc.

A high proportion of positive responses might be expected due to self-selection - the people completing the survey will be more likely to have engaged with the guidance. However, these are still very positive results which suggest that where people and institutions are aware of the guidance, it is valuable and is being used.

The responses to each closed question are listed on Page 9. Looking at the free text responses, the guidance appeared to be positively received. It was welcomed and seen as valuable. However, there were some areas we need to consider when improving and republishing the guidance.

Some respondents criticised a perceived absence of a strategic, university-wide approach within their organisations, with a lack of awareness of our guidance across faculties and departments. Some responses suggested an amount of complacency about the issue and its scale.

Overall there was positive feedback on the use of the guidance to update institutions' own policies and procedures, and some also mentioned they would be doing so in the future. Respondents noted an increased effectiveness in detecting paid-for essays when specific training, including inter-disciplinary training, is delivered within HEIs. Blocking essay mill websites from providers' systems was seen as problematic in that it only worked on campus computers, and the lack of legal prohibition of these sites – at the same time, some respondents said they were already doing this.

Good practice examples were also asked for and we received a considerable number. These ranged from use of online training modules supporting skills for successful transition as well as focused on academic integrity, to the adoption of new assessment methods. Several suggestions involved establishing networks within providers to discuss the guidance, emerging developments, review cases and discuss difficult matters relating to academic misconduct.

We also received many comments suggesting where we could improve the guidance. These included requests for more tailored additional guidance on assessment design, the conduct of vivas, and the line between legitimate support and actual misconduct. We were urged to produce annual publications on new trends in academic integrity and any new technologies used to cheat.

Analysis of responses

84% of respondents said their institutions had engaged with the guidance, while 77% have implemented its recommendations, when providing training and information for staff on contract cheating.

Similar proportions (86% and 73% respectively) said that their organisation had engaged with the guidance, or implemented its recommendations, when providing information and support for students (86% and 73% respectively).

84% had engaged with the guidance to some or a great extent when considering ways to prevent contract cheating, and 72% had implemented some of its recommendations.

88% had engaged with the guidance when considering methods to detect contract cheating, and 75% had implemented some of its recommendations.

86% felt that to some or a great extent their organisation had engaged with the guidance when reviewing regulations and policies, and 78% had implemented the recommendations.

Themes

The following key themes (in bold) emerged from the responses.

'The guidance is clear. It needs to be embraced and operationalised by the University... We are aware that contract cheating is happening and on probably a significant scale. The university needs to make this a serious academic offence and ensure that policies and procedures reflect the guidance.'

This respondent's institution had simply not addressed contract cheating in their policies or guidance - they had an academic practice office within their own school and had written their own guidelines, but appeared frustrated at a **lack of a strategic, university-wide approach**.

'There hasn't been any university wide training for staff in relation to contract cheating, although I have addressed this in my own school.'

This comment suggests a **lack of awareness of our guidance across faculties and departments**, meaning we need to do more to ensure academic audiences get to hear about, and use, the guidance. This is a crucial aspect to address, as academics are at the forefront of detection and deterrence, and are key players in investigations and misconduct hearings. After circulating the guidance for comment, the respondent found that there was positive feedback and any new version we produce would be welcomed and greater use made of it. A high-profile relaunch may have a greater impact.

'... we frequently encounter staff who are unsure of whether they can definitely identify an essay mill paper'

'We would welcome training from sector experts for all staff in the detection of contract cheating. I think a lack of confidence and knowledge of what to look for prevents detection'

'...there are still pockets of resistance, seemingly driven by the perception that cheating is "impossible to prove". Training has provided considerable support to challenge this belief.'

These comments suggest that the work of Wendy Sutherland-Smith in Australia may be useful to promote. This research suggests greatly increased effectiveness in detecting

paid-for essays when **specific training**, including inter-disciplinary training, is delivered within HEIs. We should also consider revisiting the piloted contract cheating online training and offering sector-led training sessions.

