Assessment of Freshman Veterinary Undergraduates' Understanding of Behavioral Indicators of Welfare in Cats and Dogs

Malalanayake M.Y.[1], De Silva M.L.W.P.[2], Wijayawardhane K.A.N.[3]

[1] Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.
[2] Veterinary Medical Education Unit, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.
[3] Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

INTRODUCTION

✓ Animal welfare is a recognized discipline in the veterinary schools worldwide

✓ WOAH: Day 1 competency - explain animal welfare and related responsibilities, identify and correct welfare problems

✓ Rising behavioral issues → more clinic visits & owner surrenders

✓ Veterinarians play a key preventive role

INTRODUCTION

✓ Students report insufficient instruction on animal behavior (Calder, 2017)

✓ Some graduates show little or no improvement in behavioral knowledge (Lilly, 2020)

✓ Highlights need for stronger integration of animal welfare & behavior in curricula

OBJECTIVES

- ✓ Assess freshman veterinary undergraduates' baseline understanding of behavioral indicators of welfare in cats and dogs, and their ability to evaluate the welfare of their own pets

- ✓ Explore how different factors influence students' understanding and assessment abilities

METHODOLOGY

STUDY GROUP

✓ 102 freshman veterinary students at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

✓ Voluntary participation during orientation program

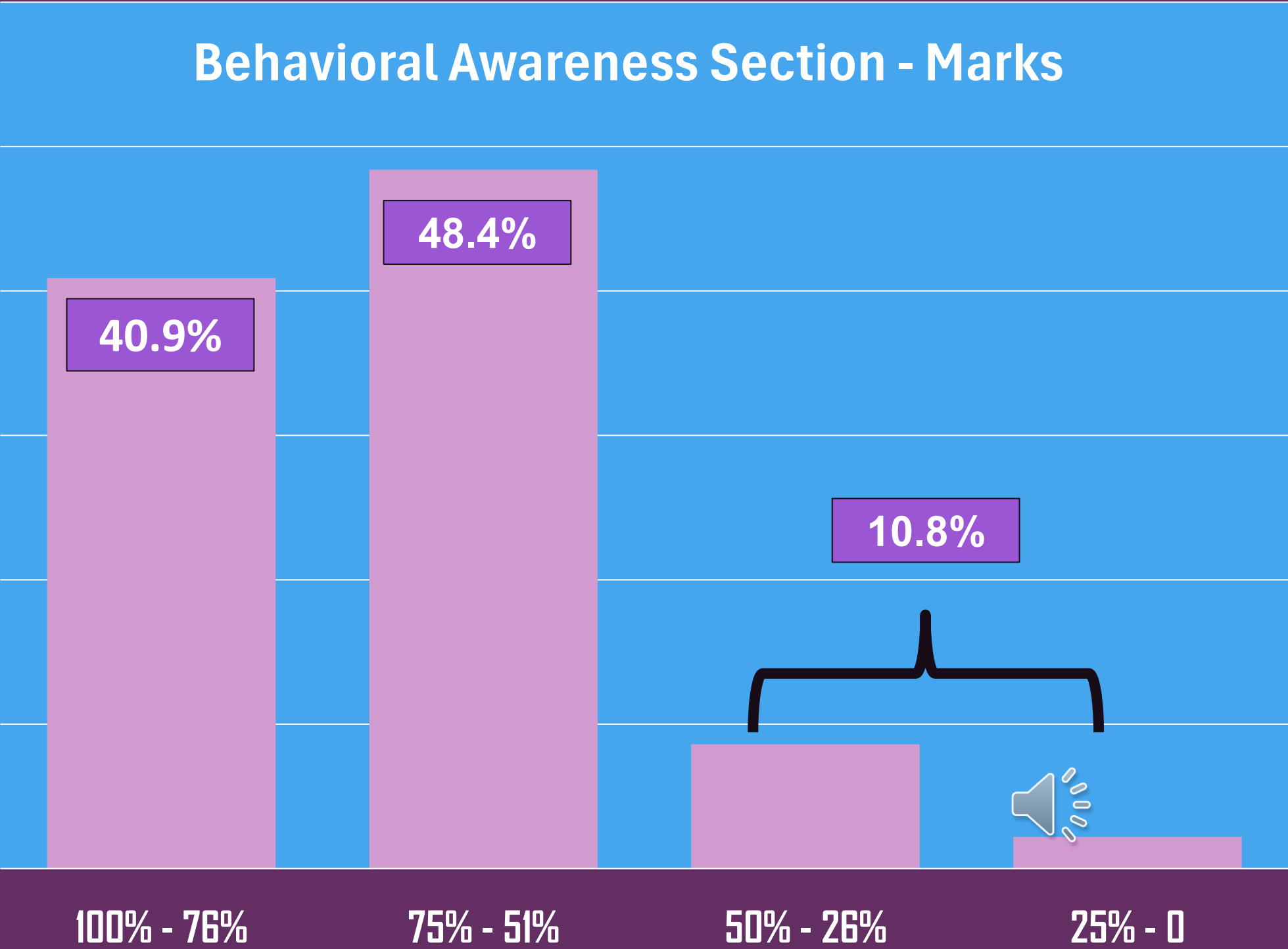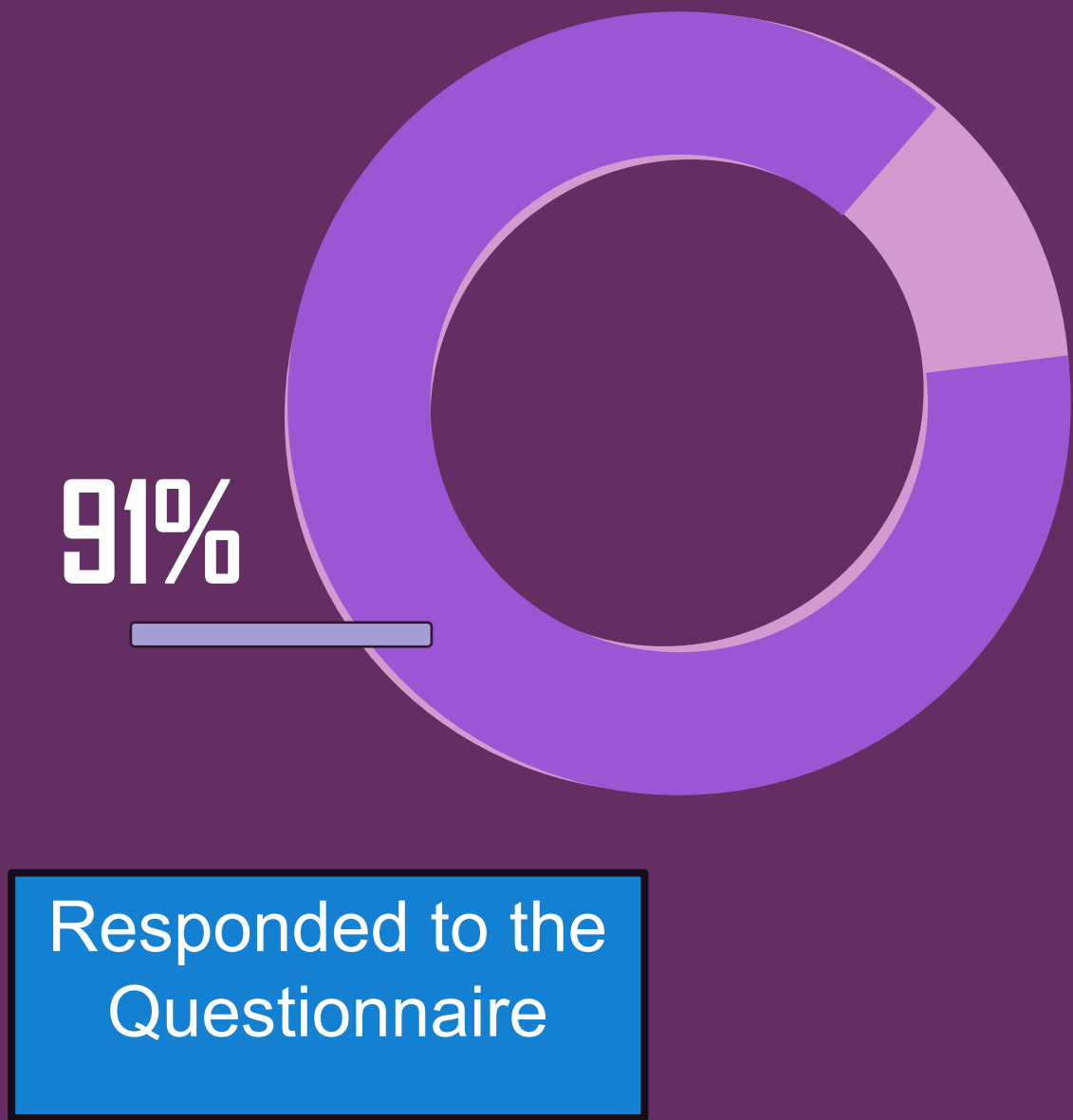## STUDY DESIGN

