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The VICTVS Podcast: Revision Notes — March Industry News

Xanthe Mitten:

Hi everyone, and welcome back to another episode of Revision Notes, The VICTVS Podcast. I'm Xanthe Mitten and today I'm joined by my co-host, Katherine Barnett.

Katherine Barnett:

Hello, Xanthe!

Xanthe Mitten:

Together we look after marketing, events and coms here at VICTVS where we specialise in delivering secure high stakes assessments all over the world. Today we're jumping into some of the biggest assessment integrity stories in the current news cycle. From essay mills and AI misuse to international cheating syndicates. I mean, we've even had a story local to our head office in Leeds where a teacher has been whispering answers in exams and we'll also cover the ELSAT scrapping online testing. Let's dive straight into them.

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. So, you mentioned this teacher local to us in Leeds who has been found guilty of helping some students cheat in their oral French exam. So, what happened there was this teacher has admitted to basically giving prompts to students to help them get the correct answers. She was whispering these prompts to the students during the exam.

And although this teacher didn't go into the exam with the intention of helping the students to cheat, uh, the misconduct panel obviously found her guilty of unacceptable professional conduct., obviously that's the correct outcome for this., and the TRA, the teacher regulation agency, has ruled that she must be supervised in any future assessment roles until 2027. She was only supposed to be helping these students roleplay and obviously ask candidates questions in these exams. Instead, she was helping them cheat.

And this story prompts uh, I guess wider discussions around how there are often people in roles of integrity, they should be upholding integrity, these teachers, invigilators, but sometimes they don't do that. Sometimes, these individuals help students cheat and it impacts the whole integrity of the exam, the assessment and ultimately the qualification, as is the case here.

So yeah, I think, it's definitely an interesting one. I think we need to think about what happens when those who shape assessment integrity and security actually help candidates cheat.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. And I guess I can see it slightly from the teacher's point of view in that they are always trying to help their students. And then because the TRA said that she didn't go in with the intent of helping these students cheat, I can see she probably went in with the intent of helping her students. However, it's no different than, I guess, seeing a student cheat, have like sneak in some notes on an exam and turning a blind eye. So, it is similar. So, I guess it's making sure that teachers are aware of all the different ways that they can be encouraging students to cheat in exams. And if students learn at a young age or at high school that this is okay, I guess they can apply it to all of their different subjects and then apply it later on in life. And you know, they can't expect to be treated that way in when it comes to professional quals or when they're doing their driving test or another language test later on in life. They can't expect to have their questions or prompts whispered to them. So, I think teachers need to think, you know, it's not helpful. They might think it's helpful at that time just to get them that GCSE or whatnot, but it's so important that the students learn early from the teachers that that kind of behaviour is not okay in exams., so I think they've dealt with this well, but I think this is way more common than just this one story.

Katherine Barnett:

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Definitely. I think you've hit the nail on the head there really by saying that it's actually not helpful to these students. These teachers think that it is helpful and they want to be...They're not doing it out of malice. They are trying to help their students. But yeah, if these students grow up thinking it's normal, it's not going to help them in life getting other qualifications. So yeah, I think you're absolutely right.

Xanthe Mitten:

But yeah, I guess we can move on to our next story. where a recent Office for Students investigation found that staff at Regent College London were directing students towards essay mills and AI tools, even advising them how to avoid plagiarism detection software. The regulator identifies serious concerns around teaching standards, excessive assessment support, and a lack of proper oversight from partner institutions. I mean, this is quite a scary example of the evolving challenge of AI misconduct actively encouraged by uni staff., you'd expect, like we previously just mentioned, you'd expect teachers to be helping and encouraging their students, but not by cheating or using this software. You want, you'd expect you especially university level professors and teachers to be encouraging students to be using their own thoughts.

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. So, an Office for Students investigation has revealed that these students at Regent College London were given excessive support with their assessments with some, as you just mentioned, even told to use AI or essay mill services.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah, and I guess we're all super familiar with AI tools being pushed onto students and us as professionals. But I guess, what are essay mills and how are they different to AI?