'I am still dealing with faculty members and administrators on my campus who do not believe that contract cheating actually happens.'

'... there are differing levels of awareness of contract cheating across the organisation'

'We could probably do more but we have had very few cases.'

This suggests that there may still be a **lack of awareness** or even some complacency about contract cheating in the sector.

'... we ensured references to the guidance were included and key principles incorporated'

'We have strengthened our penalties to include a final written warning for those involved in, inter alia, the "facilitation" of contract cheating and can now terminate for contract cheating'

A common theme was that aspects of the guidance were being **incorporated within policies, procedures, regulations and guidance documents**. This suggests that when we release information in this way, providers will map, reference or include it in their own materials. This again highlights the value of using key principles and reflective questions, in line with the Quality Code's Advice and Guidance. We should consider this when writing, to make it even easier for providers to use them in this way.

'... we would ask that QAA undertake wider consultation on the effectiveness and potential institutional costs of [blocking essay mill websites] in a heterogeneous bring-your-own-device environment. Without a coordinated effort by and necessary support from JANET, it could prove to be very resource-intensive for HEIs to implement and maintain an ever-changing list of essay mill websites.'

There was feedback that the **blocking of essay mills from providers' systems** was problematic in the context of academic freedom, that it only worked on campus computers, and the fact that such websites are not illegal. On the other hand, some respondents said they were already doing this.

'I would like to have freedom of decision making as an APO to apply strict sanctions in every instance - but I am restricted by local policy.'

While not being raised frequently enough for it to be a recurring theme, it is nonetheless interesting that some Academic Practice Officers are leaning towards stronger outcomes but are being moderated by policies at local or institutional level.

'The concept of integrity for the student... is quite strong in disciplines that have external PSRBs but perhaps is not so when disciplines are unregulated.'

'Thank you so much for this guide. I know you've produced it for UK providers, but please know that the impact of your work has been global'

'... it would also be beneficial to see the requirement to 'operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment' supplemented with lines of enquiry relating to implementation of QAA's guidance i.e. maintaining academic integrity must be a distinct element of review methodology for institutions'

Good practice

We asked for any examples of good practice, and received many examples:

- use of plain English
- focusing on the positive aspects of academic integrity, whilst also being clear about what constitutes academic misconduct and the potential outcomes
- institutional templates for school-level student handbooks and induction content to ensure provision of consistent information
- online skills module which supports the development of skills for successful transition to HE
- compulsory online modules on academic integrity, to be completed by all students
- iterative assessment processes (e.g. submissions of multiple drafts to a supervisor as with a dissertation, which could be adopted for smaller pieces of work); introducing more authentic assessment methods that draw on situations experienced in the workplace; and identifying good practice elsewhere in the sector
- flowcharts for academic investigation processes
- including students' union sabbatical officers on misconduct panels
- use of academic integrity videos on the various types of misconduct to support student understanding, and online resources to support study
- operating a network of academic conduct officers (at least one per department), meeting with them twice annually to discuss national developments/new guidance, review case studies and discuss difficult matters relating to academic misconduct
- institution-wide training on changes to policy in response to the recommendations in the guidance has taken place
- wider reviews of assessment are taking the guidance's recommendations into account, as well as experience of external examiners
- using the guidance to review staff training needs, inform training materials and auditing practices
- annual review of academic regulations, which have a specific misconduct policy
- incorporation of our guidance into policy, or using it to review procedures
- establishment of contract cheating groups to tackle the issue
- updating definitions and terminology in regulations and policies in line with the guidance
- staff trained to consistently structure assessments into interim deadlines where possible, so that progress can be observed over time and any uncharacteristic writing styles can be challenged after submission
- a fun, in-class session that explores the sorts of scenarios students may find themselves in and how they should respond appropriately in those situations
- Educational Development team conducted research and worked with some schools to aid the development of more 'active' and 'authentic' assessments that are more resistant to contract cheating than essays
- redesigning assessments using authentic, live and mixed methods with checkpoints via formative assessment
- increased scrutiny of assignments' metadata
- introduction of a new step into the process where an allegation of contract cheating is made, i.e. a preliminary interview, a sort of mini-viva, to raise the concern, and try to establish the course of events.
- institutions should consider reflecting formal sanctions clearly in references/transcripts (obviously in a proportionate manner).