✓ Online questionnaire prepared using Google Forms

✓ Questionnaire includes 3 main sections

- Sociodemographic information section

- Behavioral awareness section

- Welfare assessment section

DATA ANALYSIS

✓ Google Sheets – to create visual representations

✓ SPSS statistical software – for chi-square analysis and calculation of confidence intervals

RESULTS — Distribution of Students by Level of Understanding

91%

Responded to the Questionnaire

Behavioral Awareness Section - Marks

40.9%

48.4%

10.8%

100% - 76%

75% - 51%

50% - 26%

25% - 0

RESULTS — Accuracy of Responses for Individual Behavioral Indicator

IN CATS

Students showed lower accuracy in identifying **stereotypical** and **stress-related** behaviors in cats, such as overgrooming and increased vocalization
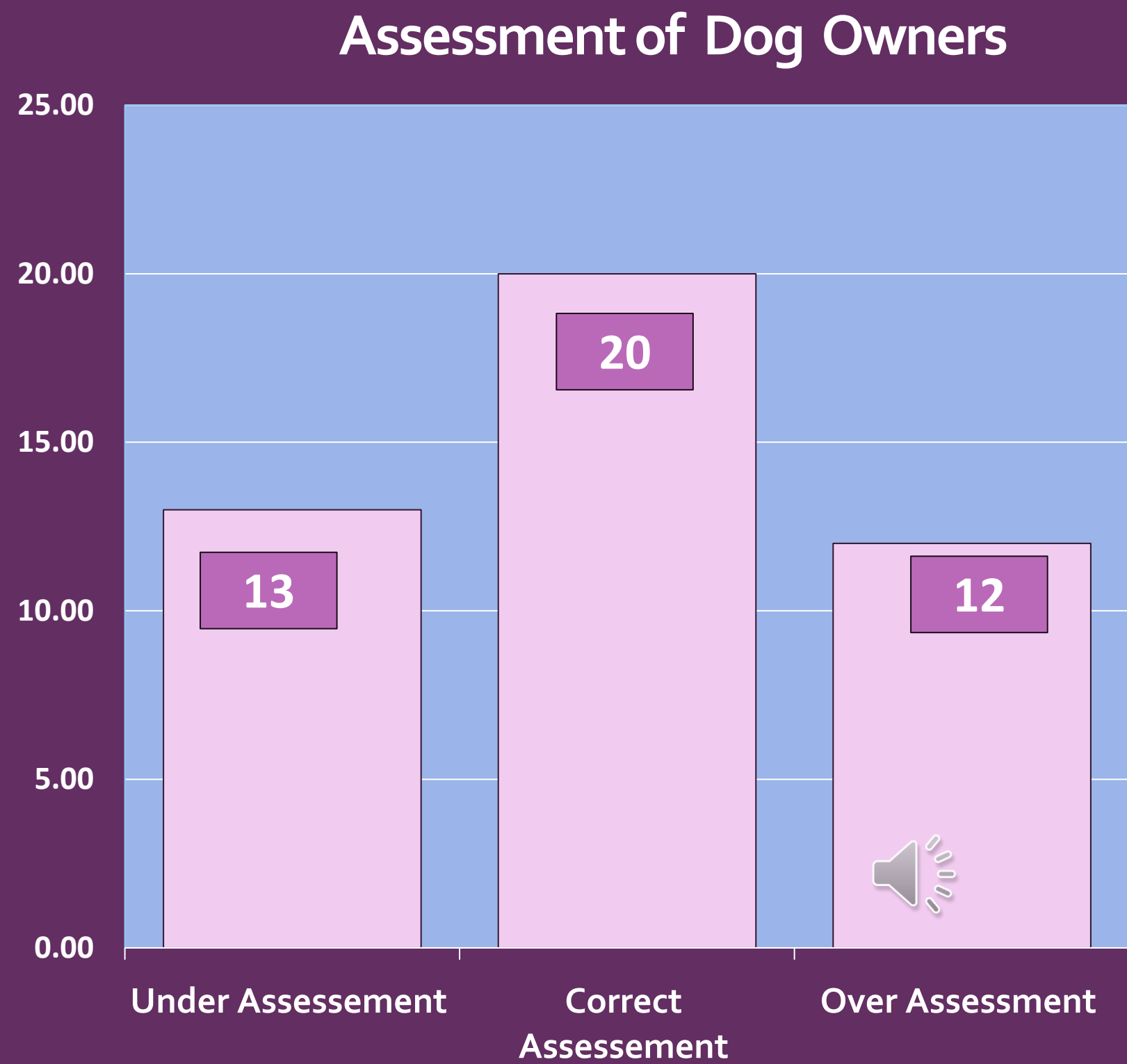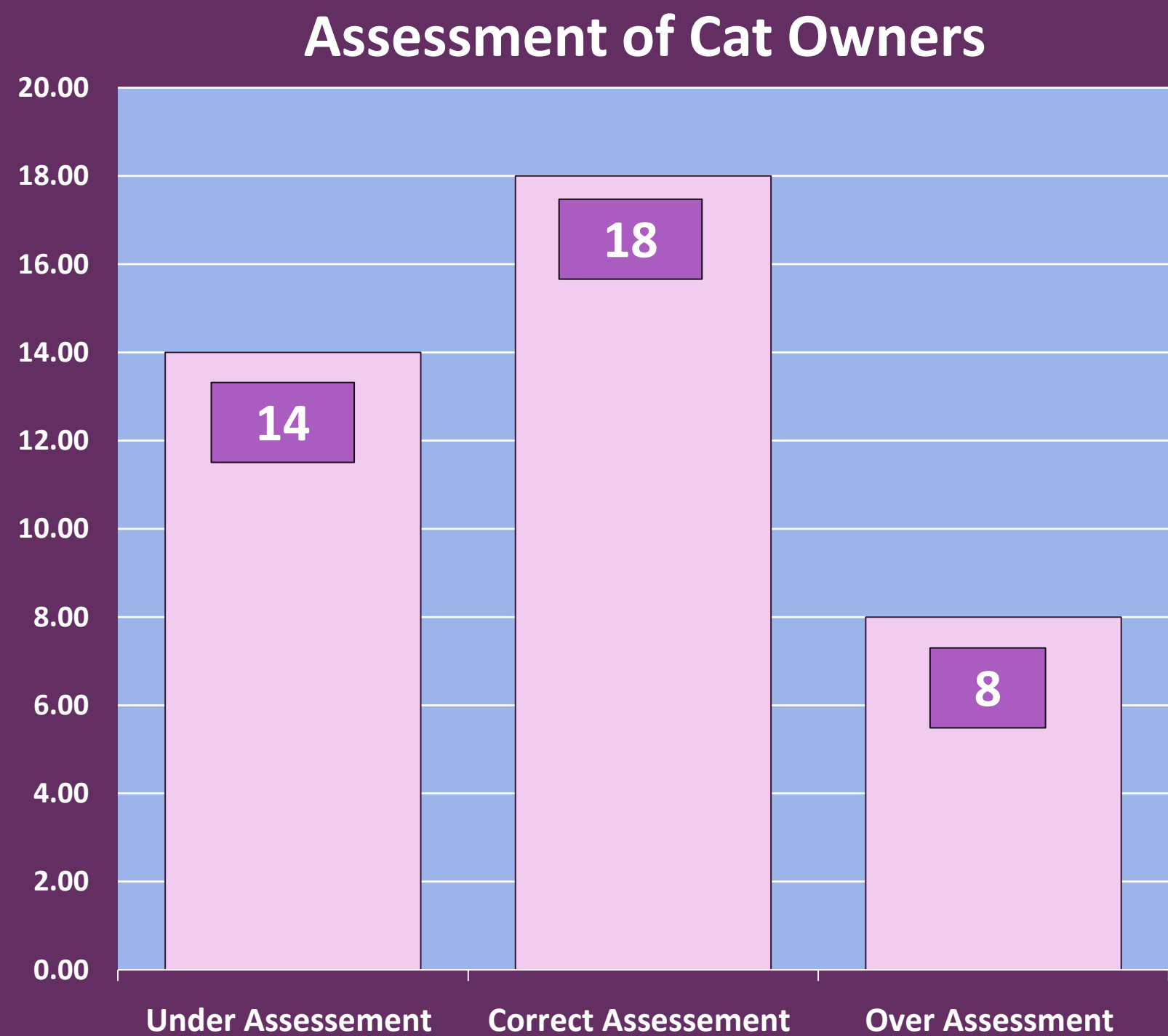
IN DOGS