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah. So, for anyone who doesn't know, essay mill services are illegal, usually online businesses that basically produce custom written academic assignments for students to buy and then submit as their own coursework or university work. Essay mills have been around for a long time, but nowadays you see them advertised a lot more online. the newsletter [This Isn't Fine](#) does a really good job at tracking essay mail services, also referred to as contract cheating services, because sometimes they even get away with advertising on Google. So, they are kind of pushed towards a lot of students online and on social media as well on TikTok, on Instagram, things like that. They're a huge problem, and you now get contract cheating services which use AI to produce the essays, which I'm sure they're not that great quality, but yeah, they're kind of combined these days as well.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. And it's super dangerous and becoming more of an everyday thing, and it's something that we'll cover in the next few news stories as well. But coming back to this specific story about students being encouraged to use essay mills and AI tools., I guess how can we expect candidates to follow rules and respect the assessment process when their superiors do not? Because that's the, that's the kind of attitude that this university has given out is that they don't respect the processes.

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah, I mean it's pretty shocking really that you have an institution telling their telling their students that they should be going and using AI or even essay mill services. I think that's, that's quite, I would hope, out of the ordinary. I see most teachers worried about AI and contract cheating services, not telling their students to use them. Yeah, obviously as we mentioned, these colleges have been reprimanded, which is obviously great. That's what we want, but as you said, how can we expect students to uphold academic integrity and want to if their if their superiors are telling them not to.

Again, as we said before about the teacher helping the students cheat in their French oral exam, this is like a heightened more extreme version of that

Xanthe Mitten:

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Where I mean the students are becoming the whistleblowers which is crazy. Where they promise good grades but some of them are saying oh actually, we think something's going wrong and it's not fair. Like that's, that's probably a new situation for the industry.

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah. Well, if I was at school or university and my peers were cheating and I was not, I would be pretty annoyed!

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. So, you can see that becoming more common as well.

Katherine Barnett:

But yeah, it's it's something needs to be done to ensure that teachers are not they don't get to the point where they are doing this and then getting caught out later on. The root cause needs to be cut out there. I'm not I don't know what the solution is, but the fact that schools even started doing that in the first place and were able to get to a certain point with it where students were using these services and then it gets called out, it's too far gone at that point. It needs to not happen. Schools need to be more rigorous, I guess, with their teachers and check that they're not suggesting using these services, which shouldn't need to be done really, but I think I think yeah, clearly it needs to be.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah, absolutely. Moving on to the next news story, we have the Law School Admission Council has announced that the LSAT will no longer be offered online after June 2026. They cited security vulnerabilities with having exams online with organised cheating including incidents previously identified in mainland China. So, all the future exams will be in person and not online.

This is a big one. Obviously during COVID we saw a lot of AOs and professional qualifications moving to do online exams because they made them more accessible. The tech was there and people were able to go sit their exams and get their qualifications online. And now, because of the rise in technological advancements and cheating devices, there's a massively increased fear of sitting exams online now.

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah, there is. Some of it is founded, some of it is has been exaggerated I believe. Obviously, we help host and support exams online at VICTVS. We do that very securely, we know what the risks are and we act accordingly and our software is extremely secure. So, from our perspective, I guess it's interesting seeing a lot of people talk about these fears when we know they're not entirely founded. But I think the use of AI has made people very worried as well that people sitting at home will be able to use AI to help cheat on their online exams. So, I do kind of understand this increased push back that we've seen and increased move to do more exams in centres, but that obviously has a lot of negative consequences.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah, absolutely. You can still cheat in test centres, and we see that every day.

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah. So, Obviously, there will also be pretty hefty negative consequences for completely stopping remote exams or massively reducing them. It's probably worth mentioning that the Law School Admissions Council, so LSAT as you just mentioned, they have said there will be exceptions for candidates with limited medical conditions and certain geographical hardships. Not quite sure what that means, but you can safely assume it will cut out most students' ability to take their exam remotely. It says limited medical conditions, but there's a huge problem with in-centre exams being less accessible for students. Obviously, if you work remotely and you have a minor disability or some neurological condition, if you've got ADHD or autism, maybe you're more

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comfortable taking exams at home, they are more accessible to you. So, yeah, accessibility is definitely a huge issue here. And also, it won't totally cut out cheating which is what why they've made this decision is to put people off cheating in exams.