'We have rewritten our regulations... to highlight awareness of contract cheating and to be clearer about the concerns this poses, the risks to students and the potential impacts of having an allegation of contract cheating upheld. We've reaffirmed staff confidence in our ability to address the problems posed by the essay mills. We block the essay mills websites when we find out about them, we're redesigning assessments to design it out, for example focusing more on 'real world' assessments. We've worked with students and the student union advice centre on a steering group and in producing student-friendly guidance. We're also targeting the discrepancy in numbers of BAME students with upheld allegations and relaunching academic advising and academic support as these can be effective interventions as well.'

'I can say that no similar resource exists for Canada and the QAA resource has been tremendously helpful to us. The UK is a global leader in this field, and I believe I am not alone when I say that the influence of this document has been felt well beyond the UK. I consult it at least once a week. I have also referred to it in research publications, presentations and educational development workshops for faculty.'

'We have TURNITIN but essay mill companies now have their own TURNITIN licences and review work from individuals before accepting to their own databases - so they are very savvy with this before we even are in the frame!'

'... exam style comprehension exercises (hand written comprehension papers) either during pre-entry study skills sessions or early on in the programme offers a clear overview of the students literacy capabilities on some programmes. Unless you get to know the students' capabilities, it is proving difficult to prove that the submissions were written by an advanced other or from an essay mill... [this] has proven useful as a means of comparison when there has been the necessity to challenge a student.'

Areas for improvement

'There should be a student version (much shorter) of this document, which every student must get from the QAA... the students identify QAA as a third party and when such documents come from a third party, the student will take this seriously.'

We were asked to reduce detail, summarising some pages into bullet points, and remove such language as the references to standards of evidence. We were told that the sheer volume of recommendations meant they could not all be implemented. At the same time, we were asked for more case studies and practical examples of where the recommendations have been implemented. This tension could lead us to consider new approaches to the guidance, such as supplementary documents, webinars or workshops focusing on single aspects such as assessment design or detection approaches. Thematic summaries could also be produced to act as quick reference points, and case studies could be published separately rather than included in the guidance itself.

The guidance could be revised to feature a set of guiding principles, following the approach taken in the Quality Code's Advice and Guidance. We may need to reiterate the status of the guidance, or perhaps elements of the wording, as one respondent felt there were aspects which felt like they needed to be complied with.

We were asked to publish an annual contract cheating digest, to alert institutions to new trends and technologies used to commit academic offences, and we were asked to regularly review the guidance. This is worth pursuing given QAA's new focus on more frequent content provision to its members.

We were asked to emphasise the recent proliferation of essay mills, drop in prices, use of social media and the risk to students of placing themselves at risk of coercion and blackmail by using these services.

The sixth-form college response encouraged the HE sector to learn from assessment approaches in vocational qualifications, where assignments can be less generic and have a range of assessment tasks such as video evidence, professional discussions, and research from work placement with supporting evidence.

We were also asked to name essay mills, which was something we considered when drafting the original guidance. This was not actioned because of the volume of sites (over 1,200 at last estimate) and the frequent closing of sites. The absence of a centralised list does make it more difficult for providers who want to block sites from doing so.

We were asked to recommend providing information to students in languages other than English as a helpful additional step to maximise students' understanding.

Reporting cheating to a student's professional body should be changed to 'may' rather than 'will' due to differing requirements. We accept that different requirements will be made on providers by PSRBs. However, where contract cheating is proven to be a deliberate act rather than error (such as poor quotations) there is likely to be a high level of public risk, and providers may have duties to report such conduct to the appropriate regulatory body. The guidance could be amended to say that reporting 'will normally' happen in order to give flexibility.