Similar misinterpretations were seen in dogs, specially for **stereotypical** behaviors like tail chasing and jumping at cage walls

RESULTS – Students Welfare Assessment Accuracy

Assessment of Cat Owners

Under Assessement	14
Correct Assessement	18
Over Assessment	8

Assessment of Dog Owners

Under Assessement	13
Correct Assessement	20
Over Assessment	12

RESULTS – Association Between Independent Variables and Outcome Variables

✓ **Demographic Variables**

✓ **Opinion-based Variables**

Students level of understanding of behavioral indicators

Accuracy of welfare assessment by cat-owning students

Accuracy of welfare assessment by dog-owning students

NO STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT ASSOCIATION

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

1

Most students showed moderate to high understanding of behavioral indicators in cats and dogs

- ✓ Differ from some past studies showing lower knowledge in first-year vet students
- ✓ May be due to differences in study tools, design, or sample size

2

Stress related, stereotypical and repetitive behaviors were least accurately recognized

- ✓ Pattern matches findings from previous studies
- ✓ Using native languages and visual aids could improve recognition accuracy

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3

45% of cat-owning and 44.4% of dog-owning students correctly assessed their pets' welfare

✓ Supports the overall finding of moderate to high student understanding

4

No significant associations were found between demographic or opinion-based factors and students' understanding or their ability to assess their own pets' welfare

✓ Suggests that demographic factors do not appear to influence students' understanding levels or the accuracy of their welfare assessments
✓ Possible influence from recall bias, self-rating bias, or inaccurate self-reporting

CONCLUSION

- ✓ Future studies are needed to track students' progress through practical and long-term assessments

- ✓ Findings should be used to improve veterinary education

- ✓ Goal – better prepare students to assess animal welfare and interpret behavior effectively in clinical practice

"It is our responsibility as veterinarians to protect animals from harm – not just from disease, but also from fear, pain and neglect"

THANK YOU !