Xanthe Mitten:

We know that people will, if they want to find a way to cheat, they will find a way to cheat in exams in test centres. I mean, whether it's writing on bits of tissue or all the wearable technology now, Apple watches, in ear headphones, even all of the smart tech that were in the Devices of Deception white paper by the Assessment Security Research Group. I mean there are so many ways and the only way that you stop people cheating in exams is by having a rigorous and secure in-person invigilation system. Whether that is remote or in the test centre. Obviously, that's something that we do at VICTVS, I mean you mentioned that earlier. We have live invigilators, whether it's in-person or online and they, if it's remote, I mean they've got two cameras on them. They're screen shared. We've got multimode monitoring. There's no way they can cheat in their exams. So maybe totally cancelling out online exams isn't exactly the right move. I mean, I totally understand why, and it's great that they want to combat cheating head on, but they may be not only excluding lots of people from the exams, but also you can stop cheating online. You can if you do it the right way.

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah. The geographical stuff as well is worth mentioning because if you, if you don't live near a test centre, some people might not be able to take these exams anymore because they might not be able to afford to travel to their nearest test centre. That's a whole issue as well. It's affordability and geographical restrictions. Obviously, it does say on here that certain geographical hardships they will consider but I don't know, it's hard, test centres aren't a dime a dozen. They're not just on every street corner. It takes a lot of effort for some people to get to these places. So, it is an extreme move for many reasons to completely cut them out altogether. I wish that, I wish that institutions and awarding bodies would maybe consider these negative outcomes a little bit more. Maybe they are. I'm not sure. But it's unfortunate that it will have such a massive impact on so many people who just want to get qualified. They don't intend on cheating, they just want to get their exams done.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah, exactly. It punishes a lot of people. Yeah., that just want to get their qualifications. And there's got to be a better way. And I would argue that way is sitting exams remotely with great invigilation and systems put in place to combat cheating. But there we are. We'll have to keep, we'll have to keep on top of it and see where it goes.

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. So, our next new story comes from the Sydney Morning Herald. There's a lot of layers to it, a lot of different criminal aspects to consider here. I would highly recommend that everyone goes and reads it. We will be linking all of these stories in the show notes. So yes, in this feature piece, the Sydney Morning Herald has reported on the phenomenon of Hong Kong-based cheating cartels targeting Chinese students in Australia at university. These criminal groups offer essay writing services to students and are outsourcing the academic work to contractors in Kenya. The Sydney Morning Herald has said that one such scheme run at one Sydney University involves the criminal syndicate setting up a Facebook group for a university subject, then siphoning off students who are struggling or have questions to a private chat where a sales pitch begins. So basically, these Facebook groups, the criminals are hanging around in Facebook groups looking for students who are saying that they're struggling with the course and then they are privately messaging them offering their academic services, their contract cheating services. So, these criminals are effectively posing as students and once they have convinced them to cheat, they are then asking for their university login details, essentially opening themselves up to blackmail and extortion which is, it's pretty crazy.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. And beyond the individual harm to the student obviously this whole operation is not only affecting the students at university but also the, the people that are writing the essays. But beyond the obvious individual harm to the students, these operations are also creating cyber security threats for universities because you

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mentioned that the criminals convince the students to pass over their login details. And we're not just talking about a nice little, you know, homework portal where they can put the essays in and then it's done. I mean, it's giving the criminals far more personal data, and it's opening up the universities to cyber-attacks. Yeah. So, it's super dangerous.

Katherine Barnett:

It is, and you mentioned there as well how these criminals will be able to access more personal data on the students. That's a huge concern., because all of their personal information would be on these portals, their address, their phone number, things like that., and yeah, it's a huge security risk for the university themselves as well., and also there's no proof that these criminal gangs will ever really send these essays to the students. It's all a bit shady. They don't know whether they're going to get the services they've paid for. And then yes, beyond that, you've also got the issue of these academics in Kenya being exploited. More exploitation of the global south, that's never a good thing. And we've actually spoken before about this in our episode, in our episode with Thomas Lancaster. He appeared in the film *Shadow Scholars* and *Shadow Scholars* is all about how academics in Kenya are being exploited for their work. So again, would highly recommend that our viewers go and watch that, but it's an ongoing issue. We see it time and time again, and it's popped up in this, in this news piece again. Cheating impacts more than just the student and in this case it's impacting the whole university.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yes. And unfortunately, it seems to just be an ever-growing global criminal enterprise. So finally, with a slightly more tongue-in-cheek tone, we'll discuss the legal clash involving two sommeliers suing over the voided 2018 master sommelier tasting exam after allegations that confidential tasting information had been leaked.