There was a call for sector-wide guidance and resources on assessment design as a means of reducing opportunities for plagiarism and cheating. This is something we could consider developing as an additional resource for QAA Members.

We were asked for more guidance on the conduct of vivas and on students' use of translation services.

The section on getting to know a student's styles was seen as impractical due to student numbers and anonymous marking.

'Students who are caught using essay mills are heavily penalised - in the later stages of their degrees this may impact on classification.'

This comment suggested differing outcomes across the sector when contract cheating has been discovered.

More guidance was called for on defining the line between support (often provided by student support/family members of non-English speakers) and contract cheating. Sector-wide guidance and resources on assessment design as a means of reducing opportunities for plagiarism and cheating was also requested.

There may be overlap between our guidance on misconduct procedures and the OIA's Good Practice Framework guidance on Disciplinary Procedures, which was seen as more useful as it covered a broader area.

The strongly supportive statement from the Canadian provider highlighted the value of publishing guidance as a freely available resource used internationally to combat an international issue. We should consider this carefully when deciding whether to release any revised version to QAA Members only.

We were asked for an institutional template for school-level student handbooks and induction content to ensure provision of consistent information.

Guidance on whistleblowing and amnesty policies was called for, as was more advice on emerging detection software solutions.

Next steps

The survey responses have provided QAA with substantive feedback, evidence of good practice and suggestions for improvement. In 2020 we will be updating the guidance using the survey responses, along with other feedback.

A programme of training and events exclusive to QAA Members is planned in 2020, aimed at helping to support institutions apply the principles in the guidance.

Question-by-question results

The following tables show the responses to the closed-style questions, which were arranged on a sliding scale.

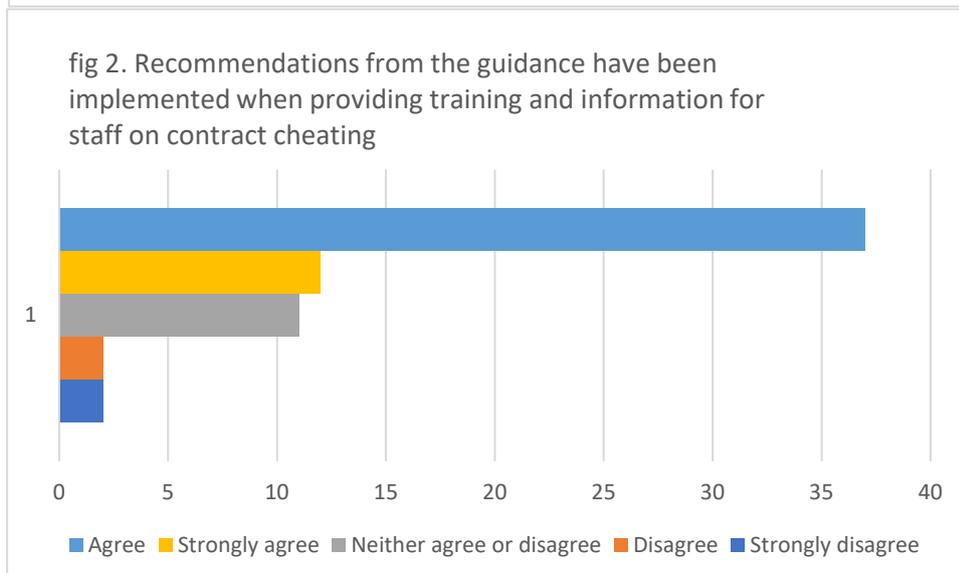
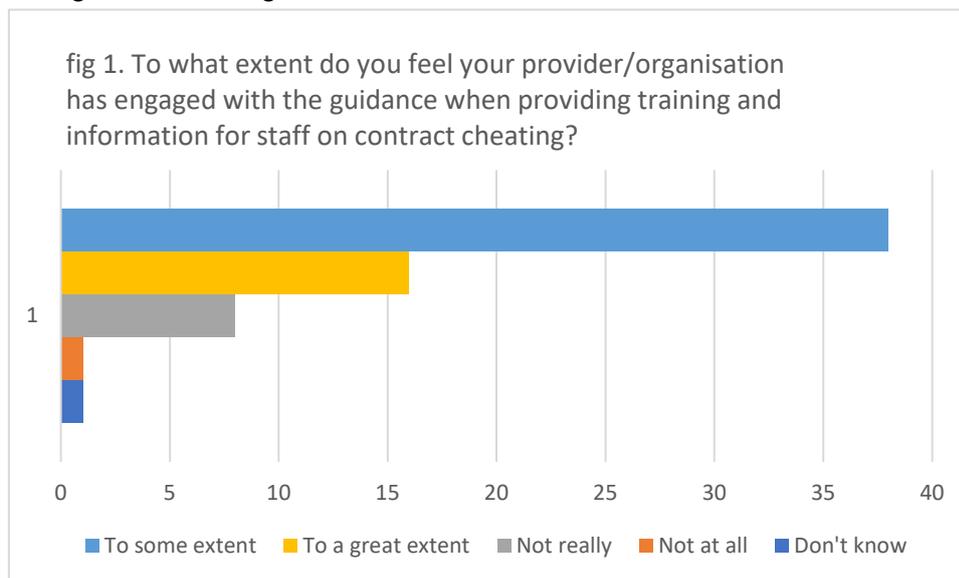


fig 4. Recommendations from the guidance have been implemented when providing information and support for students on contract cheating

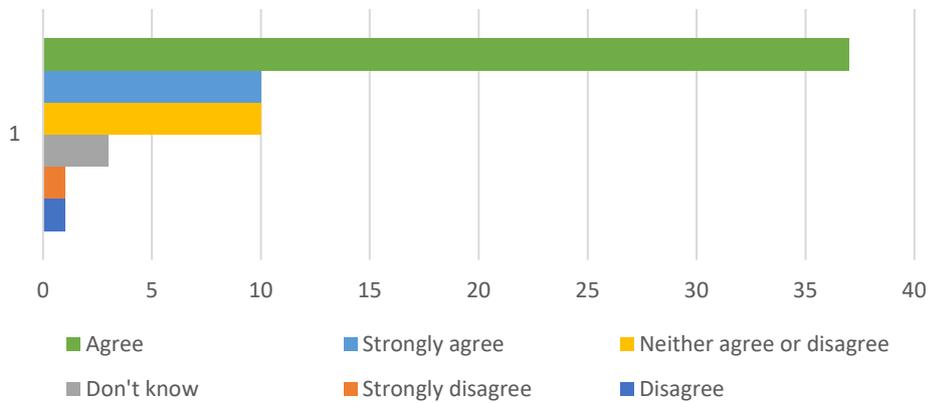


fig 5. To what extent do you feel your provider/organisation has engaged with the guidance when considering ways to prevent contract cheating?

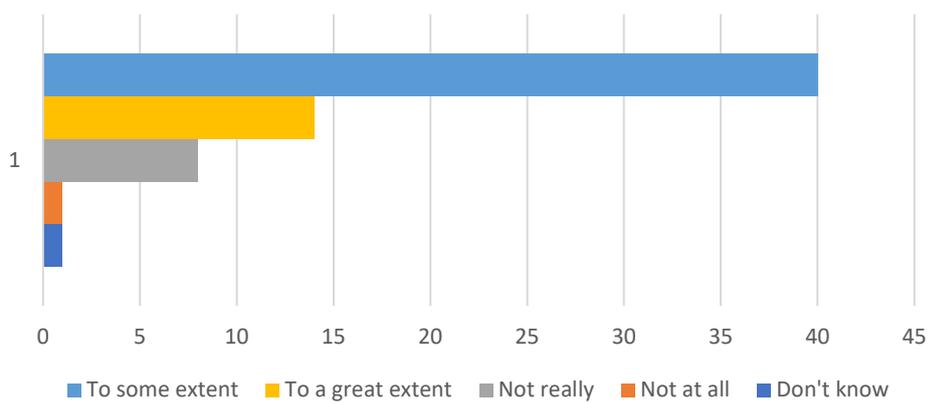


fig 6. Recommendations from the guidance have been implemented when considering methods to prevent contract cheating