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. So, in this recent news piece by Reuters called 'Uncorking a Scandal' the writer was looking back at a scandal that actually happened in 2018, but had lasting ramifications on the industry. There were legal cases going on about this exact incident till about 2023. It's a very interesting one. So, in 2018, 23 master sommeliers had their titles stripped after the organisers, the Court of Master Sommeliers, CMS, cited concerns that some candidates had been tipped off to the answers. I don't know if our listeners know much about how hard it is to become a master sommelier.

Xanthe Mitten:

It's so prestigious. I think that's probably why they've done the news story on it because I think there's only around 300 master sommeliers in the world or just in America?

Katherine Barnett:

In the world and I think it's a bit less than that as well. It's hard to get these qualifications.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. So, if someone's cheating, you're going to report it and that's exactly what happened.

Katherine Barnett:

Yeah, for sure. So, the CMS found that three of those attempting to become master sommelier in the 2018 exam contingent were tipped off via email about the wines that would be appearing in the blind taste test. So, two of these recipients of the email passed the exam while the third reported the email to the CMS to let them know what had happened. Basically, as a result of this, all of the people taking part in that exam, so all 23 people, many of which passed, their answers and their tests were voided completely. Because the way that the exam was done meant that people would be doing these blind taste tests individually and could be walking around talking to other people in between the taste tests. So, the CMS couldn't prove that candidates hadn't been talking to each other about the tip that they had been given about what wines were in the taste test.

So, they just decided to completely void everybody's results. This meant that those who had passed their exam, potentially fairly as well, with no help from anyone else, they were very unhappy. These exams are

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also expensive. They're about £900 I believe and the test is really really hard, so to have trained for a really long time to pass this exam and then have it completely voided when there was no proof that you cheated, I mean, that would be gutting.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah. I guess it raises the question of when cheating is identified, how it needs to be dealt with so that it is fair. Because if you totally void all of the...I mean, did they give, did they get another opportunity to sit the exam?

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. So, every person who had their exams voided, which was the whole lot of them, they were then given a free retake of the test. But basically, the individuals who ended up taking the CMS to court because they were so unhappy with this ruling, they claimed that they were unable to perform well in the tests because of the pressure of having to prove their own innocence. So, they failed. Everyone failed who was given the opportunity to take the test again.

Xanthe Mitten:

I actually think that it's pretty unfair that the entire test results were voided if it was proven that only three people received the email with the wine information in. Because surely that meant that all of the other candidates should have passed their exam, right?

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. So as I said, basically the CMS were worried that people were walking around in between their exams discussing the email, but then I guess an argument for that is, well, maybe they shouldn't be walking around. Maybe you should just separate the candidates between their blind taste test and then this wouldn't happen!

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah, it sounds like possibly quite a stressful situation, which I guess is why it's ended up in court for the candidates that felt that they did the test properly because they were victim of a badly organised exam and you know, [just because] some other people cheated they have now lost out on their qualification which has huge implications onto their career. Yes. because this is so important to them. So yeah, although they did get to take their exam again, because of all of the stress surrounding this case, I think everyone failed that test.

Katherine Barnett:

Yes. they did. And I mean it's a hard test on the best of days. As we said, it's less than 300 people across the globe who are master sommeliers. So, it's not something that people would necessarily pass every single time they take it, it's a hard test. So, it sucks if they did well for those people that did pass the test and then they failed again.

Yeah, it's not great. I don't really think the outcome was fair and I think it does raise concerns regarding how these exams are hosted.

Xanthe Mitten:

Yeah, hopefully they change it so that people aren't just walking around discussing, you know, if you're doing blind taste testing of wines and you're judged off that, you'd hope that people aren't discussing going, "Oh, yeah. I think that's a bit of a, you know, a cabernet" not, I don't know "peach tones".

It is serious and I imagine that's the way that they're going to go now that they've ended up in a in a court case. So yes, for sure.

Hopefully that's the last wine related exam story we see in the news cycle. But I think that's enough from us today. We will be coming back to the studio in a few weeks to update you all on the latest stories once again. But thanks so much for joining us in this episode of Revision Notes.

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At VICTVS, we're committed to supporting awarding bodies and institutions around the world with secure high stakes assessments and keeping conversations like these alive is a big part of that mission. You can also follow us on LinkedIn where we share regular updates, blogs, insights, and behind the scenes stories from our global work. We'd love to have you as part of the conversation, and we'll see you in the next episode.