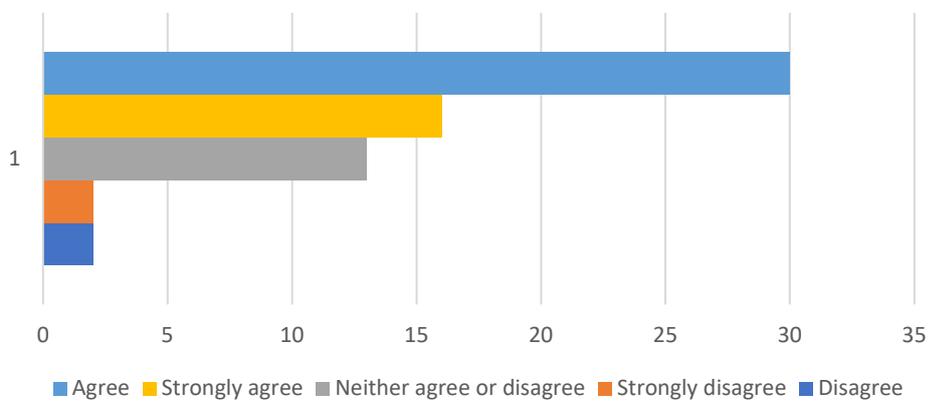


fig 7. To what extent do you feel your provider/organisation has engaged with the guidance when considering methods to detect contract cheating?

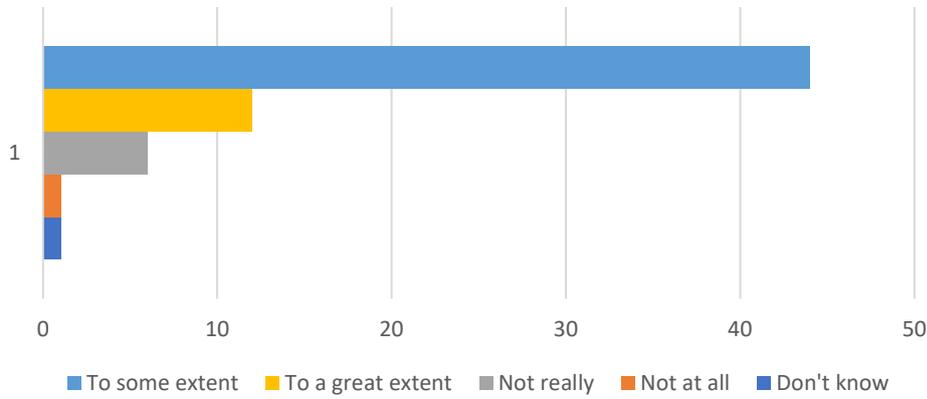


fig 8. Recommendations from the guidance have been implemented when considering methods to detect contract cheating

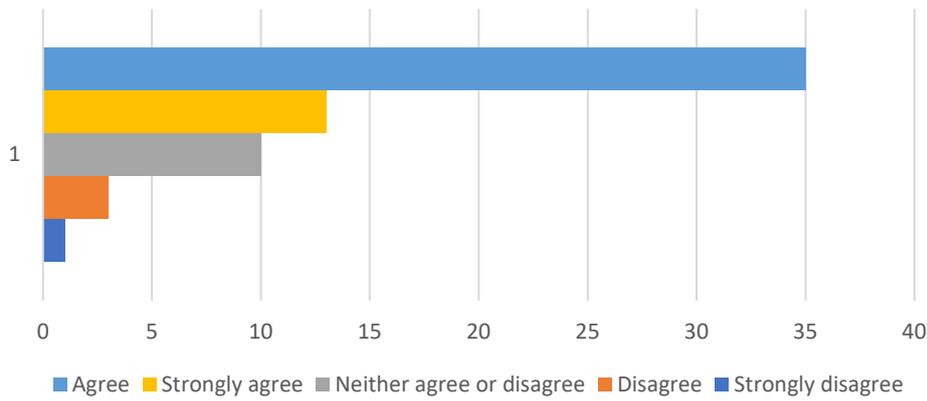
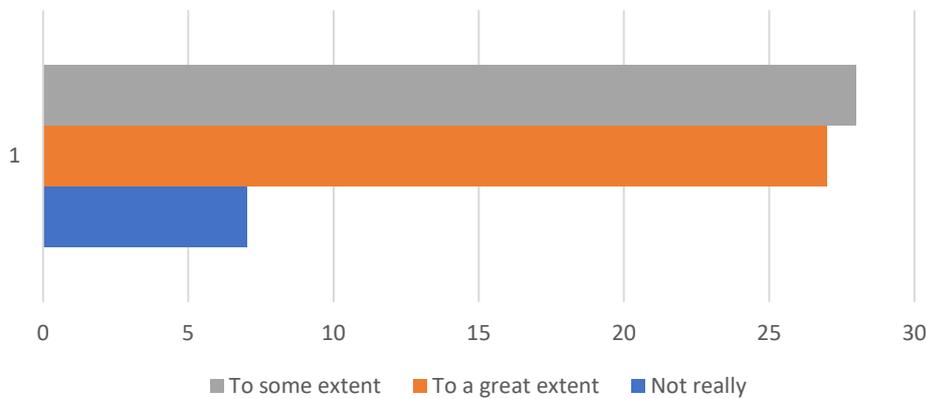
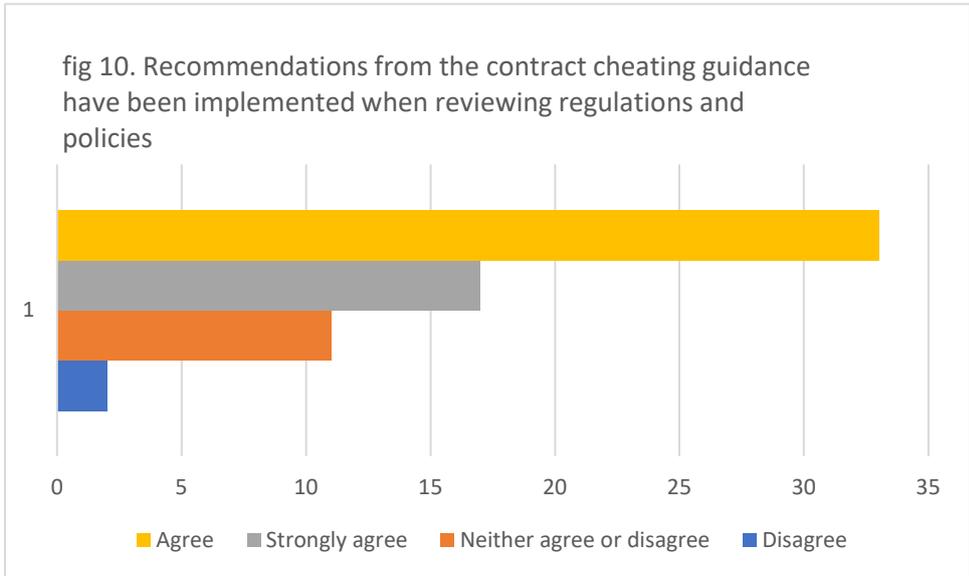


fig 9. To what extent do you feel your provider/organisation has engaged with the contract cheating guidance when reviewing regulations and policies?





This document is published on the [QAA Membership Resources site](#), which gives our members exclusive access to a wide range of resources.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2019
 Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
 Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557000
 Web www.qaa.ac.uk